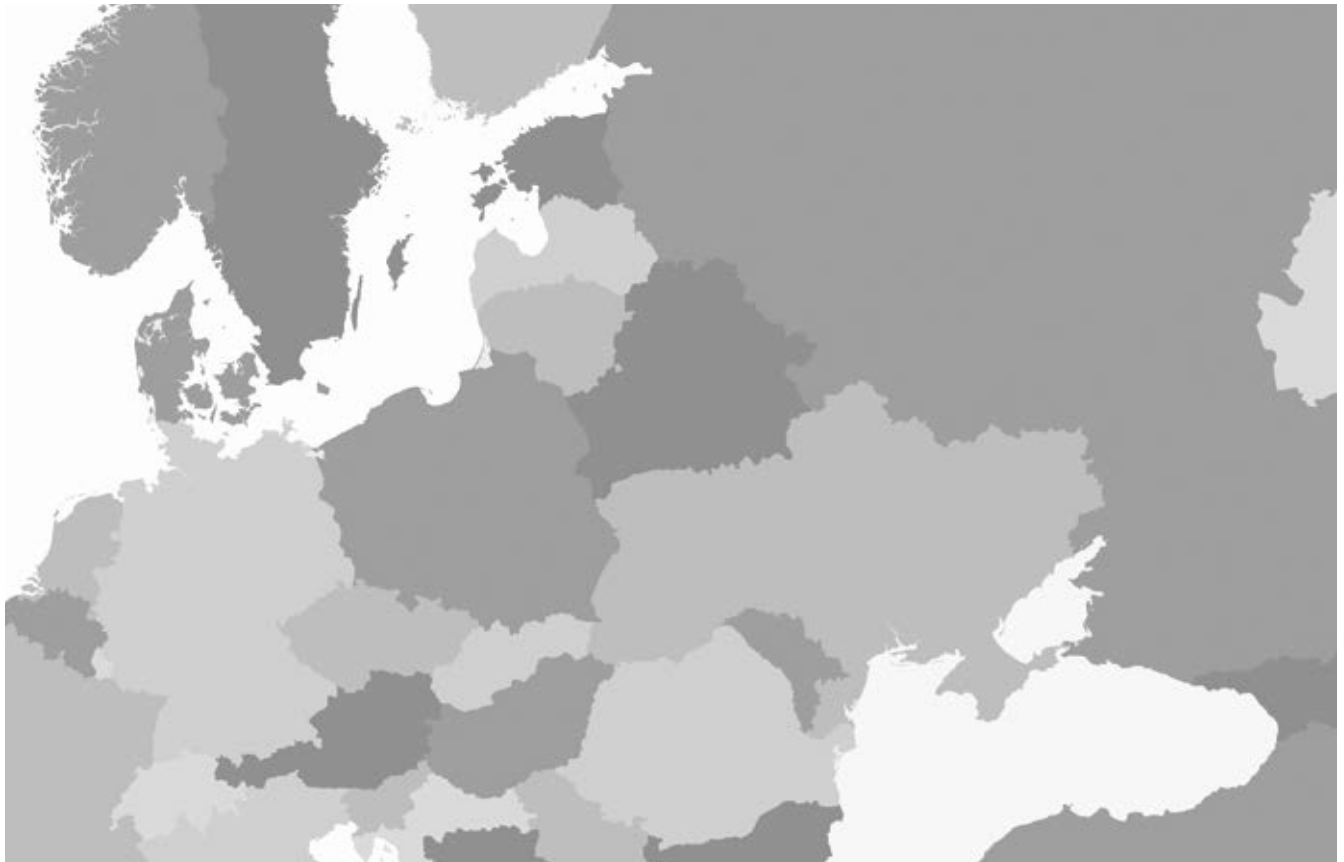


**CBEES**

State of the Region Report

2020



# Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past

A Comparative Study on Memory Management in the Region



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**ÖSTERSJÖ-  
STIFTELSEN**

Published with support from the Foundation for  
Baltic and East European Studies (Östersjöstiftelsen)

# **Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past**

A Comparative Study on  
Memory Management in the Region

December 2020

**Publisher** Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, CBEES,  
Södertörn University

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**Layout** Lena Fredriksson, Serpentin Media

**Proofreading** Bridget Schaefer, Semantix

**Print** Elanders Sverige AB

**ISBN** 978-91-85139-12-5



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## Preface

# A New Annual CBEES Publication

**T**he Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) was founded at Södertörn University in 2005 to promote and develop research and doctoral studies focusing on the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe and, at the same time, to strengthen multidisciplinary research at the University. CBEES organizes conferences, workshops, public lectures and advanced seminars, and hosts postdocs, guest researchers, and PhD students. Also, the centre publishes *Baltic Worlds*, a quarterly scholarly journal and news magazine which like CBEES is funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (*Östersjöstiftelsen*).

This year, we are proud to present a new publication series: the *CBEES State of the Region Report*. It is an annual publication, reporting and reflecting on the social and political developments in the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe, each year taking a new and topical perspective. The report is written by researchers and area experts, from within as well as outside of Södertörn University. The overall purpose of this initiative is to offer a publication that will be of great interest to fellow researchers, policy makers, stakeholders, and the general public.

The *CBEES State of the Region Report 2020* reveals disturbing tendencies to control and politicize the past in several countries of the

region. Also, it demonstrates the great extent to which authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning governments actively intervene in how crucial parts of their country's history are to be written, taught, researched, remembered, and commemorated – or neglected and ignored. Moreover, the report documents the failure of some governments to deal with restitution for past injustices, and the way some politicians forbid access to important state archives, hinder the teaching of the history of contemporary events, or withdraw funding to or close down independent research institutions.

**N**inna Mörner has edited the report, alongside CBEES-associated researchers David Gaunt, Tora Lane, Per Anders Rudling, Irina Sandomirskaja and Florence Fröhlig. We are grateful for their hard work and hope that the report will stimulate informed academic debate as well as public discussion on the state of affairs in the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe. ●

**Ulla Manns,**  
Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research,  
Södertörn University

**Joakim Ekman,**  
Director of CBEES, Södertörn University

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The CBEES  
State of the  
Region Report  
2020 reveals  
disturbing  
tendencies to  
control and  
politicize the  
past.





## Introduction

# Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past

by David Gaunt and Tora Lane

**I told myself: That's that. People don't want to go to war museums anymore. They don't want to hear about the siege of Leningrad, and that goes for Stalin's prison camps. It is tiresome. And the personal memories of the whole family being captured and no one coming back, those you must hide away and never tell anyone.**

**Natalia Tolstaya<sup>1</sup>**

**T**his regional report initiates a planned series of reports on the social and political situation of Eastern Europe by scholars affiliated with the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University. This first report focuses mainly on constructions or reconstructions of national historical memory and instrumentalizations of the past, which over recent decades has become a fiercely debated topic throughout the region, and subject of much scholarly research.

The widespread phenomenon of government commemorative politics includes the creation of historical commissions and institutions, legislating politicized interpretations of historical events, establishing new museums of national trauma, even getting into international conflicts over interpretations of history, sponsoring history textbooks for schools, erecting statues to national heroes, and instituting new days of national commemoration. Despite the authenticity of Natalya Tolstaya's everyday-life observation of public disinterest in memorialization quoted above, and Yuliya Yurchuk's<sup>2</sup> finding that nearly all passers-by in Ukraine had no idea of just who was portrayed in historical monuments or why, new

monuments, museums and historical truth commissions have been established throughout the region. Now there even exist guide books for tourists aiming to visit sites of massacres and mass extinction.<sup>3</sup> In many countries a gap exists between the memorial policies of the government and political elite in contrast with popular remembrance of the past, neither of which need to be based on facts. An astute Polish sociologist, Sławomir Kapralski, writes of a split between political forms of commemoration and popular memory, that particularly affects Holocaust discourse.<sup>4</sup>

Some major actors can be identified: one, already mentioned, is the governments and political elites who desire to establish a worldview perspective showing the successful mastering of past events, the intention being to develop a triumphant continuity of events that can be officially sanctioned through government agencies. A case in point would be the canonization of the Bulgarian revolutionary Vasil Levski, a revolutionary of little impact, as the prime martyr for Bulgarian freedom.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes these national constructs clash as when a high-profile joint historical commission between North Macedonia and Bulgaria floundered upon the impossibility of deciding whether Gotse Delchev, a revolutionary born in a border region, was a Bulgarian or Macedonian hero, leading to diplomatic conflicts spilling over into completely different issues.

**O**ther types of actors in creation of public memory are representatives of minorities, usually ethnic/religious/gendered, desiring political recognition of or

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compensation for past injustices or traumas, or demanding a proper place in the national narrative about the past. Take for instance the urge to universalize the Jewish Holocaust and a similar campaign among Roma activists for more general recognition of their World War II genocide.

A large mass of writings can be categorized as “witness literature” that, although sometimes fictional, has considerable authenticity because of the suffering of the authors, such as Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Imre Kertesz, and Hédi Fried. In recent decades large collections of witness statements and video interviews have been deposited in universities or research institutes. Institutions now exist for educational “memory work” to combat xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-gypsyism, racism, and anti-HBTQ positions. Democratic governments have been pressured to apologize for abuses and violence committed in the past. Formal apologies have been extended to many minorities and colonized peoples in a spirit that the author Wole Soyinka terms *mea culpaism*. Connected with this are academics examining, debating or joining either on one side or the other of conflicts about the past, or those who recognize injustices committed by empires or colonial structures that suppressed the human rights of peoples.<sup>6</sup>

**A**nd the new versions of the past also form new ways to engage citizens. Non-government organizations, often representing suppressed or persecuted groups, also participate in the demand for their own historical narratives and new forms of commemoration, even their own museums and school-books, and are occasionally financed (and thus controlled) by the state; sometimes however they are combated or rejected by governments. Many of these battles over the past go on inside political and social elites while citizens stand by, but the latter are expected to become politically mobilized and aware of the nation’s long-standing historical importance. In the wording of Charles S. Maier there can be a “surfeit” of memory.<sup>7</sup>

Conflicting memories of the past have a long tradition. During travels in Yugoslavia in 1937 writer Rebecca West was taken by different people through difficult terrain to obscure places where small chapels held ancient manuscripts. Depending on the lettering of the manu-

scripts – Latin, Cyrillic or Ottoman – her guides emphatically maintained that this proved that just their group settled here first and thus had the best claim to build a national-state in the surrounding country. Even though other ethnicities lived there now, they were latecomers and outsiders with no legitimate claim and needed to be removed.<sup>8</sup> Each ethnicity in multicultural Yugoslavia maintained their own exclusive view of the past and why they lived where they lived, leading finally to the breakdown of Yugoslavia as a country.

We are thus dealing with an old phenomenon – the re-interpretation of historical events for political reasons – in a new form – that of the political manipulation of memory and remembrance. Historians are used to

changing perceptions of the past. Pieter Geyl showed how the appreciation of Napoleon varied depending on France’s political shifts from republic to empire and back; Herbert Butterfield identified the dominant British historical narrative as strengthening the liberal political view of the inevitable movement towards increasing democracy and enlightenment.<sup>9</sup>

So, is this more recent interest in re-interpreting the past a case of new

wine into old bottles or old wine into new bottles? What does this transformation say about contemporary politics in Eastern Europe? Can we say with certainty that the phenomenon of manipulation of the past or the need to rectify historical injustice is today is more prevalent and pernicious in Eastern Europe than ever before?

Readers of Orwell’s 1984 will recall that the protagonist Winston Smith worked at the Ministry of Truth in something very similar to the University of London’s Senate building. There were many other ministries: the Ministry of Peace dealt with war, the Ministry of Love dealt with torture, the Ministry of Plenty dealt with starvation and finally the Ministry of Truth that was responsible for the “necessary” falsification of historical events. In line with Orwell’s critical reasoning we could consider institutions claiming to concern National Remembrance rather to be about National Forgetfulness or National Amnesia. Any way you look at organizations of that type, they appear much more to underline the national and much less to deal with uncovering the past.

We have many examples in this regional report on remembrance in Eastern Europe of Nazi and communist totalitarianism, particularly in those countries that are

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” For over a decade we have seen an increase in memory conflicts in terms of memory politics and memory wars.

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closely associated with the Visegrad group and institutions linked to the Platform of European Memory and Conscience. This platform promotes a narrative of the past written from the perspective of post-communist Europe, that rather makes people unconscious of the truth of which they can no longer have any direct experience.

In the politics or wars of memory that are taking place in particular in the former countries of the Eastern bloc, one can see how memory has penetrated right to the core of the political problems and the problems of politics of our time. The widespread “memory boom”, dating approximately from the 1990s and still growing, features a large interest in different forms of memories, reminiscences and commemorations as well in historical documents and other forms of documentations. For over a decade we have seen an increase in memory conflicts in terms of memory politics and memory wars, in particular in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Besides the memory of communism itself, it is in particular the “memory” of the Second World War that causes fierce debates, and there are many reasons for this in this part of Europe. But besides apparent historical and geographical aspects, as Eastern Europe was arguably the deadliest battle line of the world war with the greatest number of victims and the most atrocious crimes against humanity, recent memory conflicts show that there are also ideological and cultural issues linked to the very notion of ‘memory’ and its status in Eastern Europe today.

As French historian Pierre Nora, one of the main theorists of memory, noted in 1989, contemporary memory discourses are not primarily about memory, but rather about interpreting history.<sup>10</sup> He writes: “The quest for memory is the search for one’s history.”<sup>11</sup> And the field of memory, he adds, has become that of historiography, which is not to say that it is more true. ‘Memory’ denotes an in-between field, a grey zone between different forms of remembering, commemorating and otherwise addressing the past in the private and in the public sphere. What the field or discourse of memory primarily deals with has been the personal experience of real historical events and how it affects our understanding and narratives of history (as opposed for instance to the forms of the art of memory or memorization in ancient, medieval and Renaissance times). But since personal and private

experiences interfere with the larger and supra-personal public forms of history writing, in particular in the official sphere, this field of ‘memory’ has proven to be problematic. And memory politics has opened a Pandora’s box, where past conflicts resurge as conflicts over the past. The specters of European communism seem to find no rest in their graves, but is it not because we are troubling them with a new meta-perspective that implies an instance of revisionism? Is there any narrative, or is there any other form of settling accounts with the past that could bring them peace?

In the period of *perestroika* and especially after the fall of the Berlin wall, discourses of memory in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe took the form of emancipatory movements, allowing people to express long repressed truths, debunking the politicized historical narrative of the communist regimes, and contributing to its black book. Finally, through the mouths of its citizens one would hear of the crimes committed by the communists towards individuals, regions and nations. It was considered a civil right. And indeed, there were many truths to be told, in particular since history played a crucial role in Soviet culture. Not only does the Soviet narrative of history start with the October Revolution; history in terms of dialectical materialism also provided

legitimization to the new state and its political consciousness was based on a theory of history.

It is perhaps therefore no wonder that the Soviet legacy expressed in official and public culture shows a predilection for grand and ritualized historical narratives, monuments and parades. It was proud of its past, and it celebrated it, first in the form of the revolution as the victory over

capitalist bourgeois society, and second in World War II as the victory over fascism and the Soviet Union’s entry into global great power politics. In the Soviet Union, history as grand narrative and teleology probably reached its apex. But to the extent that this history also involved the memory of the sacrifices of its masses, it was replete with censorship and suppressed stories of contradictory or contradicting events, and in particular, events that would question the historical political claim of being the victory over fascism.

Soviet monumental culture was ultimately challenged through a concomitant privatization of historical ex-

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” In the Soviet Union, history as grand narrative and teleology probably reached its apex.

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## Introduction

perience and history writing in the form of individual, collective and national recollections or commemorations of the past that are also vested with the task of critically scrutinizing the former official narratives of history. It is conceivable that history, especially post-totalitarian history, has made us wiser. There was also a moral aspect, which translated the German call for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*, that is the need for Germany to deal with the past so that the crimes committed by the Nazi regime would never be possible again, into the context of European communism. The appeal to deal with the past was based on the Freudian psychological theory of the need to deal with a repressed experience of the past.<sup>12</sup> It applies to singular personal experiences of traumas of the past in Eastern Europe, as Florence Fröhlig shows, but it has proven problematic when transposed into a political or otherwise collective and supra-personal theory of memory. In particular, as it can be difficult to distinguish the victims from the perpetrators when it comes to traumas of the communist past. As the documentary work of Svetlana Aleksievich has illustrated, many people became victims precisely because of their engagement with the Soviet history of communism. In her 1986 book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, it is the women of the hero-people (*geroi-narod*) that were forced into traumatic sacrifices and sufferings.<sup>13</sup> And not only that; they also lived a life of deep, but of course also not unproblematic, pride over their personal commitment in a sense that later would be deemed as *sovkovost'*, that is, as Soviet mentality.<sup>14</sup>

**A**ll this points toward other reasons why the in-between sphere of mediation between different forms of remembrance and different historical narratives has become a conflict zone not just of perspectives, but also political and economic interests. In the redemptive and liberating role of settling accounts with a past replete with complex ideological oppositions, the memory of the actual experience sometimes seems irreconcilable with current democratic and/or liberal ideals. As Barbara Törnquist-Plewa writes in her contribution, from memory as the testimony of the truth of the past and the right to express it, and a form of dealing with trauma, the discourse became tasked with the role of reconciling the nation in several Eastern European countries. But already, primarily due to the nationalist turn, the urge to “own” the past was not without power politics, and one could pose the question of how liberal society could be tasked with settling accounts with a past of a different

historical and political engagement. According to “European memory”, as proclaimed by the European Union, “the totalitarian past must be condemned and truth restored”.<sup>15</sup> And the Declaration on European Conscience and Communism (2006), calls for:

**reaching an all-European understanding that both the Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes each to be judged by their own terrible merits to be destructive in their policies of systematically applying extreme forms of terror, suppressing all civic and human liberties, starting aggressive wars and, as an inseparable part of their ideologies, exterminating and deporting whole nations and groups of population; and that as such they should be considered to be the main disasters which blighted the 20<sup>th</sup> century.**<sup>16</sup>

The declaration in itself is both political and Eurocentric, and besides the problem of putting equal signs on all points of accusation, from today’s perspective, there is a case for arguing that ecological disasters ought to be included under the term “main disasters”. More important, dealing with the past is also a form of settling political accounts with the past. Still, what perhaps concerns Eastern Europe with regards to its memory in the most acute way is, as Yulia Yurchuk’s contribution about memory in Ukraine shows, how the problem of the memory of the opposition and fight between the two totalitarian regimes on Ukrainian ground during the World War II now resurges as the opposition of memory in the context of the war between Ukraine and pro-Russian forces.

In Ukraine, proto-fascist or Nazi sympathizers have been heroized for their opposition to Soviet (Russian) Communism, which by reverse legitimized the latter’s warfare as the fight against Fascism, including the separatist Ukrainian movement. This is perhaps one of the most apparent instances of how the historical opposition echoes in political conflicts today. And it also shows how the memory of private experiences and public commemorations, the memory of this historical moment, can resurface in current politics as indications of a nationalist turn in certain post-Soviet countries.

This is not only the case with Ukraine, but also Belarus’, Poland, Lithuania and others, as the contributions show. And again, it brings us back to the notion of memory as this mediating sphere between public commemorations and private experiences of history, and the

question if there is not also a revisionist moment in the way that politics is being done or undone in its relation to history.

How can we understand this shift in the very form of history writing? From the point of view of scholarship: does the shift away from traditional historiographical discourses between historians to investigating high-level

“memory politics” engaging NGOs and political power holders bring any new insight? Yes, but not on the past events they use as a starting point; rather, such study reveals how discourse about the past locks into everyday party politics. Privatizing the past has become a form of appropriation of the grand narratives, not a critique of them. Thus, several discussions presented here aim at explaining the “usefulness” of mem-

ory in the form of falsified, manipulated, or weaponized history for politics in countries that are democratic in the sense of needing to mobilize voters at elections, by arguing that historical facts in some way humiliates them as a collective, as a nation, and therefore must be suppressed for the sake of the nation’s honor which can only be redeemed through lying about what really happened.

**W**hat characterizes CBEES’ status of the region report is a critical, broad and multidisciplinary approach to the topic. Several contributors are historians, but there are also social and cultural scientists, some engaged in memory activism through their work. We seek to give an overview of different issues of history and memory that are at stake, and different actors and institutions involved in the production of memory, the development of memory culture and politics of memory in Central and Eastern Europe today. We will look at the dynamics of its form of dealing with the past as memory, trauma and/or political conflicts as well as the more recent trends of instrumentalization and use and abuse of memory issues in political conflicts. It is important to examine the *how*, how memory is constructed and/or instrumentalized, but also to examine how it affects the *what*, and the way that the two are interconnected. *What* is remembered in private memories is not only the private, but also the national and political, since they were connected in the Soviet times, and they remain so for that very reason until today. Discharging memory from history and politics is impossible (and the reverse),

and therefore, instead of calling for or arguing for a de-politicization of memory, we ought, in the accounts of the politics of memory, ask how the memory of politics works in contemporary memory and what the forms or anti-forms of this memory are.

Memory is not a thing, but rather is a relationship between the person/institution/collective/state ministry

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“The memory of the actual experience sometimes seems irreconcilable with current democratic and/or liberal ideals.”

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thinking about how to use the past in a way beneficial to it, thus deeming it necessary. The use of memory is multi-faceted and multi-levelled. It is very important to identify the persons/groups/political parties that are making the representations. Here Anna Bikont’s investigative report from the reaction of Jedwabne’s residents to the news (well known to themselves) that Polish civilians willingly killed Jewish neighbors. From a journal-

ist-psychologist perspective, she uncovers the who, when and methods of creating untruths about the Polish populations murdering their neighbors in Jedwabne and other small towns in 1941 – and also how others in the community have been permanently silenced by the perpetrators, and how for various reasons priests and some nationalist historians join in as cheer-leaders for denialism.<sup>17</sup>

Popular misrepresentation, abuse of and lying about past events has a long history. Historians used to call such misrepresentations myths or legends not worth a second thought. Only recently have scholars come to deal with these misrepresentations through serious research. An ethical reason is the thought that behind some of the unproven statements about the past, one can find substantial truths about what has happened to repressed minorities or discriminated groups and these therefore need to be re-discovered hand in hand with members of these groups. This latter type of memory study can be very disruptive – as in the case of Jan Gross’s book on the role of Poles in the Jedwabne massacre.

**F**rom the view of governments and of the agencies and Institutions dependent on them, memory/remembrance/commemoration work becomes a routine process of selection, exclusion, hegemony, and repression. That is to say, good-old-fashioned power politics. It is conceivable that the rise of interest in using history is a result of the death of the grand narratives of political ideologies. Instead of mobilization through ideology, mobilization is made through creating and maintaining unique national



## Introduction

identities formed by history into a story of long-standing victimhood or heroism or martyrdom. Thus, a politicized master memory narrative in the eyes of its adherents transforms into a quasi-religious standpoint that can tolerate no doubt and those who dare to doubt are treated as heretics.

**A**lthough master narratives of remembrance strive towards absolute dominance, some are quite happy with merely causing confusion and uncertainty about the facts. This plays into the increased higher education among the population as academic education teaches students to be open to multiple interpretations and treat them with equal interest. An important aspect of making remembrance or commemoration into an ideology is the building of barriers between the conflicting interpretations. In this way the contours of memory are shaped more by what it is against and what it hates and less by what it on the surface stands for and adores. In this way the study of memory-work refers not to official remembering, but concerns the consequences in the form of forgetting, silencing, suppressing, repressing. Future research should focus on the barriers between interpretations rather than the description of what the various interpretations and representations contain. From the historical perspective, memory cannot perform a redemptive task vis-à-vis the past, but it must remain truthful to its aporetic character: to all the paradoxes, disgraces and irreconcilable conflicts that it entails. Only thus can we get away from a politics of the past and understand the role of politics in the past and the past in politics in this region. ●

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- 11 Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History*, 13. See also Paul Ricoeur's discussion of the relation between memory and historiography as a response to Nora in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 90-1.
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- 13 Svetlana Aleksievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (transl. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky), (London: Penguin House Ltd, 2018).
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## Background

# Eastern and Central Europe as a Region of Memory. Some Common Traits

by Barbara Törnquist-Plewa

In his foreword to the anthology *Memory and Change in Europe*, Jeffrey K. Olick strongly argued for the usefulness of adding the concept of “region of memory” to the arsenal of analytical concepts within the field of memory studies. He pointed to the importance of examining multiple systems of memory of which “region was one, along with the global system a level up, and nation states, localities, families and even individuals as other analytical – but not concretely – independent systems”.<sup>1</sup>

This volume aims to pay attention to Eastern and Central Europe as a particular region of memory, while at the same time avoiding the trap of essentialization and myths of its uniqueness and incomparability with other regions. The question regarding the specificity of Eastern and Central Europe has been debated in scholarly literature for a long time.<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside the detailed argumentation of all parties in this never-ending discussion<sup>3</sup>, this introduction sides with those scholars that argue for treating the area as a particular region of memory.<sup>4</sup> The

peoples and inhabitants of Eastern and Central Europe share considerable common or similar historical experiences that result in an entanglement of their memories and lead them to face similar challenges in their memory work. Nevertheless it should be emphasized at the same time that Eastern and Central Europe is a part of European and global arenas of memory work and its borders are by no means fixed. In addition, Eastern and Central Europe as a particular region of memory should certainly not be seen as uniform, since the differences between the countries of this region are far from negligible. However, in the following the focus will be on the common traits that constitute the framework of memory of this region.

The Eastern and Central European landscape of memory may be characterized as post-colonial, post-catastrophic and post-socialist.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, the distinct historical legacy of the region consists chiefly of the following elements: belated modernization as a

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Lenin and some other emblematic monuments at Memento Park in Budapest, Hungary.

PHOTO: SZOBORPARK/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, Germany.

PHOTO: K. WEISSER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Children - Victims of Holocaust. Monument at Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw, Poland. PHOTO: JOLANTA DYR/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Monument to the victims of communism in Prague, Czech Republic. PHOTO: MEDIAFURY/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



result of the region's peripheral status, semi-colonial development due to the long-time control of the region by imperial states, belated nation and state building, and, last but not least, the experience of life and extreme violence under two totalitarian regimes – Nazism and Communism, followed in both cases by rapid and radical transformations of society. While the double experience of Nazism and Communism is unique to Eastern and Central Europe, the other features make many states in the region more similar to some post-colonial countries in Latin America or Asia than to Western Europe.

### Politics of Memory and Conflicting Views on the Use of the Past in the Present

The historical conditions enumerated above have left traces in the memory of the inhabitants of Eastern and Central Europe and influenced their way of viewing the past and its role in their present. The dominant approach is to treat the past as a source of collective national identities and values such as heroism or sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> This traditional understanding of history is a legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century national movements.

**T**he mythologized past fulfilled the emancipatory function. It was used as a tool to create a feeling of national belonging and common identity in the nation-building processes. This was strongly pronounced among the national movements that struggled for independence against the imperial powers which at that time dominated the region: the Habsburgs, the Ottomans, the Russian Empire, Prussia and, for a shorter time, the German Empire. The first modern nation-states in Eastern Europe came into being as late as at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their sovereignty was tenuous. They also lost their independence as a result of the Second World War and regained it as late as at the beginning of the 1990s. Thus, in the situation of recurrent threats, prolonged oppression and struggles for independence, the memories of heroism and sacrifice maintained their appeal. They were used to mobilize for resistance and create cohesion within national communities.<sup>7</sup> This approach to the past was further strengthened during communist rule since it was adopted both by the

communists<sup>8</sup> and by the opposition (e.g. memories of armed uprisings).<sup>9</sup>

The end of the Cold War and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe as well the integration of large parts of Eastern and Central Europe into the EU and the Western security system created conditions for revisions of the traditional approaches and the emergence of a new understanding of the past, one more in line with the discourse of human rights and the memory work promoted by the EU.<sup>10</sup> This entailed seeing the past as a warning and cautionary tale,<sup>11</sup> and most importantly, critically examining each nation's deeds towards the Others, asking questions about responsibility, the need for apologies, reparation and mourning.

Thus, the new approach could be described as non-national, self-critical, and cosmopolitan (i.e. not centered on the own national or ethnic group but focused on the suffering of Others).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the decades that followed 1989 saw the rise of this new approach in Eastern and Central Europe. The new attitude to the past became visible in the activities of individuals and organizations working with the memory of the Holocaust, as well as with the revival of the memory of those former inhabitants of Eastern and Central Europe that were murdered or expelled due to the ethnic cleansings that occurred in the region in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

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“The mythologized past fulfilled the emancipatory function. It was used as a tool to create a feeling of national belonging and common identity in the nation-building processes.”

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**H**owever, these acts aiming at changing their societies' vision of the past have met strong resistance by those who believe that memories of the past should be used to mobilize forces behind the nation and the state, considered to be vulnerable and in need of constant protection. For them, memory and history are matters of security.<sup>14</sup> Thus, collective memories should serve to strengthen the national community,

contribute to its cohesion, be a source of pride and deliver role models for new generations, preparing them for future sacrifices for their country.<sup>15</sup>

The proponents of this view criticize the cosmopolitan visions as imports propagated for Eastern Europe from the hubs of Western European political and economic power and thus as an expression of the normative hegemony of the West. Since the end of the 1990s those active in the field of politics of memory<sup>16</sup> have been divided

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along these two different lines of understanding the past. This is not unique for the region, but the intensity of the struggle between them is rather unparalleled in the Western part of the continent. The two camps clash with full strength in public debates about the commemoration of historical events, monuments, contents of museum exhibitions and about acts of legislation regarding what should be remembered and how.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, both sides tend to define their positions in strong normative and even moral terms as expressions of “good” and “evil”.

### The Legacy of Nazism and Communism

The legacy of two totalitarianisms, Nazism and Communism, constitutes a particular feature of Eastern and Central Europe as a memory region. The history of these two regimes became entangled in this part of Europe in a unique way<sup>18</sup> and resulted in a multiplicity of painful and mutually conflicting memories. Millions of people starved to death, were killed or expelled from their homes at the highest points of the rule of these regimes (before, during and shortly after World War II).

**T**he pre-war multicultural co-existence in the region collapsed, and interethnic clashes took place in the shadow of the raging war (e.g. Polish, Ukrainian or Lithuanian pogroms of Jews, massacres of Poles by Ukrainians in Volhynia). Perpetrators, victims and bystanders changed places with the unfolding events. A hero one day could become a villain the next and vice versa. Difficult moral choices had to be made in the struggle for survival, giving history a truly tragic dimension. On top of it all, the burdensome memories of this particular period (from the 1930s to the 1950s) were suppressed by the post-war communist regimes and were able to resurface only after their fall.

Consequently, the 1990s saw a memory boom, and memory activists on the local, national and even international level started to involve themselves in the processes of working through traumatic memories, often dealing with mutual atrocities committed in the past. Locally, this meant for instance raising new monuments or taking care of the graves of the victims; nationally, writing new history books, opening new museums and producing films dealing with the difficult past, and transnationally, working for instance in committees of historians from

formerly conflicting sides (German-Polish, Czech-German, Polish-Ukrainian etc.). Special attention has been paid to the discussion of collaboration in the Holocaust on the local level. This work on reconciliation has involved many individuals and organizations: international and national, governmental and non-governmental.

However, activities of this kind have also led to confrontations between memory actors promoting different views on the use of the past and accordingly different politics of memory. Those traditionally and nationalistically minded are mostly critical of the acts of regret and mutual apologies expressed by the proponents of reconciliation, arguing that they blur the difference between victims and perpetrators and dilute the question of responsibility. They also have not hesitated to commemorate historical figures who served the own nation yet at the same time could be held responsible for the deaths of civilians of other nationalities, e.g. Stepan Bandera in Ukraine<sup>19</sup> or several of the

“cursed soldiers” i.e. anti-Communist guerillas, active in the few post-war years in Poland.<sup>20</sup> This, in turn, is unacceptable for those who work for a memory that promotes human rights and mutual understanding.

**T**he double experience of the Nazi regime and Soviet-style Communism, both of them of equal importance for the nations in Eastern and Central Europe, also gives rise to memory politics on an international level, especially on the EU level. Following the Prague Declaration of June 3, 2008, a number of the Eastern European Members of the European Parliament called upon the EU to condemn communist crimes, in the same way as the crimes of Nazism. For them, the turning of the memory of the Gulag and other communist crimes into a common, innate, European, not only East European, memory would mean the recognition of their axiological equality.

However, most of the Western European MEPs perceive these demands as an attempt to relativize and diminish the importance of the Holocaust remembrance that has become fundamental in EU memory politics.<sup>21</sup> They regard the claims as an expression of victimhood competition and an attempt to avoid the questions about complicity in the Holocaust. In turn, this distrust is interpreted on the part of Eastern and Central Europe as a demonstration of superiority, and is even described by

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“Difficult moral choices had to be made in the struggle for survival, giving history a truly tragic dimension.”

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Euro-sceptics as a “post-colonial attitude”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the clashes over the memory of the Holocaust and the Gulag constitute a substantial obstacle in the construction of a common European memory.

**A**lthough it is already several decades since the communist regimes collapsed, the memory of Communism as well as the memory of the first decade of the intensive social transformation that followed its fall are of crucial importance in Eastern and Central Europe, and they still continue to create political divisions in the countries of the region. The so-called “revolutions” of 1989–1991 were in fact generally peacefully negotiated and thus did not provide a clear-cut break with the past. Many former communists had the opportunity of joining the new establishment.

The processes of transitional justice, that is, dealing with the communist state’s violation of human rights, were delayed.<sup>23</sup> The left-leaning liberals accepted this course of events in the conviction that reconciliation, and not retribution, was the best way to promote democratic development. However, it produced a reaction among many of those previously engaged in anti-communist opposition for whom the memorialization of communist crimes has been of the utmost importance. Thus, they supported a politics of memory that focused on communist oppression and its remembrance in a vast variety of forms: monuments, museums, books and media products, judicial actions such as a few trials, lustration laws, “memory laws”<sup>24</sup> and the establishment of state institutions investigating the crimes of the communist regimes (e.g. Institutes of National Remembrance in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine).

While intended to achieve justice and truth about the past, these measures almost immediately became politicized and used in internal political struggles, primarily between the Left and the Right. The archives of the communist security forces have been used to compromise political opponents as former denounciators. The Right also blames all the social problems that emerged during the post-communist transformation on “the unfinished revolution”.<sup>25</sup>

However, these hard-line politics of memory are a double-edged sword. They alienate many people who lived through Communism and remember it in a more

nuanced way, with its negative but also some positive aspects. Unlike Nazism, the communist system in Eastern and Central Europe lasted for many decades and went through both more and less repressive phases. People learnt to live with it and many of them had difficulties adjusting to and accepting the new post-communist, neoliberal order. Some became memory activists, defending their positive memory of Communism and even expressing a kind of nostalgia for the communist past. They are mostly visible in popular culture<sup>26</sup> and in social media.<sup>27</sup> In Russia (and partially also in Belarus) the state consistently promotes nostalgic memories of Communism and even Stalinism.<sup>28</sup> However, in other parts of Eastern and Central Europe they do not usually get any official support. Settling accounts with Communism is still an unfinished process in Eastern and Central Europe and it belongs to the core of politics of memory in the region, alongside the other focal points mentioned: Nazi occupation and the ethnic cleansings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Surfeit of Memories and Other Features of Memory Politics in the Region

Eastern and Central Europe was the central zone of conflicts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “century of extremes”<sup>29</sup> that shook the region profoundly and exposed it to rapid and drastic shifts: in borders between states, in the ethnic composition of local populations and in the political and economic systems.

The swift and profound changes continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century when Eastern and Central Europe underwent a speedy modernization, and after decades behind the Iron Curtain was rapidly exposed to Europeanization and trends of globalization. It may not be surprising that after such an exhaustive experience, societies are in urgent need of making sense of their difficult past, and their memory work acquires a special dynamic and intensity. Accordingly, the obsession with the past and a surfeit of memories became another distinctive feature of Eastern and Central Europe. It is rooted in the region’s traumatic events and long periods of suppression of the memories of them,

but it is exacerbated by the dominant view of history as a pillar of national identity and of a vulnerable nation that needs to be constantly defended.

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“The so-called ‘revolutions’ of 1989–1991 were in fact generally peacefully negotiated and thus did not provide a clear-cut break with the past.”

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The mnemonic activities in the region are extremely intensive and marked by ideological and political struggles. The debates about even one mnemonic issue can penetrate all arenas of social life: scholarship, education, politics, legislation, media of all kinds, art, literature, religious institutions, etc. A good example is the never-ending dispute in Poland on Polish complicity in the Holocaust. Its crucial moment, the publication of Jan T. Gross' book on the murder of Jews by Poles in the town of Jedwabne in June 1941, resulted not only in an immense debate in Polish media, and official statements of Polish politicians and representatives of the Catholic clergy, but also reverberated in Polish cinematography, plays and novels, art, historical works, and textbooks for schools and museums.

One of the latest stages of the dispute between those memory activists who admit Polish culpability and those who want to deny it was the attempt by the Polish conservative-nationalist government in 2018 to issue a law criminalizing claims of Polish responsibility or co-responsibility in crimes like the one in Jedwabne. Strong international criticism prevented the adoption of the law in its planned wording.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the case is illustrative of the politicization and juridification of memory,<sup>31</sup> both being symptomatic of the surfeit of memories in Eastern and Central Europe. The legislative acts criminalizing certain statements about the past (so called "memory laws") are not unique to Eastern Europe. In fact, several countries in Western Europe have laws banning Holocaust denial or the denial of the Armenian genocide. However, the large scale of this legislation, its focus on self-victimhood, and the use of laws in memory conflicts both within and between the countries makes the region stand out in this respect. Moreover, the authoritarian regimes in the region use memory laws for nationalist mobilization and for limiting freedom of expression. The most typical example is the law (called the Yarovaya act) adopted in Russia in 2014. The law was presented as an act preventing "rehabilitation of Nazism" but it sought in fact to hide the crimes of Stalinism and penalized among others statements describing the Soviet-German collaboration at the beginning of the Second World War or the crimes committed by the Red Army.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the law was adopted in the midst of the Ukraine crisis and thus

assisted the Russian propaganda campaign against the Ukrainian national movement, labeled as "Nazis".

The juridification of memory points yet to another feature of Eastern and Central Europe as region of memory: the strong presence of the state as a memory actor. It is of course hard to find any state in the world that does not engage in memory politics, since history and memory are intrinsically connected to the legitimation of power. However, the large scale of state involvement in the politics of memory in the region is striking and had a tendency to increase with the rise of national populism and authoritarian disposition of the ruling regimes in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. State institutions have been involved in the "memory wars" between the advocates of the cosmopolitan memory, mostly supported by leftist and liberal parties, and the conservatives' and nationalists' side that stands for the traditional understanding of history as a source of pride and national cohesion. Thus, depending on which party holds the governmental power in a country, the state supports their vision of the politics of memory.

The last aspect to be mentioned in the discussion of the characteristics of memory politics in Eastern and Central Europe is the prominent role played by the dominant churches and religions. After the decades of state-driven secularization under the communist regimes the churches re-emerged as important societal actors. The Catholic church has a crucial influence on the formation of collective memories in Poland,<sup>33</sup> but also puts its mark on memories in Slovakia<sup>34</sup> or Croatia.<sup>35</sup> The Orthodox Church in Romania tries to assume a similar role,<sup>36</sup> not to speak about the significance of the Orthodox Church in Putin's Russia. Both the Russian Orthodox Church and religion are instrumentalized in the state's politics of memory.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, even in the countries in which religion has been less important as a hallmark of national identity (e.g. Ukraine or Armenia), religious language and symbols are frequently used in dealing with memories, especially those traumatic and morally difficult ones. In this regard, Eastern and Central Europe displays more similarity to such countries outside Europe as South Africa than to the Western European neighbors. It seems that memories of mass violence, provoking ultimate questions about life and death as well as about human nature, make peo-

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“Several countries in Western Europe have laws banning Holocaust denial or the denial of the Armenian genocide.”

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ple prone to reach for religion as a provider of tools for coming to terms with the past. Religion may help people to restore meaning to the world after the experience of atrocities. When the past is seen as existential drama, as is the case in the post-catastrophic landscape of Eastern and Central Europe, religion offers symbolic resources and interpretative frames to handle this past.

In sum, it can be argued that the specific historical experiences of Eastern and Central European societies, especially their temporal proximity to violence and rapid and radical social changes, have given rise to some distinctive features in the politics of memory of the region. These have been briefly described above. However, the question that remains to be answered is whether that distinctiveness requires new analytical tools in the studies of the mnemonic processes in the region. This should be a subject for further research. ●

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# Victimhood and Building Identities on Past Suffering

by Florence Fröhlig

**E**astern Europe has been confronted with many violent experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the representation of these events has become a battlefield in the process of reconstructing and renegotiating the past in post-communist societies after 1989. Today's travellers in Eastern Europe can only be struck by the new nations' tendencies to put to the fore "their" particular histories and "their" own traumas.

In this article I discuss the intense and peculiar forms that Stalinist terror and World War II have taken in post-communist European societies as symptomatic of an undigested past and thwarted mourning. The Soviet-imposed representation of World War II prevented the working through of war experiences and led to the repression of all experiences that did not fit into its narrative. And as Sigmund Freud warned us in his work on the uncanny, whatever is repressed returns in distorted, fragmented, or monstrous forms.<sup>1</sup> Hence if the deeds of the past are not recognized, the perpetrators not condemned, and the victims not compensated: "The memory of the past becomes indistinguishable from the obsessive fear of its repetition, and the dread of the future takes the shape of compulsory repetitions or creative remembrances of the past."<sup>2</sup>

I borrow here the psychoanalytic "metaphor" of neurosis and obsession for its hermeneutical efficacy rather

than as an explanatory schema. In this article, I will first show how Soviet-imposed memory led to a re-narration of the past and nation-building myths rooted in traumas. The new identification processes based on victimhood are seen as the continuation of the dreadful violent experiences into the present and the current memorial obsession as the return of the repressed. In a second part, I discuss the problematic of uncertain death which entails the work of mourning and condemns the unburied to haunt the living. I argue that the former thwarted memory becomes the new imposed memory, leading to new imbalance.

## The Return of the Repressed

In the aftermath of World War II, the USSR, like the other victorious powers, were portrayed as heroes, and the losers together with their allies as villains. In this "Grand Alliance narrative", the USSR was presented in a positive light and as an *ethical protagonist*. What is at stake is the fact that the winners of war, here the USSR, write history and determine heritage. This narrative comes with an authorized, official narrative of the war, through which states impose the selection of events to be remembered, memorialized and commemorated, with respect to the common identity. The narratives served to strengthen national communities and legitimized Soviet authority on the region. Memory is instrumentalized which leads in-



The first exhibition on the crimes of Stalinism, called “Week of Conscience,” was held thanks to Perestroika in November 1988 at the club of the Moscow electric lamp factory. PHOTO: DMITRY BORKO / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

evitably to its abuse by those who hold power. The forced memorialization led to an excess of memory and commemorations which proved to be obsessive. One can just remember the Soviet tradition of taking wedding photographs in front of World War II monuments. Too much memory, like too little memory, can be “reinterpreted in terms of the categories of resistance and compulsion to repeat”, as the philosopher Paul Ricœur argued, which inevitably entails the work of remembering.<sup>3</sup> And what is at stake is that the excess of memory obscures the experiences of war that do not fit in the dominant framework. Yet memories of humiliation and loss do not disappear but become rather symbolic wounds stored in the archives of the collective memory that call for healing. Abuses of memory and forgetting are thus particularly problematic since the imposed historical representation of the past is “placed in the service of the circumscription of the identity defining the community.”<sup>4</sup>

**A**fter 1989, the new emerging nations challenged the narratives about the Great Patriotic war and delegitimized the heroic anti-fascist struggle along with the communist regimes. The new narrative of the end of

World War II was reframed as a loss of sovereignty, for instance. In this new narrative, “Yalta” was no longer “the symbol of liberation and the Allies’ victory over Nazism, but of the partition of Europe, in which half the continent was abandoned to four decades of repression.”<sup>5</sup> The fact that Latvia was occupied and not liberated by the Soviets in 1944 was, for instance, the American-Latvian history professor Paulis Lazda’s main concern when he initiated the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia in 1993.<sup>6</sup>

In these new historical reconfigurations, the trauma of communist crimes is placed at the core of historical representation. From this perspective, the period before Communist rule is portrayed as a golden era. Communism is depicted as the greater evil and the Nazi occupation is even used to present an anti-communist interpretation of the past.<sup>7</sup> In the narratives presented at the Estonian Museum of Occupations in Tallinn or the Lithuanian Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights (previously the Museum of Genocide Victims), the representations of the horrors of Nazism clearly avoid giving rise to feelings of sympathy for the idea of the Soviet Union as liberator. Further, the memories of the victims of Nazism should not drown out the suffering



of the victims of communism. In the Estonian Museum of Occupations in Tallinn, the anti-communist framing determines which evidence is presented. For instance, in the part concerning the “War and the German years”, German wartime propaganda films warning of the “red terror” and “Bolshevik assaults” are used as evidence of Soviet atrocities. As for the Lithuanian Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, located in a former prison of the Soviet secret services, the NKVD and later the KGB, the spotlight is turned on the victims from the two Soviet occupations (e.g. before and after WWII) and the fact that the building served as a Gestapo prison from 1941 to 1944 is only mentioned in passing on a “tiny board at the exhibition on the ground floor.”<sup>8</sup>

In the post-communist period, victimhood thus became the new dominant narrative and the new emerging nations rooted their identity in traumas, often using the term “genocide” to label the violent experiences they were subjected to during the Stalinist period.<sup>9</sup> This has notably been the case in Ukraine, where the memory of the *Holodomor* (the famine of 1932–33, induced by the Bolshevik government) became one of the founding myths of the post-Soviet Ukrainian state. The recognition and representation of the Stalinist repressions is undeniably crucial to coming to term with the past. The problem, however, is that the status of nation-victim and the externalization of communism provides “a moral alibi”. As the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov argued, “To have been a victim gives you the right to complain, to protest, and to make demands.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, the wrongdoings of one’s own nation are justified as defensive actions. The position of victim also offers the possibility to dispel one’s own group’s collaboration, voluntary or forced, in Nazi crimes against the Jews. And when director Heiki Ahonen of the Museum of Occupations in Tallinn, for instance, was asked what the museum contained from the Holocaust, he answered: “Estonia never had a Jewish question and we just simply don’t have any physical items from these people who were killed.”<sup>11</sup>

Even in the ambitious Polish museum POLIN in Warsaw, anti-Semitism is externalized by blaming some external forces, from the Cossacks to the German and Soviet occupiers. In this way, any complicity or collabo-

ration, voluntary or forced, in Nazi crimes by some Polish citizens can be drowned out. This is also the case in the narrative offered at the Jasenovac death camp exhibition in Croatia, the only death camp in German-occupied Europe operated by local collaborators where the role of Croat perpetrators is carefully blanked out.<sup>12</sup>

What is even more problematic is when perpetrators are reframed as “anti-Soviet resistant fighters” or “freedom fighters” and especially when politicians instrumentalize the symbolic wounds that were tabooed

or disfigured in the Soviet official narratives and reframe them as objects of glory and celebration. Thus, the “reordering of meaningful worlds”<sup>13</sup> after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a process of reclamation of history, well attested for instance by the reconfiguration of the Ukrainian nationalist movement.<sup>14</sup> It is of course legitimate to address the historical wounds suffered by one’s own group, but the problem is when the reclaimed past is cleared of any difficult aspects of past events that could damage the group’s self-identity. And when the duty of memory “proclaims itself to be

speaking for the victims’ demand for justice”<sup>15</sup> it becomes an obligatory memory which has the same signs of abuse as the previous Soviet-imposed authorized narrative.

### The Return of the Undead

The forced memorialization of the Great Victory led to another phenomenon, i.e. blocked memory. Indeed, imposed memory drowns out mourning for the victims and serves as a way to avoid confronting one’s own deeds during the war (for instance the rape of women by Soviet soldiers). Hence, only the memories of the soldiers who fought for the Soviet Union were commemorated in Estonia or Latvia during the Soviet period while the men who had been mobilized by Nazi Germany, voluntarily or forced, were silenced.<sup>16</sup> Their experiences were consequently ostracized. This led to a double silence, since these sorts of traumatic experiences were not recognized and commemorated, and the suffering of these men had to be silenced for their own survival and for the sake of their relatives. It also creates an insidious divide within a society between citizens who are allowed to pay tribute to their dead and those who are silenced. This sort of taboo-creating process complicates the working through of

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“In the post-communist period, victimhood thus became the new dominant narrative and the new emerging nations rooted their identity in traumas.”

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traumatic experiences and marks an impossible mourning process.

In Eastern Europe, where millions remain unburied, the repressed continue to torment the living and the dead return as the undead “in novels, films, and other forms of culture that reflect, shape, and possess people’s memory”, as the historian and cultural scientist Alexander Etkind put it.<sup>17</sup> Missing citizens and soldiers cannot be properly mourned if the circumstances and place of their deaths are not known. And as Freud warned us,

**If the dead are not properly mourned, they turned into the undead and cause trouble for the living. If the suffering is not remembered, it will be repeated, If the loss is not recognized, it threatens to return in strange though not entirely new forms, as the uncanny.**<sup>18</sup>

Soviet terror left indelible aftereffects in societies, which are very difficult to come to terms with for several reasons. Firstly, it is difficult to frame the experiences of Soviet terror in one single narrative since the experiences could take many different shades, from house arrest to detainment in a penitentiary or disciplinary institution (prison, gulag camp, psychiatric hospital, orphanage, Soviet army), from ethnic resettlement to collectivization or forced industrialization. Secondly, the lines between victim and perpetrator were blurred. As Etkind suggested, “the same person could be a perpetrator during one wave of terror, and the victim during the next”,<sup>19</sup> which complicated any attempt at mourning. And thirdly, families were left without information and in uncertainty and whether the victim came back or not, their fate affected deeply the lives of their descendants for generations. Those who returned from the camps returned as different people, still alive but no longer themselves, which was very difficult for descendants to face and created a wall between the traumatized victims of the gulag and their families.

The work of mourning is impeded when the fate of one parent is uncertain and/or the circumstances of death in the camp remain unknown. The uncertain loss is destructive both for survivors and for the memory of the dead, “nothing could be worse for the work of mourning than confusion and doubt; one has to know what is bur-

ied and where.”<sup>20</sup> Families kept hoping that the missing relative would reappear from captivity. This hope of an eventual return postpones and complicates the families’ mourning.

Not knowing where a loved one is buried indicates an impossible mourning process. As the cultural theorist Aleida Assmann argues, “it is precisely this cultural and religious duty of laying the dead to rest that is so shockingly disrupted after periods of excessive violence.”<sup>21</sup> A human being’s passage on earth is annihilated when s/he is refused a place of burial or at least a ritual through which the place and time of her/his departure is attested. The act of throwing bodies into a mass grave or leaving human beings in the anonymity of a communal grave is a powerful statement: It erases their passage in life. The relatives and next of kin’s identification of the victims’ bodies attest that “she or he has lived and is dead”. The refusal of this last homage to a human being is, as Jean-Luc Nancy pinpoints, to steal his/her death. To set up right relations between living communities and their

ancestors is crucial and as the anthropologist Katherine Verdery put it, “though it is never easy to learn which relations are ‘right’, wrong relations are universally believed to be unfair to the dead and dangerous for the living.”<sup>22</sup> Proper burial is a prerequisite for the memory of the dead in our world view. As anthropologist Johanna Dahlin shows, war is not finished until the last fallen soldier is buried. This motivates some people organized in a voluntary search movement in Russia to offer a belated funeral to missing

soldiers in action whose remains are buried in the woods and bogs of the Kirov district near St. Petersburg. In this way, war is brought to an end and the unburied can rest in peace.<sup>23</sup>

The rehabilitation of the victims of Stalinism is incomplete, however, and very few persons have been compensated. No consensus about the representation or the remembrance of the losses has been developed.<sup>24</sup> If the unlawfully killed are not mourned they are condemned “to return in strange though not entirely new forms, as the uncanny” and hover around the living.<sup>25</sup> The duty of memory is usually transmitted to the third generation. While the survivors and/or the direct descendants of the unburied are struggling with their trauma and loss, the next generation is left with the responsibility of reassess-

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“The third generation, sensitive to the grandparents’ feeling of injustice, might also turn to violence to make their request heard.”

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ing the place of one's ancestors in history and to "revise national genealogies, inserting the person as an ancestor more centrally into the lineage of honoured forebears."<sup>26</sup>

Yet the felt demand of memory raised by wounded and impassioned memories encompasses a threatening tone to the proclamation of the duty of memory. If no cultural or political frameworks for giving meaning to the losses are available, the demand of memory can take the form of new abuses. This is notably the case when descendants and/or representatives of the diaspora initiate museums and decide how the past should be represented, which has been the case at Occupation museums in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius.

The third generation, sensitive to the grandparents' feeling of injustice, might also turn to violence to make their request heard. This is notably the topic of the film *Don't Tell Me the Boy Was Mad (Une histoire de fou, 2015)* produced and directed by Robert Guédiguian, which show the radicalization of an Armenian refugee's grandchild and his attempt to make the Armenian genocide publicly recognized in France through an act of terrorism. The issue of unburied victims is also taken up in the film *Aftermath (Polish, Pokłosie)* from 2012 by Władysław Pasikowski. In the film, based on the tragic event in the town of Jedwabne in June 1941 (see Törnquist-Plewa in this volume), a man relentlessly gathers Jewish tombstones displayed in the neighborhood and moves them into his own field to save them from oblivion. His agency met the opposition of the town residents, reluctant to face their deeds against local Jews during the war. Indeed, repressed unlawful deeds are condemned to return in distorted and monstrous forms.

As Etkind shows, films and literature in the post-communist societies not only reflect the societies' obsession with the past but "extend the work of mourning into those spaces that defeat more rational ways of understanding the past."<sup>27</sup> The proliferation of ghosts, vampires and zombies in post socialist countries' high and popular cultures prove an obsession with the return of the undead. From films like *Repentance* (by Tengiz Abuladze, 1987) and *Zero City* (by Karen Shakhnazarov, 1988) to film *4* (by Ilya Khrzhanovsky, 2004) and *Terra Nova* (by Aleksandr Melnik, 2013), the public space is haunted by undead and uncanny monsters.

### Call for an Appeased Future

The current historical reconfiguration in Eastern Europe proves that the past has not yet been crystallized in a con-

sensual memory. The region, as Barbara Törnquist-Plewa argues in this volume, is struggling with a multiplicity of painful and conflicting memories. The unappeased pasts continue to haunt the citizenry and urge various groups in Eastern Europe to compete for recognition of "their" past, their "trauma" which was long silenced or obscured in the official discourses. This tendency to construct a "national Holocaust" tied up the new nations in a victim status that make it difficult to find commonalities with the traumas experienced by other groups. Thus, the symbolic wounds stored in the archives of collective memory are grafted onto the demand for identity. We are witnessing here the need of groups and individuals to reclaim their past and restore "the damage inflicted on their identities by abusive power systems."<sup>28</sup> This reclamation of history is often accompanied by the claim for historical justice. What is at stake is that the affirmation of historical justice in the name of one's own group is often accompanied by the obscuring (or even erasure) of injustices and atrocities inflicted on other ethnic groups, which inevitably affects the capacity to acknowledge another groups' past, perceived as a danger for one's own identity.

The current historical representation in post-communist countries remains captive to the symptom of obsession and makes memory waver continually between use (recognition of the victims) and abuse (victim status). The competition of victimhood nevertheless leads inevitably to new abuses of memory and creates a new imbalance between a "we" and a "them".<sup>29</sup> Thus, the re-framing of the Soviet period as occupation or colonization impacted on the current social relationship between communities in the post-communist nations. The colonisation paradigm dictated the political debate in Estonia and Latvia during the early 1990s and impacted on the decision to create ethnic democracies in which only those who lived in Latvia and Estonia prior to the occupation by the Soviet Union and their descendants (mostly ethnic Baltic people) were considered legitimate citizens.<sup>30</sup>

This regressive character of the abuse carries us back into the uses and abuses of memory under the sign of thwarted memory during the Soviet period. We have reached a point when yesterdays' thwarted memory becomes today's imposed memory, proving that the repressed past is subjected to resistance and repetition since it has not undergone the ordeal of the difficult work of remembering. The undigested past turns to obses-

sion and entails descendants engaging with the work of memory and of mourning. And as Etkind warns us, mourning and trauma are similar in relation to repetition: “In mourning as well as in trauma, the subject obsessively returns to certain experiences of the past, and these returns obstruct this subject’s ability to live in the present.”<sup>31</sup> Post-communist societies need to face the violent experiences they have been subjected to and to work on the representation (the mechanism of making the non-present relevant for the present) and the process of “remembering”, e.g. “to reconnect the lost member with its peers.”<sup>32</sup>

This process of working through is essential to reconstruct the societies and avoid the return of the repressed as uncanny phenomena (from ghosts to act of terrorism). This process is unavoidable if an appeased standpoint is to be reached: We are indebted to those who have gone before us for part of what we are. As Ricoeur argued, “The duty of memory is not restricted to preserving the material trace, whether scriptural or other, of past events, but maintains the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others, of whom we shall later say, not that they are no more, but that they were. Pay the debt (...) but also inventory the heritage.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the duty of memory is also a duty of working through the inherited past. An appeased future cannot be reached without taking responsibility. There is a need to reach some social consensus and to renegotiate the knowledge presented in memorial museums which are not only core sites for the negotiation of historical narratives but a place for social, ethnic and religious in-groups and out-groups’ inclusion.<sup>34</sup>

These acts of re-member-ing are thus crucial for post-communist societies to regain coherence and vitality. ●

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# Image, Afterimage, Counter-Image: Communist Visuality without Communism

by Irina Sandomirskaja

**V**isual culture produced under communist regimes has nowadays become a contested object. A direction appeared in post-socialist visual culture studies that focuses on communist visuality. Formerly a field dominated by communist and anti-communist propaganda, visualizations of communism nowadays attract a new generation of scholars who see it as “a sphere that illustrates, narrates, debates, questions, confronts, and ultimately remembers the dream of a better future”.<sup>1</sup> The value of communism is in its utopian imagination, the value of the image is in providing communism with a language to get hold of and retain the spirit of utopia. This is a new attempt to awaken the public from the all-embracing nostalgic daydreaming, the neoliberal utopia that Zygmunt Bauman called “retrotopia”: “the global epidemic of nostalgia” that came with the era of neoliberalism to replace “the epidemic of progress frenzy in the relay race of history.”<sup>2</sup>

Bauman’s retrotopia is fundamentally ahistorical and should not be confused with memory only because it is also oriented to the past. It is phantasm, a politically

reactionary flight both from history and from the present into the imagined domain “reconciling, in the long term, *security with freedom*.”<sup>3</sup> The trend is now visible in many former socialist societies where political regimes seek stability by using police violence and enforcing traditional values. In this part of Europe, utopia and belief in historical progress used to be strictly prescribed to every citizen. Visualizations of communism also came into being in the spirit of utopia and historical progress, and were prescribed as its representations and instruments. The question is, how communist visuality is re-appropriated within the framework of retrotopian desires – and if there is a way to use it as a compass out of the mire of nostalgic fetishism back into history.

**I**n order to find out what happens to communist visuality in some cases of its present-day reuses and re-makes, we have to know what it is. At the risk of recapitulating what is known to everyone, I nevertheless intend to start with a brief overview of communist visuality as it was invented by the revolutionary avantgarde and given a second life in the European new wave, followed by the





Filming of the film *Dau* on the Railway Station Square in Kharkov. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

demise of cinematic representation with the arrival of digital technologies. The question is, what is it that makes visuality “communist” in the original meaning? Then, to illustrate how communist visuality is appropriated in visual culture today, I will present three cases. One is the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl*, a period production based on historical facts; another is *Dau*, an international project at the crossroad of cinema, immersive theater, and performance art. The third case was chosen for its critical perspective: documentary films by Sergei Loznitsa as examples of historical research and cinema for the critical interpretation of history. Thus, I will be following the itinerary of communist visualization from its invention during the age of communism (the image) to its simulation in post-communist commercial entertainment (the afterimage) and its deconstruction by confrontation with the historical fact (counterimage).

### Visualization of What?

Communist visuality nowadays is a visuality without an object: communism does not exist any longer, not as glob-

al power, not as social utopia, not as a moral code, and, importantly, not as an economic system within which film industries could operate in countries ruled by communist parties. If communism does return from the past, it returns not as a specter but as a memory of the specter, nostalgic dreamwork made of media images and narratives and their new applications. Is the memory of the communist past ultimately colonized by retrotopia? Can it be that the visuality from the recent past still retains a share of communist potential to support “the safety of the planet, democracy, and human solidarity”?<sup>4</sup>

Strictly speaking, it is not possible to instrumentalize, use, misuse, or abuse history. Yet, when historical meaning and value are projected onto artefacts, history becomes objectified and therefore manipulable as far as their content is concerned. A visual image is different from other bearers of historical significance, but it is also a material object, a thing that is made (planned, directed, filmed, developed, montaged, distributed, and so on). As such, the image constitutes an object of value, and as value it can be further invested to produce new value. In-

stead of serving as an ideological instrument of the state, the communist image then acquires value as symbolic capital.

What is it that constitutes a visual image as a communist one? “Communist” means not only time, place, and terms of production, but, importantly, aesthetics and ideology, a poetics of politics (or a politics of poetics). We associate visuality with communism as concrete historical contexts: the black-and-white picture and the dynamic montage of the Soviet avantgarde, or the bleak and blurred, faded color images of the auteur cinema of the 1960–70s. In what follows, I will narrow down all visuality to film images because cinema, due to the mimetic desires it inspires in its audiences, is no less than political repression and communist education responsible for the symbolic constitution of communist subjectivity.

Early communist film images produced an alphabet of visualizations of revolution in general as the masses’ effort towards a new beginning of world history. Left-wing cinematography in post-war Europe expressed its revolutionary aspirations by appropriating the politics of the film image invented by the Soviet avantgarde. Nowadays, as during the Cold War era, “communist” rather means visual styles and images from Socialist Realism including its decline in the 1960s–80s. It is an open question whether these new appropriations should be subsumed under “communist visuality” or rather under “post-modern Stalinism” (Jonathan Brent’s term).<sup>5</sup> But it is noticeable that intellectuals’ interest in Stalinist aesthetics appears to grow parallel to the rise of Stalinist sympathies in popular culture, a remarkable coincidence that would be worth discussing in greater detail elsewhere.

### **The Communist Image: “Comrade, Not Commodity”**

At the dawn of communist visual culture and its great cinematic experiments, in the Soviet 1920s, “communist” was attributed to the political economy of the image, and not its effects, its aesthetics being inseparable from its politics. Thus, LEF, the group of leftist artists and critics in the USSR, saw cinema as a constitutive part of socialist economy and film as an instrument of socialist construction. They evaluated all artistic expression in terms of its use value, its ability to satisfy the needs of the proletariat and the proletarian state. Alexander Rodchenko declared that the socialist thing is “not a commodity but a comrade”, and this maxim also applied to the image. Boris Arvatov, the leading LEF theorist, proclaimed that the

value of the film image lies in “the methods of its production and reception ... not in the properties of the product but in the properties of the collective process of artistic production: by whom, how, and with what practical purpose the film is produced.”<sup>6</sup> A communist visual regime rejected fetishistic pleasures provided by bourgeois entertainment. LEF even suggested eliminating cinema theaters and replacing them with film departments within Soviet administrative bodies for the use of film in “cinematic research, education, propaganda, and information ... to socialize the function of the art of cinema.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the making of communist visuality started with the remaking of the principles of its production, distribution, and useful application; film for profit was to be replaced by non-surplus-value cinema.

This led LEF to divide film into right-wing and left-wing. On the right, Arvatov placed movies with actors and a fictional “fabula”; this kind of film distorted objective reality. On the left, there was a non-acted film without a “fabula”, therefore, true-to-life.<sup>8</sup> This rather straightforward attempt to formalize and politicize visuality failed to account for the role of the audience and, more broadly, for the politics of seeing that constitutes the regime of visuality. In order to establish cinema as a communist project to be deployed in the achievement of communist goals one needed to develop new skills of reception and appreciation in the proletarian audience. Dziga Vertov was most efficient educating Russian workers and peasants in communist vision. In his earliest film experiments he designed his films as a collective “cinema-eye” for the political class. During the years of the first five-year-plans, he created visual epics filling the cinema-eye with the content of Soviet industrialization. Even at the end of his career, as a newsreel film director, Vertov was still trying to increase the use value of his cinema by making newsreel a vehicle of objective communist knowledge. He proposed, among other things, the method of squeezing the grand time of the Socialist Realist epic into the mini-format of a ninety-second long episode, so that an ultra-short film could cover the immensity of Soviet spaces and projects, experimenting with time-space compression long before it was discovered by post-modern theory.<sup>9</sup>

According to Jean-Luc Godard, the master of *film socialisme*, cinema lost its grounds to television when the small screen (watched by an individual viewer) came to replace the wide screen (watched by the masses)<sup>10</sup> It was Godard who most radically opened up

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the film image towards everyday life when he took his filming onto the streets. Instead of carefully planning and controlling the logic of the gaze of the camera moving inside the constructed set, he preferred to choose just one point of view, “like in a documentary”, and then watch things happen in the field of vision “as if by themselves”.<sup>11</sup> That was his contribution to the general trend of democratization of cinema after the war, against fetishism and towards a greater social and individual awareness. In television, the medium that came to replace film and the subject of filmic vision, “there’s no creation at all anymore, just broadcasting”,<sup>12</sup> the viewer alone with his gadget. Digital technology has no genetic or functional connection with cinema; digitized cinema changes not simply in appearance, but also in its nature as an event. We will also see some examples of how this change in visual regime from “communist film” to “bourgeois television” affected communist visuality.

### The Afterimage: Remembering the Trauma

Throughout the history of Soviet modernization, film served as a powerful factor encouraging mimetic desire, the wish to imitate in everyday life the ideal images presented on the screen. The power of cinema as the producer of dream images is tantamount, but, according to André Bazin, even in the dream worlds of its imagination, film invariably acts as “a social documentary”.<sup>13</sup> Even re-medialized with the use of digital technologies, cinema still remains “a social documentary”, even though the structure of this new documentality becomes considerably more complicated, its dream worlds more complex and remote from immediate experience. Streaming services are where communist visuality is located nowadays, and this is where the audiences receive communism as information and sensation: the digital image is an afterimage of communism.

An afterimage is an illusion that remains after a period of exposure to the original image, after the object itself is no longer present. We are all familiar with the phenomenon: a negative “imprint” on the retina that lingers floating in the field of vision after we looked for some time at a brightly illuminated object.

Soviet visuals representing the reality of the USSR as a communist society in construction were produced within the framework of the socialist economy. Yet nowadays, inherited by capitalism and capitalist entertainment, they are used as images of dystopia to represent communism’s “better world” doomed from the very beginning. Dystopia is the legacy of the Cold War, when



PHOTO: HBO NORDIC

The film *Chernobyl* borrows narrative and visual patterns from Soviet war movies and post-war “socialist humanism”.

western media and film interpreted Soviet communism as a typically “Russian” thing, the radical Other of the rest of the rational world or, according to Boris Groys, an “unconscious, unrepresentable mode of being, alien to any historicity.”<sup>14</sup> This way of alienating communist experience from world history is quite prominent in two of my examples later in this essay, one of them (*Chernobyl*) promoting itself as a historical narrative with a twist of the present-day apocalypse, the other (*Dau*) an investigation of dark fantasies about communism in the post-communist collective unconscious. Thus, not only melancholy and sentimental nostalgia, but also much heavier issues are at stake when the present-day media and art subject communist visuality to scrutiny, trying to make out what exactly our time has inherited after the demise of communism, and what potential of expression can be gained from re-medialization of communist visuality.

**C**hernobyl, an award-winning historical miniseries produced by HBO and Sky UK in 2019, is an interesting case of reuse. It was seen by eight million people across various streaming platforms and highly acclaimed both by critics and the general public. A mixture of reality-based and period productions, *Chernobyl* recycled quite a lot of Soviet symbolic material, especially narrative and visual devices from (late) Socialist Realism. Such were for instance the tragic episodes based on the historical accounts of Chernobyl’s struggle, the self-sacrifice of the rank-and-file who fought a hopeless fight full of enthusiasm but without any protection whatsoever. In its rendering of facts *Chernobyl* proved remarkable in the way it borrowed narrative and visual patterns from Soviet war movies and post-war “socialist humanism”, especially the combination of melodrama depicting indi-



vidual lives with tragedy in the interpretation of national history.

The way *Chernobyl* used reconstructed Soviet environments was especially impressive: Those insignificant things that were so recognizable for everyone born in the USSR surrounded the characters tightly and intimately. The property team worked wonders collecting exclusively authentic objects and environments for the set. Due to its high definition technology, *Chernobyl* could easily serve as a museum of the 1970s – or a museum of 2020s historical fetishism. Added in post-production were also effects simulating the chiaroscuro of Soviet movies, giving *Chernobyl* an atmosphere of almost otherworldly bleakness, as if seen through a screen of smoke (or tears), and reproducing sovcolor (Soviet color) as a sign of “typically Soviet bloc” cinema.<sup>15</sup>

*Chernobyl* locations have nowadays themselves become objects of tourist interest.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, neither this, nor excellent props helped to fully convince, and even made some people quite angry. The claim to facticity was predictably questioned by Chernobyl veterans, as well as (also predictably) by Russia’s Communist Party and culture ministry who rejected the project as counter-historical and “Russophobic”.<sup>17</sup> By progressive critics, *Chernobyl* was reproached for exploiting anti-communist clichés of the Cold War era, but at the same time positively evaluated for acting out “some of our collective fears about the safety of the planet, democracy, and human solidarity.”<sup>18</sup>

It is still unclear how exactly the simple idea of shooting a biopic about the Soviet nuclear physicist Lev Landau gradually transformed into Ilya Khrzhanovskii’s opus magnum *Dau*, described by himself as a “unique, epic, and ever-changing project ...[that] combines film, science, performance, spirituality, social and artistic experimentation”.<sup>19</sup> Its production was generously financed by private donors and took over ten years. From the outside *Dau* appears a mixture of hard-core authenticity, historical re-enactment and shamanic journeying therapy – except that both re-enactment and therapy were professionally documented on film throughout the period and later converted into cinema and TV formats for distribution. The theme of this reenaction (or therapy) was everyday

life under Stalin, to be reconstructed in every detail, complete with top level classified regime members on the premises, the NKVD in period uniforms, denunciations and psychological violence during night-time interrogations, as well as abundant non-simulated scenes of nudity, sex, violence, etc.

In the heated post-factum discussion of *Dau*’s grandiosity mania, little attention has been given to its director’s profoundly ahistorical philosophy and his almost religious, if not obsessive, belief that authenticity guarantees historical truth and can indeed “activate history”.<sup>20</sup> In the spirit of pop-cultural historical reconstructions and motivated by the myth of the Milgram experiment, *Dau* set out to prove that *homo sovieticus* could be re-awakened in the present-day individual by meticulous reconstruction of material and social environments. Authenticity, the Holy Grail of the digital image, here replaced historical fact with a “feeling of history”, assuming feeling to be identical with fact. What started as a historical project and a parody of communist visuality, with time and thanks to an uninterrupted flow of money, withdrew into fantasies, into “a cinematographic bubble”, in which the visual and other history of communism under Stalin’s rule got “remixed, circulated, and reproduced”, turning history into a digital affect.<sup>21</sup> That all historical memory and not only communist visuality

could be “remixed” in such a way is a possibility, given the nature of digital technologies and the tension they produce in general, between symbolism and indexality, or the knowledge and experience of history, on the one hand, and the “feeling” on the other.

### The Counter-Image: Un-Forgetting Communism

This tension shows itself in the craving for “the real thing”, the authentic and the genuine under the rule of the digital, and this concerns

also the “sincere and direct” communist representation, the “truth” of the documentary or media image and the blindness of the audience that cannot discern constructiveness in the image, in its constitution as an artefact. Documentary footage fascinates and mystifies the fetishist consumer not less than the spectacle of “the ballerina’s underpants”, as Vertov in the 1920s summarized the fetishism of bourgeois cinema.

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“Due to its high definition technology, *Chernobyl* could easily serve as a museum of the 1970s – or a museum of 2020s historical fetishism.”

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In 1930 in Moscow, USSR, the Soviet government puts a group of top rank economists and engineers on trial, accusing them of plotting a coup d'état. The charges are fabricated and the punishment, if convicted, is death. Image from *The Trial* by Sergei Loznitsa.

On the other hand, the kind of politically aware perception promoted by the Soviet avantgarde with its program of emancipation could not help relying on cinema's totalizing power, which agreed with the communist ideology but originated in cinema's own power to produce fascination in the viewer. The image of communism deployed by Vertov in *One Sixth of the World* made visible the geographic, historical, and ethnic diversity of the territory of the USSR, but such inclusiveness was based on the assumptions of structural homogeneity and visual control. Not only bourgeois, but communist visuality, too, requires a critical deconstruction to mobilize the image against the imperialist potentialities inherent in its technology and aesthetics.

The effects of the film image as total representation are the object of Sergei Loznitsa's critical intervention in Soviet documentary film from Stalin's time.<sup>22</sup> By using material that had been for some reason excluded from the final version, he seeks to subvert Stalinist visuality

by means of visuality itself – and thus calls into question the ideological and technological criteria of communist aesthetics that allowed images born out of the spirit of revolutionary emancipation to find useful application for themselves in the regime of total terror.

Loznitsa's *Protsess* (*The Trial*, 2018), uses leftovers from Iakov Posel'skii 1930 documentary *13 dnei: protsess po delu "Prompartii"* (*Thirteen Days: The Trial of the Industrial Party*). This was one of the earliest events in the history of Stalin's show trials, a staged act of mock justice by "socialist legality". Prompartia was an OGPU falsification used to justify political repression against the technical intelligentsia who could be blamed for the economic failures of Stalin's regime. One person died during the investigation and another was executed without trial, which probably helped secure the cooperation of the rest of the victims.

Loznitsa reconstructed the story by restoring much of what Posel'skii had left out. He thus made visible the

nature of the Prompartia trial as a theatrical event, a staged production directed according to a script, played by a group of actors on the stage, and supported by audience in the hall and outside the courtroom. In Loznitsa's version, it turned out that the central position in the scenography of the trial had been given to a film crew; the images revealing their presence had been cut from the original 1930 documentary to give it the appearance of objectivity. Alongside the fragments showing how the event was being documented (by film cameras and stenographers) Loznitsa also restored the close-ups of the procurator's complete speech and of the accused persons delivering their final statements, as well as fragments showing how the public reacted and the organized demonstration outdoors howled, demanding capital punishment. Thus, Loznitsa's montage not only completed the factual content but also revealed the anatomy of this major provocation, a historical forgery and a fake act of fake justice that ended "for real", with death and prison for the innocent victims.<sup>23</sup>

Another film from Loznitsa's series of archival restorations is *Gosudartvennye pokhorony* (The State Funeral, 2019). Here, Loznitsa again worked with found material left after another earlier film production, *Velikoe proshchanie* (*Great Mourning*, 1953), a detailed chronicle of the three days after Stalin's death, crowds marching to see Stalin's body, and public mourning ceremonies all over the USSR. *Great Mourning* was commissioned on the day of Stalin's death to be distributed all over the USSR, which never happened; historically, it is the last in a whole series of Stalinist documentaries filmed by dozens of cameramen all over the country and put together using the principles of Vertov's montage to represent the USSR on screen as a temporal and spatial totality. The 10,000 meters of footage were produced in the project out of which only a fraction was usable in the final version. Such a gigantic over-expenditure of time, money, and effort would in itself already be a massive monument suitable to commemorate Stalin's greatness. Then unexpectedly *Great Mourning* was not interesting anymore and all materials were sent to the archives where they remained until found out by Loznitsa.<sup>24</sup>

Here again, just like he did in *The Trial*, Loznitsa wishes to follow the process closely and to allow national grief

to be visible in all its detail, face after face, group after group, site after site. He found a way of re-using critically the way original camera work captured the event: In the same location where the Prompartia trial had taken place twenty years earlier, crowded by the grieving masses and security forces, the camera could only capture the events from one and the same angle, the same monotonous movement of endless processions, people wearing the same expressions on their faces, of either sorrow, or boredom, or curiosity. Due to this emphasis on the ceaseless and meaningless repetition – in fact, the mystery behind the effectiveness of Stalin's version of communism – Loznitsa's image in *The State Funeral* became a counter-image of its prototype, *Great Mourning*. The original film shows the loss of the genius leader in allegorical tableaux, groups of citizens expressively frozen in sculptural poses of motionless grief. In Loznitsa's remix, instead of frozen images, society appears to scatter and melt and flow in formless and aimless fluxes. "Everything that is solid melts into air", and the uncomfortable monumental memory starts dissolving. However, Stalin's burial can signify the end of Stalinism and by the same token the beginning of its forgetting. To undo the forgetting is the critical intention here: in order to un-forget the inconvenient heritage of communist visuality, Loznitsa brings it back into the field of vision to counter the nostalgic imagination of the present day and to challenge its uncritical memory.

### What Is Left of Communism?

Together with communism's claim to be the end of all human history, communist visual symbols have lost their

pretensions of totality – but then, in what sense do they remain communist, if at all?

For present-day political philosophy, the idea of communism is relevant not as a "system", nor an "era", but merely as "a communist moment" (Alain Badiou) or "the communist hypothesis" (Jacques Rancière): "Communism is think-

able to us as the tradition created around a number of moments, famous or obscure, when simple workers and ordinary men and women proved their capacity to struggle for their rights and for the rights of everybody, or to run factories, companies, administrations, armies, schools, etc., by collectivizing the power of the equality of anyone with everyone."<sup>25</sup> "Communists without

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” Loznitsa re-constructed the story by restoring much of what Posel'skii had left out.

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proper communism” nowadays find communism usable as “a dream of a better future” and hope to find a way of reinvesting “the forgotten aspects of communism ... the expanse and effectiveness of communist cultural work.”<sup>26</sup> Communism is no longer politics but cultural value; communist visuality, consequently, a cultural asset.

It cannot be denied that “emancipation and equality of anyone with everyone” is needed more than ever before in the present-day world of global disproportions. The age of the omniscient and all-powerful digital technologies has brought with itself an entirely new kind of unfreedom. The user of the digital commons can use but not govern the resources, and the capitalist subject, to quote Gilles Deleuze, is constructed in such a way that “the more he obeys, the more he commands, since he obeys only himself.”<sup>27</sup> A return of communist visuality in digital forms might be a signal of Bauman’s retrotopia, utopianism’s neoliberal mirror reflection. Alternatively, it might be a way to disengage communist visuality from its instrumental function in “propaganda, demagoguery, primordial nationalism, corruption, and authoritarianism [that] are not the exclusive properties of communism and that neoliberal capitalism does not inherently lead to democracy and social justice.”<sup>28</sup> To quote Rancière again, “A rethinking of communism today must take into account the unheard-of situation of the failure of the capitalist utopia.”<sup>29</sup> Such rethinking necessarily involves communist visuality, as well as the aesthetics and politics of visualizing communism, both historical and imaginary. ●

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# The Toxic Memory Politics in the Post-Soviet Caucasus

by Thomas de Waal

**O**n May 17, 1989, a team from the American human rights organization Physicians for Human Rights arrived in Tbilisi, the capital of what was still Soviet Georgia. They came to investigate the deaths of around 20 civilians who had taken part in a peaceful protest in the city on April 9 that was violently broken up by Soviet troops.

The arrival of the three physicians in Tbilisi coincided with the end of the traditional 40-day period of mourning for those who had perished that night. On this symbolic date the doctors witnessed a third wave of hospitalizations in which hundreds of young people complained of a mysterious sickness, caused, they said, by exposure to a toxic chemical agent. Up to 400 children and young people sought treatment and 43 were hospitalized.

The killings of April 9, 1989 were experienced as an act of national martyrdom in Georgia. The brutal dispersal of a peaceful demonstration by Soviet troops turned Georgians *en masse* against the Soviet Union and spurred on the nationalist movement for independence. Georgia's Communist Party leadership resigned, and the party never recovered its authority. Symbolically, the new Georgian parliament chose the same date two years later, April 9, 1991, to declare independence,<sup>1</sup> mentioning the 1989 killings as a justification for doing so.

In two short years, from 1989 to 1991, not only Georgia, but the two other "union republics" of the South Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, all of which had been part of the Soviet Union since 1922, moved rapidly towards independence. During the same period violence began

and escalated, between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and between Tbilisi and the Abkhaz and South Ossetians, over the status of territories disputed between them.

The violent and tragic episodes that occurring during these formative years are still memorialized and remembered across this region. This is quite natural, but the way this memorialization is performed all too often re-enacts trauma or perpetuates conflict rather than seeks to overcome it. This process of remembering and "mis-remembering" of these key events is the subject of this article.

## Mass Trauma in Tbilisi

**O**n completion of their mission to Tbilisi in May 1989, Physicians for Human Rights issued a damning report holding the Soviet authorities responsible for the deaths of unarmed civilians on April 9.<sup>2</sup> They determined that the soldiers may have used a toxic gas against the crowd, although they were unable to state conclusively whether the deaths had been caused by that agent, by asphyxiation or by other means. A mission from the newly elected Soviet parliament, the Congress for People's Deputies, led by the man who later became mayor of St. Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak, reached a similar verdict.<sup>3</sup>

In a later article,<sup>4</sup> the three doctors who had visited Tbilisi analysed the health effects of April 9 in a broader perspective. They called the mass hospitalizations, especially of children, that followed the tragedy a case of "mass psychogenic illness":

**Subsequent systematic examination of each child revealed no major abnormalities in their mental**



## Essay



Pro-independence Georgian demonstrators sit on Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi on April 8, 1989. On April 9, Soviet Interior Ministry troops moved in to crush the peaceful protests, killing at least 20 people and leaving hundreds injured or poisoned by gas.

PHOTO: RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY



Photos of the April 9, 1989 Massacre victims on billboard in Tbilisi.

PHOTO: GEORGE BARATELI / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



A woman in a car holding a black flag mourning the victims of April 9, 1989.

PHOTO: YURI MECHITOV

**status. It instead yielded more data consistent with a diagnosis of mass psychogenic illness.**

**In considering the origins of the symptoms seen in the Georgian schoolchildren, the PHR team thought that the children were expressing somatically the tremendous anxiety, fear, and grief felt throughout the community resulting from the Soviet military intervention and its aftermath. (The MSF team concurred with this view.) That their symptoms so closely resembled those suffered by the victims of the toxic gases appeared related to the emotional identification of these children with the victims. There also appeared to be a significant contribution to the epidemic by the adult community—parents, teachers, school officials, and medical personnel—in that the children’s symptoms were interpreted as having resulted from possible toxic exposure. The outbreak (beginning on day 38 and peaking on day 39) appeared tied to the renewed focus of community attention as the 40<sup>th</sup> day of mourning was approached...The 40 days of mourning in the Georgian Orthodox Church are meant to serve as a vehicle for processing grief, with the 40<sup>th</sup> day acting both as the culmination and termination of the official period of mourning. The people of Tbilisi, however, burdened by ongoing anxiety, fear, and vulnerability to the Soviet forces, could not move toward such closure regarding their recent trauma and grief.<sup>5</sup>**

The report refers to other instances of traumatic events leading to this phenomenon of mass psychogenic illness, in Kosovo in 1990 and the West Bank in 1983. It refers to all three incidents as “a sentinel indicator of community suffering in the context of political repression or fear.”

The Tbilisi deaths of April 1989 still constitute a reference point for collective memory and trauma for Georgia. The trauma was real and deepened by the fact that the perpetrators within the Soviet armed forces and their political masters were never prosecuted or held to account.

But the psychogenic illness suffered by Georgia’s children is also a kind of metaphor for how Georgian society was infected by these events and cannot shake them off—in the words of the PHR cannot “move towards closure.” The deaths acquired such a significance that that it is still almost impossible to discuss them in public as a political or historical event.

In a definitive article on the topic, Katie Sartania records how even before tragedy struck the protests in the centre of Tbilisi had an aura of religious ritual about them. Protestors carried crosses and icons as well as nationalist symbols. During a public hunger strike a few months before, one of the opposition leaders, Merab Kostava, told fellow protestors that “readiness for sacrifice was a positive thing.”<sup>6</sup> Perceived loyalty to the nation was deemed to be even greater than loyalty to the Georgian Orthodox Church. At 4AM on April 9, Patriarch Ilya II, having spoken to Communist Party boss Jumber Patiashvili, asked the demonstrators to leave the street and move to Kashueti Church, saying that the “danger is real”. Demonstrators refused, saying, “No, we swore.” Protest leaders Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava told the Patriarch that if they ended the demonstration now, people would consider them traitors.

**T**his suggests that those who died on April 9 were the victims not just of the callous brutality of the Soviet troops who came shortly afterwards to disperse the crowds, but also of the inflexibility of the protest leaders, who had invoked the language of martyrdom and resisted a call to move the crowd out of harm’s way.

Sartania relates how self-criticism on this issue was even a taboo topic in 2018. In that year Georgian journalist Tamila Varshalomidze, who had been a child in 1989, made a documentary for Al Jazeera named *My Soviet Scar*. She devoted much of it to the 1989 killings, saying that the protests were the culmination of “two hundred years of Russian occupation” and that protestors were “killed anonymously and deliberately under the cover of darkness.”<sup>7</sup>

In the documentary Varshalomidze interviewed photographer Yuri Mechitov who took a famous picture at the time of a young Georgian woman holding a black flag to mourn those who died. Mechitov surprised his younger interlocutor by saying that he did not believe that the Soviet soldiers planned to kill anybody and those who died did so in a stampede.

Mechitov was denounced for these words. Members of Georgia’s “Anti-Occupation Movement” protested in front of his house, calling him a traitor and carrying a list of those who had died on April 9. The fact that he had personally borne witness to the events was not enough to save him from denunciation and he issued an apology.

## Constructing Memory in the South Caucasus

In all three countries of the South Caucasus, tragic events from the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period have

become reference points of public memory. While Georgia marks April 9, the equivalent date in the calendar for Azerbaijan is January 20, “Black January” which marks the day when around 130 people died after Soviet troops intervened in Baku in 1990.

However for both Armenia and Azerbaijan the bloody Karabakh conflict fought between them has even greater resonance than “Black January.” The two tragic events associated with the conflict which receive special commemoration every year are acts of bloodshed committed by the other side: the pogroms against Armenians in the Azerbaijani town of Sumgait in February 1988 and the killing of civilians fleeing the Azerbaijani town of Khojaly by Armenians in February 1992. These two “sacred events” are marked in ways that evoke martyrdom and help perpetuate the conflict between the two nations. The second Karabakh war of 2020, in which many thousands died as Azerbaijan reversed its losses and won a military victory created new traumas and bitter memories which will now be memorialized by a new generation.

The nations of the South Caucasus are of course the norm, not the exception, in having powerful national myths, edited versions of history and constructed identities. Every country has its sanctified historical events—they would hardly be modern nations if they did not. This region does have certain some specific features in the way its narratives are constructed, however.

Some differences should be noted first in the world-views of different parts of the South Caucasus region, as the Soviet Union broke up. While for Azerbaijani and Georgian nationalists in 1989-91 Moscow was identified as the “Centre” and the locus of repression, many Armenians still regarded Russia as a natural ally in a struggle against Azerbaijan and Turkey. For Abkhaz, recent history was more complex still—their story was that they had suffered under the oppressive Georgianization of their republic launched by Stalin in the 1930s, but had benefited from Soviet rule both under Lenin and in more recent times.

When it comes to attitudes on the three events discussed here—the killings in Tbilisi, Sumgait and Khojaly—there are also noteworthy points of convergence.

First, all the three events discussed here which defined public discourse occurred in the very specific context of the rapid disintegration of the socialist ideology of the

USSR. These conditions helped to produce a particular kind of ethnic nationalism which, as Ernest Gellner wrote, “is favoured by a double vacuum: there is no serious rival ideology, and there are no serious rival institutions.” In other words, the conditions were present for an especially strong nationalist ideology to emerge in a context in which any alternative political discourse had been suppressed by that of state socialism; when the socialist ideology itself was discredited, nationalism was the most available and most attractive political formula. Moreover, as many scholars, such as Ronald Suny, had noted, this nationalism was already prevalent in society: the Soviet system had actually incubated nationalism, not suppressed it. When the historical moment arrived, large parts of the elite and professional classes were ready to embrace it.<sup>8</sup>

The new nationalist movements which emerged in 1988-89 across the Soviet Union all sought to reset

history and restart the clock on what they declared to be stories of nation-building that had been cruelly interrupted. Each movement of course focused on different moments when history had been more favourable for them. For Georgians it was their brief independent republic of 1918. For Abkhaz it was the period in the 1920s under Lenin when they had unprecedented autonomy.

This ahistorical mindset inculcated an intense euphoria about the future, as though, if historical wrongs were righted, black clouds would disperse and a new golden age would begin. The Sukhumi-born Georgian writer Guram Odisharia recalls, “We Georgians thought we’d become independent, sell our wine and mineral water and live like millionaires. The Abkhaz, with their sea and countryside, thought they would break from Georgia and become a second Switzerland. We were all going to live so well.”<sup>9</sup>

A second specific feature of this region is that its rich and complex history gave entrepreneurial nationalist politicians the opportunity to be selective. It is possible to write many different and entirely different histories of the South Caucasus. Georgians for example could look back to the Middle Ages, when Abkhazia was part of a wider kingdom. They could refer to the brief independent republic of 1918-21 and to the crackdown on the Georgian intelligentsia in 1930s. But periods in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the Soviet era when relations between Georgians and Russians were more harmonious and Tbilisi was essen-

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“ We Georgians thought we’d become independent, sell our wine and mineral water and live like millionaires.”

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tially loyal to Russian rule could be overlooked.

A third peculiarity of this region was that, with the end of the Soviet Union, it was harder to forge a cosmopolitan narrative that reached across borders and emphasized a bigger Caucasian identity. The Soviet Union had been both repressive and integrationist, hence to be patriotic was now to approve of disintegration. The only other experiment in a single unified state in the region, the Transcaucasian Federation, had lasted just five weeks in 1918. If remembered at all, it was as a failure.

In the mutually exclusive narratives which persist to this day Armenia and Azerbaijan can find no place for the comparatively recent historical experience in which Armenia was home to large numbers of Azerbaijanis and vice versa and inter-ethnic relations were mostly harmonious. The Georgians could access slightly different historical narratives, notably the “memory” of how Georgia’s Golden Age under David the Builder presided over a multi-national kingdom and an era of tolerance.

### Sumgait and Khojaly

Despite a history of peaceful co-existence Armenia and Azerbaijan have defined their modern statehood around the Nagorny Karabakh conflict and therefore in extreme opposition to one another. It is anathema for Armenia to wish for Azerbaijan to prosper as a country, or vice versa. The success of one country is predicated on the failure of the other. In recent years this black-and-white discourse has spread to the Armenian and Azerbaijani diaspora, most of whom had previously stayed detached from the conflict. During the cross-border clashes of July 2020, Armenian and Azerbaijani market traders in Moscow waged war against each other’s business, in a display of patriotic fervour.<sup>10</sup> That mobilization intensified in the war that began in September 2020.

As noted above, two tragic episodes from the Karabakh conflict, the killings at Sumgait and at Khojaly in 1992, have been afforded a sacred status. The bloodshed and suffering in both cases was certainly real. It is worth noting in passing that distasteful conspiracy theories have sprung up that seek to pin responsibility—in defiance of all the facts—on the other side for both sets of killings. These were even promoted by the leaders of both countries at the Munich Security Conference in 2020.<sup>11</sup>

A tendency to paint the horrors in even more lurid tones is also real. Both sides have called the events “genocide” although neither can be reasonably said to qualify as such. Sumgait was a pogrom, Khojaly a massacre and war crime. The Armenian government put up a *khachkar* (cross-

stone) at the Tsitsernakaberd Genocide Memorial in Yerevan to commemorate the victims of Sumgait, somehow equating those who died at the hands of Ottoman Turkey in 1915-16 and those killed in Azerbaijan in 1988. Ceremonies to mark Sumgait are still held there every year.

The decision to term the killings at Khojaly a genocide began around a decade after the event. The massacre is now marked each year with much greater intensity than it was at the time or in the years immediately following. The Azerbaijani government funds memorials, events and advertising campaigns abroad in a way that competes with Armenians’ campaign for recognition of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-16. It is declared to be emblematic of a consistent Armenian ideology of seeking to destroy Azerbaijanis as a people.

If we consider Sumgait and Khojaly as real, if tragic, historical events, a picture emerges which affords agency to more actors and suggests how things could potentially have been different.

A comprehensive version of what happened in Sumgait emerges from interviews conducted with survivors not long after the pogroms themselves. The first edition containing 36 interviews, was published as a book in 1989.<sup>12</sup> In his public comments its scrupulous editor Samvel Shakhmuradian made it clear that he was not interested in a simple morality tale. (Shakhmuradian, a journalist, was one of the early leaders of the Armenian democratic movement. He was killed fighting in the Karabakh conflict in 1992).

The interviews for example contain many stories of how Azerbaijanis in Sumgait sheltered their Armenian neighbours from attacks. At the time Shakhmuradian also mentioned the story of Ishkhan Trdatyan, a man who defended his apartment and family with an axe and killed at least one of the attackers in self-defence. Trdatyan’s story—one of the most remarkable from Sumgait—was not included in the first publication and was only published in full years later.<sup>13</sup> One can speculate that his story of violent resistance did not fit with the official narrative of victimhood and genocide that the Armenian authorities wanted to promote.

Few of the Sumgait Armenians identified themselves at the time as protagonists in the Karabakh conflict. One darkly ironic aspect of the pogroms was that, although the Armenians of the town were targeted and threatened with death because of their apparent association with the Karabakh cause and their ethnic motherland, Armenia, many of them seemed to have spoken Russian better

than Armenian and had little connection with Armenia. Those who managed to escape the violence took refuge in Sumgait's Palace of Culture. According to Grigory Kharchenko, the first Soviet official from Moscow to arrive in Sumgait, most of them asked to be evacuated from there not to Armenia but to Russia, on the grounds that they were "not real Armenians."<sup>14</sup>

The historical story of Sumgait can be said to be one more of callous incompetence, rumour and the sadistic violence of criminal young men than of conspiracy. A quicker intervention by the local Azerbaijani authorities and Soviet authorities in Moscow might have suppressed the violence before it got out of hand. In the event, the pogrom set off a chain reaction of conflict and violence that persists to this day.

When it comes to the killings outside Khojaly, committed four years later, the initial Azerbaijani narrative was more one of domestic politics and betrayal. Thomas Goltz, who was one of the first eye-witnesses to the aftermath of the massacre, and who first reported it in the foreign press, writes of public indifference to the conflict in the Azerbaijani capital Baku: "The events of February 25-26, 1992, would soon become just a detail, just another grim statistic in the ongoing litany of death and destruction in Karabakh, the Black Garden."<sup>15</sup>

The Khojaly massacre also shows every sign of having been avoidable (even if the wider Karabakh conflict was perhaps not). Up until that point, the combatants in the conflict had aimed to capture land and villages with minimum bloodshed, leaving a corridor for the civilian population to escape. In the case of Khojaly in February 1992, the feckless Azerbaijani authorities were slow to evacuate civilians from the village. As the village fell to Armenian conquerors, a corridor was left open near the village of Nakhichevanik. But two rogue Armenian units, known as Aramo and Arabo were in the vicinity and met the columns of fleeing villagers, interspersed with some fighters, with gunfire. Arriving on the scene too late, the diaspora Armenian commander Monte Melkonian was furious at the "indiscipline" of the fighters.<sup>16</sup>

The traumas of Sumgait and Khojaly persist in part because justice was not delivered for their victims. Had the Karabakh conflict been resolved politically, it is surely unlikely that they would be "remembered" as intensely as they

are today. Around the same time, after all, even worse atrocities were being committed in the Bosnia conflict, which have been confronted and at least partially overcome.

### A Toxic Legacy in Georgia

As the Soviet Union began to dissolve and Georgia began to contemplate a post-Soviet future, the philosopher Merab Marmadashvili (1930-90) and Georgia's nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia were intellectual antipodes. Marmadashvili believed Georgia's best future to be joining Europe, as a law-based democracy, hopefully in partnership with a democratic Russia. Gamsakhurdia was an ethnic nationalist who believed that the Georgian nation had a special destiny and rejected most of its neighbours as enemies.

Marmadashvili urged Georgians to fight the Soviet system with tolerance, respect for law and (quoting Kant) as "citizens of the world." "The battle must be not for the attributes of nationhood, but for the freedom of the people," he said. As Gamsakhurdia's ethnic nationalism won more adherents, the philosopher warned, shortly before his death, "We live with phantoms and idols. This is idolocracy! If we will construct our new thinking out of old concepts, then we will with precise accuracy reconstitute all the structures of the totalitarian system and the blind will again lead the sighted, who will be hunched over in a posture of complete and total submission. It is

absolutely essential that every day someone says to his people, "Did you want a leader? Be careful. Know that that means slavery."<sup>17</sup>

Marmadashvili's worst forebodings came true. The aftermath of April 9, 1989 handed the initiative to Gamsakhurdia, who sought to construct just such an "idolocracy." Gamsakhurdia demonized anyone who opposed him as "traitors" and

"enemies." He painted a Manichean picture of the world in which Georgian nation had to fight evil in the form of the Russian empire and its treacherous allies amongst Georgia's ethnic minorities. The extreme ethnic nationalism of Gamsakhurdia—and many others—drove Georgians headlong into conflict with Abkhaz and Ossetians.

The April protests in Tbilisi which culminated in the April 9 tragedy were initially called to protest against developments in Abkhazia—a fact that has now also been mostly erased from public memory (among Georgians, but not Abkhaz).

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“The traumas of Sumgait and Khojaly persist in part because justice was not delivered for their victims.”

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On March 18, the entire ethnic elite in Abkhazia—around 30,000 Abkhaz and 6,000 representatives of other ethnic groups—had signed the so-called “Lykhny Declaration.” It called for the restoration of the Abkhaz Socialist Republic of 1921, which had a higher status, not subordinate to rule by Tbilisi. The 1920s were seen as a Golden Age for the Abkhaz when local Bolshevik leader Nestor Lakoba ran the republic with the blessing of Lenin.

Both the Abkhaz, meeting symbolically in the ancient grove of Lykhny next to a Byzantine-era church, and the Georgian nationalists were seeking to dissolve seven decades of history and return to a glorious—and imaginary—historical moment. For the Georgian nationalists, the chosen moment was the independent republic of 1918-21. This aspiration would eventually be expressed in the declaration of independence adopted on April 9, 1991 by the Georgian Supreme Council. The declaration “hereby establishes and proclaims the restoration of the independent state of Georgia based on the Act of Independence of Georgia of 26 May 1918.”

Both these symbolic calls for restoration had a darker side of course, by excluding facts, developments and people who had become a reality in the meantime. As such they fit with Svetlana Boym’s definition of “restorative nostalgia.”

**Restorative nostalgia knows two main narrative plots—the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory, characteristic of the most extreme cases of contemporary nationalism fed on right-wing popular culture. The conspiratorial worldview is based on a single transhistorical plot, a Manichean battle of good and evil and the inevitable scapegoating of the mythical enemy. Ambivalence, the complexity of history and the specificity of modern circumstances is thus erased, and modern history is seen as a fulfilment of ancient prophecy. ‘Home,’ imagine extremist conspiracy theory adherents, is forever under siege, requiring defense against the plotting enemy.<sup>18</sup>**

Armed with their rival worldviews, the two sides first engaged in violence in July 1989 with clashes over the status of the Abkhaz State University. Full-scale war followed in 1992-93.

Georgian society has a greater capacity for debate than either Armenia or Azerbaijan, even if that debate is often

angry and uncivil and rarely touches “sacred” topics such as the events of 1989. Facts on the ground have shifted societal debate, sometimes imperceptibly. Georgia has de-throned successive idols since Gamsakhurdia first came to power in 1990, beginning with the violent overthrow of Gamsakhurdia himself in December 1991. The rejection of each leader, each very different from his predecessor, has opened up a little more space each time for critical reflection on the nature of Georgian politics—although it seems many Georgians are still looking for the “idol” which Mamardashvili warned them about.

The return of former Communist Party leader Eduard Shevardnadze in March 1992 was a blow against ethnic nationalism and a moment of rehabilitation for the professional classes who had done well in the late Soviet period and whom Gamsakhurdia had called “the red intelligentsia.” This battle would continue across the decades. Mikheil Saakashvili who came to power after the peaceful Rose Revolution of 2003 also used the same term, “red intelligentsia” to disparage his opponents in Tbilisi. Although his ideological stance was much more pro-Western, Saakashvili also borrowed some of the rhetoric of Gamsakhurdia in declaring the Rose Revolution was a kind of Year Zero for Georgia in breaking with its Soviet past and the influence of Russia. A new state flag and series of memorials and an ambitious new building programme, especially in the city of Batumi were intended to make a new reality for Georgia.

Despite the official discourse, a 2019 poll for the Caucasus Barometer<sup>19</sup> found that as many Georgians regretted the end of the USSR as welcomed it. A total of 41 percent respondents said the end of the Soviet Union was a good thing, while 42 percent said it was a bad thing. These are private views which are barely reflected in public politics.

## Conclusion

The past does not remain the past when there is “unfinished business” in domestic and international politics. The case of the massacre of April 9, 1989, is not an ever-present reality in Georgia but the way it is publicly remembered continues to impact on Tbilisi’s relations with both Moscow and Abkhazia.

Anxiety about Russia and its intentions is a constant of life in Georgia under all leaders—an anxiety for which April 9, 1989 is an important reference point. Nor is this anxiety an abstract thing in the present day as the experience of war at the hand of Russia in 2008 showed. In the summer of 2019, a row over the invitation of a Russian

politician to the Georgian parliament quickly got out of hand and led to disturbances, a police crackdown and a new row between Tbilisi and Moscow. This volatile political reality will persist for the foreseeable future, even as economic links are restored—yet it happens within the context of Georgia’s continuing development into a strong state where Russian influence declines with every year.

Whatever else happens in other aspects of Georgia’s development (its fairly successful Europeanization project and domestic reforms), the Russia factor overshadows the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts. Anxiety about Russia is one corner of what might be termed a “triangle of insecurity” between Georgians, Abkhaz and Russians that obstructs progress in resolving the protracted conflict. Put simply, the Abkhaz harbour fears of being destroyed or assimilated by Georgia, which leads them to turn to Russia for protection (despite historical grievances the Abkhaz also have against Russia.) This allows them to overlook the oppression they have visited on their own Georgian co-citizens, by expelling them and expropriating their property. Georgians for their part fear being attacked or taken over by Russia and view the Abkhaz as accomplices of Moscow.

These narratives have a basis in reality. The terrible loss of life and home the victims of the 1992-3 suffered are fresh in real memories. But as set out here, these narratives are also made rigid and inflexible by selective memory and memorialization.

Since 2008, when Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states and stationed thousands of troops there, Tbilisi has called the two breakaway regions “occupied territories.” There was said no longer to be a Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, but a Georgian-Russian conflict in which the Abkhaz were “hostages” of Moscow. The new Georgian Dream government which came to power in 2012 adopted new language calling for “reconciliation” and—in terms rather reminiscent of the Soviet Union—the Abkhaz and Ossetians “brothers and sisters.” This narrative is rejected in Abkhazia. There is no real dialogue between the two sides, just a kind of double monologue.

In the case of both Georgians and Abkhaz an examination of and dialogue over the “memory politics” that have dominated both societies since 1989 is a prerequisite for the kind of real dialogue in which both sides can seek to understand why they continue to generate such fear and insecurity in the other three decades on. ●

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# The Flag Revolution. Understanding the Political Symbols of Belarus

by Andrej Kotljarchuk

**B**elarus remains one of the least known countries in western and northern Europe. There are several reasons for this, the primary one being the fact that in modern times, Belarus did not exist as a political entity. During this time Belarus had no sovereignty, being initially a province of Poland-Lithuania and the Russian Empire.<sup>1</sup> The Cold War contributed to the disappearance of Belarus from Western political and academic discourse. Very few scientific books and articles about Belarus were published in the West before 1991.<sup>2</sup> Despite the Belarusian SSR's membership of the UN, Belarus was absorbed by the Soviet Union. Unlike neighboring Latvia or Lithuania, Belarus was not independent during the interwar period and had no large diaspora in Europe after 1945. Therefore, Belarusians were often considered by people outside Eastern Europe as so-called 'white Russians', a nation without a tradition of statehood, native language and culture, or political symbols. Belarus made headlines in the global media for the first time in its history in August 2020. The rigged elections after 25 years of authoritarian rule by President

Lukashenka led to mass protests across the country for the right to vote in free and fair elections. International readers are fascinated by the peaceful nature of the protests and by the thousands of white-red-white flags worn by protestors.

**H**aving a national flag is an old tradition. From the beginning, national flags were an effective medium for political messages that could be passed on to people without having to rely on a certain level of literacy. During the era of nationalism in Europe, several new political nations constructed their own flags that were intended to mobilize a movement and unite a nation around a powerful political symbol. As Gabriella Elgenius pointed out, in the modern world national flags continue to be used as political symbols, as tools of propaganda and control, and as devices for the inclusion and exclusion of different social groups within the entire nation.<sup>3</sup> Why do protestors and officials in Belarus use different national flags? What do the white-red-white and red-green flags symbolize for the people in Belarus? Why are the police hunting the white-red-white flag? Why does the massive





Protest in Minsk, August 2020. PHOTO: RADIO FREE EUROPE

state-run propaganda against peaceful protests focus on the white-red-white flag and the history of World War II? In this paper, I outline how a study of political symbols of Belarus can contribute to a more detailed understanding of the ongoing situation in the country.

### Historical Background

The Belarusian national movement was one of the latest in Europe that emerged after the 1905 revolution in the Russian empire. The first political party, the Belarusian Socialist Party Hramada, was founded in Minsk in 1905. The first Belarusian-language newspaper was established in Vilna (nowadays Vilnius) in 1906. The first publishing houses were established in Vilna and St. Petersburg in 1906. The first history of Belarus, written by a Belarusian writer in Belarusian, was printed in Vilna in 1910.<sup>4</sup> The first grammar of the Belarusian literary language was published in 1918. The first network of Belarusian-language schools was created only during World War I in the German occupation zone.<sup>5</sup> As everywhere in Europe, students took an active part in the national awakening known in Belarusian as ‘the renaissance of a nation’ (adradziennie). In the summer of 1917, Klauzdzii Duzh-Dusheuski, a student at the Petrograd Mining Institute, designed a white-red-white flag. He was born in

1891 in Hlybokae, Vitsebsk region, into a Roman Catholic family of Belarusian farmers. Duzh-Dusheuski came to St. Petersburg (aka Petrograd) for his university studies because there were no universities in Belarusian lands after the tsarist government closed the Jesuit Academy in Polatsk and the University of Vilna. The white-red-white flag was based on the traditional colors of Belarusian folk dress and military banners of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Ruthenia. Historically, the white-red-white stripes appeared on the dress of Belarusian Orthodox bishops. The flag quickly became popular among the people and the first all-Belarusian Congress, held in Minsk in December 1917, accepted it as the national flag. This congress, that gathered 1872 delegates from different regions of Belarus, was violently dispersed by Bolshevik military. Klauzdzii Duzh-Dusheuski was one of the founders of the short-lived Belarusian Democratic republic (hereafter the BNR). The government of the republic that proclaimed its independence in Minsk on 25 March 1918 adopted a white-red-white flag as a national flag.

In 1921, after the treaty of Riga that divided Belarus between Soviet Russia and Poland, Duzh-Dusheuski went into exile in Lithuania where he worked as architect. During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, he was





The national flag of Belarusian Democratic Republic and independent Belarus in 1991-1995. PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA COMMONS



The state flag of Belarusian SSR (1951). PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA COMMONS



The flag of Belarusian Democratic Republic on the balcony of the republican government (former office of the Russian governor). Minsk, February 1918. The unknown photographer. Originally published in the magazine *Varta* October 1918, 33. PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA COMMONS



The white-red-white flag on the cover of the pro-Nazi Belarusian police journal *Belarus na Varcie* in June, 1944. The author's private collection.

arrested by the Germans for helping local Jews and sent to prison. After the war he was arrested again, this time by Soviet secret police MGB, as “a Belarusian nationalist” and sent to prison. He died in Kaunas in 1959.<sup>6</sup>

In 1918, Professor Mitrofan Dounar-Zapolski wrote a work on behalf of the government of the BNR, entitled *The basis of Belarusian state individuality*, which was published in English, German and French.<sup>7</sup> Dounar-Zapolski pointed out that a Belarusian state emblem (Pahonia) and a white-red-white flag have deep historical roots in the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Ruthenia.

In interwar Poland, the white-red-white flag was adopted by different political and non-governmental organizations of the Belarusian minority, apart from the Communist party. These include the Belarusian Student Union at Wilno University, the Association of Belarusian-language schools, the social-democratic Hramada and the Christian-Democratic party.

At that time, the flag was considered by all Belarusians in Poland, Latvia and Lithuania to be “a national flag”. For example, in 1930, Maksim Tank (aka Maksim Skurko), a renowned poet and member of the Communist Youth League of Western Belarus, published a poem: “Do you hear my brother”. The poem described the white-red-white flag as a powerful political symbol in the mobilization of the Belarusian minority in Poland.

**Boldly face the future!**  
**The long-awaited time has arrived**  
**Under a white-red-white flag**  
**The glorious victory awaits us.**<sup>8</sup>

However, in the early 1930s the Communist Party of Western Belarus in Poland received the directives of the Communist International (Comintern) general office in Moscow to combat a white-red-white flag as being “bourgeois-nationalistic”.<sup>9</sup>

As happened elsewhere in Nazi-occupied Europe, the national flag was used by civil collaborationist authorities in Belarus in 1941-1944. At that time, Soviet partisans used the red flag and the Polish underground resistance used the Polish national flag. During first years of occupation the Nazis moved several police and anti-partisan regiments recruited in the Baltic countries, Ukraine and Russia to Belarus. There is no evidence of the white-red-white flag being used by Belarusian auxiliary police. The national flag was used by the Belarusian Home Guard (Weißruthenische Heimwehr). However, this pro-Nazi police and military formation was established only in April-June 1944, few weeks before the withdrawal from Belarus and after the final stage of Holocaust.

On this occasion, Vasyl Bykau, the prominent Belarusian writer and Red Army veteran of World War II, ironically noted: “It is known that Belarusian collaborators used the white-red-white flag; it is also well known that they wore pants – so what? We do not have any other national flag”.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that most pro-Nazi military and police forces recruited in the occupied republics of the Soviet Union and the Baltic states used their national flags. For example, the national flag of Russia (aka tricolor) was used by *SS Sturmbrigade R.O.N.A.*, which acted in 1943-44 in Belarus, and by a paramilitary

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pro-Nazi Union of Russian Youth (Soiuz russkoi molo-dezhi); the leaders of each moved to Minsk in 1943. For example, in June 1944, the Nazi press reported about the assembly of the Union of Russian Youth in Minsk that gathered in the House of the Russian National-Socialist Working Party. The delegates raised “a Russian national flag” and sent addresses to the soldiers of the Vlasov army, SS-brigade RONA; and the members of the Hitlerjugend and the Union of Belarusian Youth.<sup>11</sup> In post-war western countries, the white-red-white flag was promoted by activists within the Belarusian diaspora as the flag of Belarusian Democratic Republic created in 1918. In the diaspora, the white-red-white flag was used by different political and non-governmental associations, from left to right, as well as the Belarusian veteran organizations that included both former pro-Nazi BKA soldiers and veterans of Belarusian origin who fought the Nazis in the Polish formations of the British army. This situation is typical for many East European diasporas.

**T**he present-day state flag of Belarus is a modification of the Soviet Belarusian flag designed under the rule of Stalin. The concept of the history of the Belarusian SSR as conceived by the Communist Party was adopted in 1948, and in 1953 a collective monograph, *History of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic*, was sent to print by the Institute of History at National Academy of Sciences. According to this concept, Belarus’ political history began in 1919, when the Soviet government was established in Minsk. In 1922 the Belarusian SSR became one of four founders of the Soviet Union. Under the Soviet flag Belarus doubled its territory after 1939 as a result of the Reunification of Western Belarus (the official term for what happened to Eastern Poland after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact). Under the red flag the Belarusians, together with Russians and other Soviet nations, defeated Nazi Germany and successfully reconstructed the country after 1944. According to this concept, the international recognition of Belarus as a sovereign republic resulted in UN membership.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the membership of the Belarusian SSR (together with Ukraine) in the UN was a result of Stalin’s diplomacy, not an initiative of the regional government in Minsk.

However, a new UN member state needed a flag. Until the end of the 1940s, the flag of Belarusian SSR was almost identical to the red flag of the Soviet Union. The only distinguishing feature was the abbreviated name of the republic in gold paint in the upper left corner. The decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet *On the*



The state flag of Belarus since 1995.  
PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

*State Flags of the Union Republics* from January 20, 1947 allowed the use of other colors and additional symbols to reflect the national character of the republics. The flag of the Belarusian SSR, adopted in 1951, was designed as a compromise between communist and national symbols. The red-white-red stripes were placed on the green-red background and a white and red folk ornament was placed on the vertical stripe at the hoist near the communist symbols. The flag was designed by a group of scholars and artists led by Mikhail Karcer, a historian at the National Academy of Sciences, and Mikalai Huseu, a professional artist. According to the 1956 statute, the flag represented both Soviet and national traditions. The white and red ornament was named “Belarusian national ornament” in this document.<sup>13</sup> The ornament was added to a golden hammer and sickle and a red five-pointed star on the red-green background.

### Two Flags, One Nation

The symbolic value of the white-red-white flag was kept through the post-war period by both the Belarusian intelligentsia and the Belarusian diaspora in the West. After 1984, this flag was promoted by members of the first underground youth organization, *Maistrounia*, established in Minsk. In 1988, the white-red-white flag appeared in public for the first time after WWII at the first opposition rally in Kurapaty. This site is the largest single mass grave in Minsk, where from 1937 to 1941 the NKVD murdered between 10,000 and 30,000 residents of Belarus, as well as citizens of the Baltic states and Poland.<sup>14</sup> The peaceful demonstration was brutally dispersed by Soviet militia that confiscated opposition flags. However, the discovery of the previously secret site of mass killings and selective exhumation of bodies in 1988 led to a rapid de-Sovietization of Belarusian society. The exhumation team was led by archeologist Zianon Paźniak, the leader of the Christian-conservative party and anti-communist movement, the Belarusian Popular Front. Mr. Paźniak was the leader of opposition to Lukashenka until 1996 when he had to leave the country for exile in the USA. The collapse of the Soviet Union and growing public awareness of Stalin’s terror in Belarus led to the discreditation of Soviet political symbols, including the red-green flag. In 1991, after



Inauguration of President Lukashenka was held under the national white-red-white flag. 20 July 1994, Minsk.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the decision of Parliament and the expert report by the Institute of History at National Academy of Sciences, the white-red-white flag was proclaimed to be the national flag of Belarus. As Gabriella Elgenius pointed out, this is normal practice for many East European countries where changing the ideological regime led to the modification of an old flag or adoption of a new one.<sup>15</sup>

**A**liaksandr Lukashenka became president of Belarus in 1994. This was the first presidential and democratic election held in Belarus after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The result was a great victory for Lukashenka, who received 80.6 per cent of votes in the second round. The inauguration of Lukashenka was held under the national white-red-white flag and the president took the oath under this flag.

However, a year after taking office, Lukashenka won a controversial referendum that gave him the power to dissolve parliament. In 1996, he won another referendum that dramatically increased his authoritarian power and allowed him to rule the country in an authoritarian way for the next 25 years. In 1995 the white-red-white flag was replaced by a red-green flag with certain modifications. From this moment the white-red-white flag became a symbol of democratic opposition and was visible at all protest actions. The authorities started to term the white-red-white flag an “illegal symbol” and ordered police to arrest people who wore the flag or put it on their private balcony. The main headline in non-governmental media in 1995 was news about Miron. This was the nickname of an unknown person who placed white-red-white flags on top of towers and high buildings across the country. In July 1995, Miron place the large



White-red-white flag made of thousands of stripes on the facade of an apartment building in Minsk. August 2020.

PHOTO: MIKOLA VOLKAU.

white-red-white flag over the 40-meter factory chimney in Liozno near Vitsebsk – hometown of Marc Chagall. A note was attached to the flag: “Return memory to the people! Miron.” That was the beginning. Between 1995 and 2010 Miron placed dozens of white-red-white flags across the country. The political performance was supported by young followers. For over 15 years the police and KGB hunted Miron. He was arrested in 2010 after the installation of a white-red-white flag on top of the main Christmas tree in Vitsebsk. He was Siarhei Kavalenka, an ordinary construction worker. The court gave him a three-year suspended sentence for ‘illegal activity’. In 2014 Mr. Kavalenka was arrested again and sentenced to prison.<sup>11</sup> However, the appearance of white-red-white flags in public space continued and many resources within the police and KGB were directed to hunting this flag.

The current design of the Belarusian red-green state flag was introduced in 1995. The communist symbols





Collage made by Viktor Korbut, published with author's permission. On the right is a portrait of Hitler in Minsk painted by Mikalai Huseu in 1943. The slogan above written in Belarusian and means "Long live 1<sup>st</sup> of May, Holiday of Labour and Spring!". On the left is a poster with a state flag of Belarusian SSR designed by Mikalai Huseu in 1951. The slogan below is written in Belarusian and means "Long live Soviet Belarus!".

were removed, as were the white-red-white stripes along the national ornament.

The official propaganda promoted this flag as a symbol of a great Soviet history and an even greater life under Lukashenka. In fact, the red-green flag also has a dark history. Under this flag, the Stalinist regime implemented forced collectivization in Western Belarus (part of Poland before 1939). Thousands of people in the countryside were forced to leave their farms and resettle in newly established kolkhozes; some of them were sent to the Gulag. Under this flag, the security police destroyed the patriotic youth organizations in Western Belarus and the last detachments of anti-Soviet partisans. Therefore, for many Belarusians this flag was associated from the beginning with mass violence and political repressions. It is little known that a designer of the 1951 flag, Mikalai Huseu, collaborated with the Nazis and was sent to prison in 1944. During the Nazi occupation, Huseu was one of the most sought-after artists in Belarus. In particular, it was he who painted the large portraits of Hitler that hung in Minsk streets.<sup>17</sup> After prison, he returned to socialist realist art.

Nevertheless, for the young generation which grew up under the long-term rule of Lukashenka, a red-green flag became the national symbol. Under this flag, national teams won international competitions. Under this flag, official holidays and ceremonies were held in Belarus. Since the mid-1990s the state flag, coat of arms and a portrait of Lukashenka were hung in each classroom, military barracks and administrative office in Belarus. As a result, the red-green flag was normalized.

The administrative persecution of people with a white-

red-white flag led to the next phenomena. Since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the national flag began to be associated with the anti-Lukashenka democratic opposition only. Referring to the white-red-white flag, official propaganda described the leaders of the opposition as heirs of the pro-Nazi collaborators. The fact that Belarus proclaimed its independence under this flag in 1918 and in 1991 was suppressed. The propaganda's use of the memory of World War II was not accidental. The Nazi occupation was the biggest disaster ever experienced by the civilian population of Belarus. According to Per Anders Rudling, World War II in particular became a foundation for the creation of a modern Belarusian identity. As a matter of fact, no historical event has had a greater influence on today's Belarus.<sup>18</sup> Lukashenka's nation-building project is based in great measure on the memory of World War II. Exploiting the mythology of war and occupation certainly has a practical political significance for the regime, not only by claiming a special place for Lukashenka as the last defender of Europe against Nazism, but also supporting the myth that the democratic opposition is 'heir' to the Nazis and 'servant' of the West. Speaking in 2010 at a ceremonial meeting dedicated to the victory in World War II, Lukashenka noted:

**The Great Victory is sacrosanct for every Belarusian. And even if a bunch of such rogues exist [the democratic opposition], who like the idea of 'an independent Belarus in the new Europe of Adolf Hitler', we know them. We know in whose service their idols were during the Great Patriotic War, and we fully understand whose lackeys they are now.**<sup>19</sup>

Unlike many East European countries, the Lukashenka regime politically marginalizes such ethnic referents of Belarusians like native language and national history, basing its nation building on the idealized past of Soviet unity.<sup>20</sup> The country has had two official languages since 1995: Belarusian and Russian. However, officials and the state-run media use mostly Russian and the opposition, independent newspapers, and digital resources use Belarusian. Therefore, describing the white-red-white flag as ‘anti-Soviet and nationalistic’ uses negative terms only and the narrative of the red-green flag avoids any references to the dark pages of its history.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the government promotes the red-green flag and use it as a tool for conservation of *Homo Sovieticus*. The ornament of the state flag was designed in 1917 by Matrona Markevich (née Katsler) a sister of Mikhail Karcer. Her husband Aliaksei was arrested by the NKVD during the Great Terror, murdered without trial and buried in an unmarked mass grave. The family found out about this only in 1986. Today the relatives of Ms. Markevich visit both a monument devoted to the red-green flag, which was erected in her hometown Sianno, and a mass grave of the victims of Soviet terror at Kabylytskaia Hara.<sup>22</sup>

### The Flag Revolution

The political symbolism of the white-red-white flag illustrates the rule of law that existed in independent Belarus in 1991–94 before Aliaksandr Lukashenka took office.

The white-red-white flag also symbolizes the peaceful heritage of the BNR that was destroyed by the military forces of Soviet Russia and Poland that divided Belarus in 1921. The mass opposition celebration of the BNR centenary in Minsk in March 2018 was a strong showcasing of the fundamental principles of democracy violated by Lukashenka’s regime. For decades, official media constructed an iconic image of the red-green flag as a symbol of stability and prosperity. August 2020 changed this picture dramatically and this flag became a symbol of state-run mass violence. At the same time, the regime played with existing contradictions around the flags in order to divide society and spark off the conflicts. On the day after the brutal police repressions against protesters, a red-green flag was placed on all police vans and prison trucks in Minsk.

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“Official propaganda focuses on the World War II period only, trying to connect the flag with some individuals who collaborated with the Nazis.”

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The official mass media that monopolizes all TV channels and dominates periodicals in Belarus began a massive propaganda campaign against the white-red-white flag, blaming it on the Nazi connection. According to the propagandists: “Under this flag the Nazis and their collaborators burned the population of Khatyn and other Belarusian villages”.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the population of Khatyn, a Catholic Belarusian village near Minsk, was almost entirely exterminated in 1943 by the German Dirlewanger SS special battalion and Schutzmannschaft Battalion 118, comprising Ukrainian nationals and Soviet POWs of different ethnic origin.<sup>24</sup> These detachments never used a Belarusian national flag. The national memorial was opened in Khatyn in 1969 and the former policemen of Schutzmannschaft Battalion 118 were tried in a Soviet court in Minsk and executed in 1975 and 1986. Khatyn is a symbol of mass killings of the Slavic civilian population by the Nazis and a site of memory known to every Belarusian.

On August 20, 2020, the country’s main state TV channel showed a reportage with Viacheslau Danilovich, the director of the Institute of History at National Academy of Sciences. Dr. Danilovich stated that the use of the white-red-white flag is absolutely unacceptable, since it is the flag of collaborators who sought to create a fascist state under Hitler’s protectorate.<sup>25</sup> On August 21, dozens of professional historians, including those from the Institute of History, published an open letter to Mr. Danilovich under the remarkable

title *Danilovich is lying and this is an act of immorality*. In the letter the historians once again tell readers about the origin of the national flag in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and pointed out that the national flag of Belarus was used by different political forces, as national flags were everywhere.<sup>26</sup> Despite these facts, official propaganda focuses on the World War II period only, trying to connect the flag with some individuals who collaborated with the Nazis. The authorities use this technique to blacken the national flag. At the same time, propaganda is silent on similar stories behind the red-green state flag.

On August 23, the Belarus Minister of Defense, Viktor Khrenin, made a statement on the history of the white-red-white flag. According to General Khrenin:

**Today we cannot calmly watch the actions under these [white-red-white] flags, under which**

**the Nazis organized mass killings of Belarusians, Russians and Jews, representatives of other nationalities. The mass actions are held near our sacred places, the memorials of Great Patriotic War. We cannot allow this to happen. I categorically warn you that in case of violation of order in these places, you will not deal with the police, but with the Army.**<sup>27</sup>

In fact, there is no evidence of the white-red-white flag being used by pro-Nazi military and police collaborators during the Holocaust and the mass crimes against the civilian population in Belarus. Therefore, the speech of the Minister of Defense is a clear example of what is called a “half-truth”, in which incorrect references to the white-red-white flag work as a propaganda tool to legitimize illegal actions of the Belarusian army against peaceful protesters. It is practically impossible to buy white-red-white flags in Belarus, and the Covid-19 pandemic stopped international shipping. In response to state-run propaganda against the national flag, people began en masse to sew white-red-white flags at home. After that, the authorities forbade the sale of white and red fabric in Minsk.<sup>28</sup>



Project of flags for Danish-Belarusian Culture Society Beladania. Designed by Dim Newman, published with author’s permission.

People had to be more creative. Hundreds of flags were placed on high buildings in many cities of Belarus. When police and emergency services forcibly removed these flags, people started to design them from hundreds of stripes that complicated “the work” for police.

In the first weeks of the protests, a spontaneous initiative arose to create local flags based on the national white-red-white flag. Today the Virtual Museum of the White-Red-White Flag has collected more than 650 flags of Minsk quarters, various cities and villages of Belarus as well as the associations of the Belarusian diaspora around the world.<sup>29</sup>

Belarusian women, the most active group of protesters, developed the creative way of thinking further. Many of them began to dress in red and white dresses, and to use red and white jewelry and umbrellas.

The reaction of police was aggressive, and many women were arrested just because of their clothes.<sup>30</sup> The persecution of people for wearing the white-red-white flag in Minsk reminds the older generation of the tragic events in interwar Poland. The Polish authorities in Western Belarus confiscated white-red-white flags as “corpus delicti of anti-state activity”. Just like today, hundreds of Belarusian flag bearers were arrested at that time and sentenced to short prison terms or fines.<sup>31</sup>

In December 2020, the Department of Heraldry, Genealogy and Numismatics at the Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences, led by Professor Aliaksei Shalanda, was closed. Professor Shalanda and many of his colleagues were fired by Vadzim Lakiza, the new director of the Institute. After that, some historians wrote a letter of resignation in solidarity with their dismissed colleagues. Many historians from the Institute of History took an active civic position during the peaceful protests. They participated in the peaceful rallies, and five of them were arrested. On the request of a Belarusian court, Professor Shalanda gave a number of official expert opinions regarding the white-red-white flag. He pointed out that it is a historical political symbol of Belarus and not “an illegal symbol” as the police claimed. On November 24, Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced a new law against the glorification of Nazism. He stated in particular that:

**In the near future, our parliament will consider a bill on the inadmissibility of the glorification of Nazism in Belarus. Many countries sin today with the so-called ‘heroization of Nazism’. Especially our neighbors.**<sup>32</sup>

What is most interesting is that a law against the glorification of Nazism has already been adopted by the parliament of Belarus and has been in force since February 1, 2020.<sup>33</sup> In my opinion, Lukashenka’s new initiative is aimed solely at discrediting the national white-red-white flag as it was used by the collaborationist administration under the Nazis. Indeed, on December 6, 2020, SB-Belarus Segodnia, a propaganda flagship of Lukashenka’s government organized a round table titled “The brown shadows of white-red-white flags”. In the discussion participated: Sergei Klishevich, a member of the Parliament and Historian by education, Boris Lepeshko, a Pro-



fessor in History at Brest State University, and, Vladimir Egorychev an Associate Professor in History, Hrodna state University. The discussion had a propagandistic approach and the scientific quality I regard as low. The participants concluded that:

**The prohibition of Nazi and semi-Nazi symbols is actively discussed in the Belarusian society. Previously, the white-red-white flag was, in fact, in a grey zone. The flag was not registered, but at the same time it was not included in the list of extremist symbols. This may not be sustainable in the long term. The problem is clear and requires our solution.**<sup>34</sup>

On December 10 2020, Viktor Morozov, the prosecutor of the Homel region declared that:

**The white-red-white flag is a Nazi symbol, which must be equated with the swastika and other Nazi symbols and attributes, which are banned in Belarus today. The penalty must also be relevant, at a minimum administrative sanction.**<sup>35</sup>

At the same day, the Minsk Police stated that the displaying white-red-white flags in private windows and on balconies will be equated with illegal picketing, which will give 15 days of arrest.<sup>36</sup> However, to pass a new law, the expert opinion of the Institute of History will be needed. This explains the liquidation of the Department of Heraldry, Genealogy and Numismatics led by Professor Shalanda.

## Conclusion

The hunting of the white-red-white flag illustrates an ongoing collapse of the dialog between the state and civil society. Unlike the revolutionary events in Georgia and Ukraine, the demonstrators in Minsk hardly use the flag of the European Union and do not arrange actions against the political symbols of Russia. Moreover, the Russian flag is present at opposition marches. Some of protestors use both the white-red-white and red-green flags without any negative reaction from the opposition to Lukashenka.

The regime's attempt to divide society according to the colors of the flag is doomed. The symbolism and esthetic power of the white-red-white flag represent the beliefs of the Belarusian nation in *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, just

as at the time of the French revolution. As David Gaunt and Tora Lane point out in the introduction, today “we are thus dealing with an old phenomenon – the re-interpretation of historical events for political reasons – in a new form – that of the political manipulation of memory and remembrance”. The academic community of historians is strongly divided in today's Belarus. The part of historians that collaborates with the dictatorship act not as scholars but as propagandists. The part that had stood up to the impunity of Lukashenka's rule have suffered in the political repression and lost their employments. Over and over again, historians are used to form and reform the perception of the main political symbols of Belarus. ●

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# Institutes of Trauma Re-production in a Borderland: Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania

by Per Anders Rudling

Over the past few decades, we have observed a new trend across Europe: “memory laws,” aimed at regulating the writing of history. In several countries these have been accompanied by governmental organizations set up to shape, form and police what is referred to as “national memory.” This phenomenon is prevalent in those states of east-central Europe, where significant efforts have been vested in controlling the representation of Soviet and Nazi legacies. This essay focuses on one transnational space, the former eastern borderlands of interwar Poland, known as *Kresy Wschodnie*, a region exposed to some of the most brutal aspects of both National Socialist and communist rule. The area is now part of four independent states: Belarus, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine. This essay aims at discussing some of the problems associated with the legislated “national” memory in those countries.<sup>1</sup> It is intended as a cursory overview<sup>2</sup> of some of the institutions and some key issues, to be further explored in the hereafter following contributions from each of those four countries.

Contrary to what one may surmise, the phenomenon of history legislation and setting up institutes of national memory is a recent one, which, in its current form, can be dated to the early 1990s. Moreover, the

trend started in Western Europe. It was France that first criminalized denial of the Holocaust in 1990, a move that would be copied by many other countries across Europe. However, in regard to institutionalization of memory through government agencies, Poland and Lithuania were at the forefront. Poland established the precursor of the current Institute of National Remembrance in 1991, Lithuania followed suit in 1992. Today, no less than fourteen countries have laws dedicated to the denial of the Holocaust, and the number of institutes of national memory continues to rise, in particular across the post-socialist space.<sup>3</sup> The impetus of using state institutions to enforce a particular interpretation of history has antecedents in the communist era, but the activities of these institutes of “national memory” straddle a number of activities, including popularizing scholarship, gate-keeping of archives, and instrumentalization of history. While they are often led by trained historians, these do not always follow practices and standards of their profession. For one, they operate on the behalf of governments, using history to pursue ideological agendas. Their preferred venues are not academic, peer reviewed journals, but what they refer to as “popular-scientific” fora. They often do not adhere to standards of note apparatuses and accuracy, and do not, like academic historians, seek to be free of tendency.<sup>4</sup> Various terms have been suggested

for this curious phenomenon; they have been referred to as “memorians,”<sup>5</sup> “dogmatic intellectuals,”<sup>6</sup> “mnemonic warriors,”<sup>7</sup> “memory managers,”<sup>8</sup> and “information warriors.”<sup>9</sup> John-Paul Himka (b. 1949) has described politics of history as a “disease” which affects all post-communist countries.<sup>10</sup> As this volume illustrates, the phenomenon is wider, and not limited to post-communist Europe.

**A**lthough the budgets, mandates and institutional frameworks of the memory institutes differ, there are similarities. As to the institutes that are the main focus of this study, they share the totalitarian interpretive framework and the heavy stress on victimization. Klas-Göran Karlsson (b. 1955) argues that post-Soviet history writing tends to “place blame on a communist ideology which no longer enjoys any significant popular support, identifying Lenin and Stalin and their closest henchmen as culprits, while Soviet society at large remains innocent, oppressed, subjugated and totally subjected to the arbitrary rule.”<sup>11</sup>

### Use and Abuse of History

The literature distinguishes between use and abuse of history, though there is no consensus regarding the terms.<sup>12</sup> In her essay in this volume, Florence Fröhlig argues that one such distinction is that of recognition of wrong-doings and self-victimization. Memory, she notes, “remains captive to the symptom of obsession and makes memory waver continually between use (recognition of the victims) and abuse (victim status).”

### Genocide and Memory

Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine not only share a common history, but also display similarities in terms of governmental memory management. Not least the memory of the Holocaust, its representation and management, has been surrounded by controversy and generated significant international attention.<sup>13</sup> A common trope in the memory discourse in all three states is the generous application of the term “genocide,” and the centrality it occupies in their memory discourses. The term itself is linked to the eastern borderlands. Raphael Lemkin (1900–1959) and his main critic, Hersch Lauterpacht (1897–1960) were both educated at the university in the city today known as L’viv.<sup>14</sup> From the very beginning, the

term and its use were fraught with problems. In 1948, as the United Nations Convention on Genocide (UNCG) was drafted, Stalin’s USSR and Chang Kai-Shek’s Republic of China were veto-wielding permanent members of the UN Security Council and thus had a decisive say over the definition of genocide. Unsurprisingly, Joseph Stalin “was among the most vocal opponents of extending Convention protection to political groups.”<sup>15</sup> In May, 1948, Platon Morozov (1906–1986), the Soviet representative in this process, argued that: “Crimes committed for political motives are not connected to propaganda of

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“Not least the memory of the Holocaust, its representation and management, has been surrounded by controversy and generated significant international attention.”

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racial and national hatred and cannot therefore be included in the category covered in the notion of genocide.”<sup>16</sup> While the Soviet bloc were not the only ones to oppose the inclusion of political groups – they were accompanied by South Africa and a number of Muslim countries<sup>17</sup> – the 1948 Convention, as one observer notes, “breathes politics.”<sup>18</sup> While the UNCG covers “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such,”<sup>19</sup> it specifically and explicitly omits political groups, thus excluding mass killings by the Khmer Rouge

in the 1970s and the Soviet Union during the 1930s and 40s.<sup>20</sup>

The bitter irony of Stalin playing a decisive role in the drafting of the Genocide Convention was not lost on hundreds of thousands of refugees who had fled his regime. Émigré groups picked up the term, applying it defiantly – and generously – against the Soviets.<sup>21</sup> From the 1940s onwards, Lithuanian émigrés presented a tally of over 700,000 genocide victims in Lithuania.<sup>22</sup> In 1950, genocide allegations were picked up by Mikola Abramchik (1903–1970), leader of the émigré Rada of the Belarusian People’s Republic, who accused the Kremlin of “genocide of my nation.”<sup>23</sup> Genocide claims similarly played a central role in the memory culture of the Galician Ukrainian émigrés from the 1940s, though, in the immediate postwar years, the focus was on the NKVD execution site in Vinnytsia, massacres of inmates in the NKVD prisons in West Ukraine in 1941, and post-war deportations from West Ukraine.<sup>24</sup> Some collaborated in multi-nationalist networks, the most prominent being the anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations (ABN), bringing together the successors of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, the Lithu-

anian Activist Front, and the Ustasha, who affirmed each other's genocide claims in their publications.<sup>25</sup>

Lemkin did not regard the Ukrainian famine of 1932–33 to be genocide in 1948 when he developed his concepts for the genocide convention. Rather, this came later, as the impoverished lawyer increasingly sustained himself by speaking on behalf of various groups of refugees and expellees. Over the 1950s he inflated his concept of genocide to include German policy in occupied Luxemburg, Alsace-Lorraine, and Slovenia, and all communist crimes, including the deportations of Lithuanians, Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign, and the 1956 Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising.<sup>26</sup> Lemkin's approach does not lack critics; historian Anton Weiss-Wendt (b. 1973) points at one concern associated with the use of an ever-expanding definition of genocide: "when everything is genocide, nothing is genocide."<sup>27</sup> On his part, Lauterpacht was concerned that the UNCG's focus on groups would undermine the protection of individuals.<sup>28</sup>

Communities exposed to extreme violence handled their traumas differently. It may be worth recalling that in Israel, while society was keenly aware of the Holocaust,<sup>29</sup> memory culture during the first decades of the state's existence was centered on resistance, with the Warsaw ghetto uprising constituting the key image in Israeli memory culture. The shift in focus towards the victim can rather be dated to the Eichmann Trial and the wars of 1967 and 1973.<sup>30</sup> In the case of Armenia, it was only with the 1965 semicentennial that the 1915 massacres came to occupy the central position they hold today in the Armenian diaspora's memory.<sup>31</sup>

For post-war émigré communities such as Ukrainian and Lithuanian Displaced Persons, a memory culture centered on genocide was also a liability. Among these groups there was a disproportionate number who had worked for the German occupation authorities in various capacities.<sup>32</sup> The émigrés were well aware of the Holocaust – yet deliberately omitted it from their memory culture.<sup>33</sup> From the late 1970s, as the Holocaust became an increasingly important point of reference in Western historical culture, Ukrainian and Lithuanian émigré communities felt compelled to break their silence.<sup>34</sup> Allegations of war criminality and collaboration in the Holocaust stung the

communities, which, following the establishment of the Office for Special Investigation (OSI) in the 1980s, jointly rejected allegations of war criminality.<sup>35</sup>

### Holodomor

Similar to the case of the Armenian diaspora, the Galician Ukrainian diaspora elevated the 1932-1933 famine to the centerpiece of its modern history for the semicentennial anniversary. In 1983, the first "famine-genocide" memorial was erected, in the city of Edmonton in Canada.<sup>36</sup> It was to be followed by several others in Winnipeg, Windsor, and other cities. From the mid-1980s, terms like "Ukrainian Holocaust," "the Ukrainian genocide," and "famine-genocide" were increasingly replaced by the neologism *Holodomor* and coupled with the figure seven million (or higher).<sup>37</sup> The term is the preferred nomenclature of those who regard the famine as deliberate genocide, aimed at exterminating the Ukrainian nation, an interpretation which occupies a central position in the memory culture of the Ukrainian diaspora.<sup>38</sup> Though this definition is legislated into law in Ukraine, consensus remains as distant as ever, and the genocide thesis not endorsed by most scholars outside the Ukrainian community.<sup>39</sup>

The late Ukrainian diaspora historian Orest Subtelny (1941–2016) argued that the famine "was to be for the Ukrainians what the Holocaust was to the Jews and the massacres of 1915 for the Armenians."<sup>40</sup> His massive

*Ukraine: A History* (1988), which appeared in Ukrainian translation in 1991, came to have a tremendous impact on post-Soviet Ukrainian historiography. In the early 1990s, there was hardly a work on Ukrainian history which lacked a Subtelny reference: tongue-in-cheek, historian David Marples (b. 1952) refers to Subtelny as "the new Lenin."<sup>41</sup> Heavily centered on the his-

tory of ethnic Ukrainians, it allotted no more than five of nearly 700 pages to other ethnic groups who also called Ukraine home.<sup>42</sup>

### Poland: The Institute of National Remembrance

Poland, with its relatively more liberal cultural climate, already began addressing the Holocaust and popular anti-Semitism in the final years of communist rule. In 1987 Jan Błosiński's (1931-2009) essay "Poor Poles looking at the Ghetto" constituted an early attempt at addressing

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” Communities exposed to extreme violence handled their traumas differently.

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Poster about *Holodomor*, the man-made famine in the Ukrainian SSR in 1932 and 1933 (Leonid Denysenko, 2009).

the topic.<sup>43</sup> Poland was at the forefront of dismantling the socialist system; it was also a pioneer in establishing an institute of national memory. In 1998, the Main Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation was incorporated into the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, IPN*), established in 1991, a government institution straddling tasks such as prosecution, education and running archives. To a significant degree, the IPN

has mirrored the government’s historical interpretations, to the point that critics have described it as a “ministry of memory.”<sup>44</sup> Notably, a catalyst for these debates were Polish-born historians active abroad, who more or less forced these difficult discussions on Polish society. The discussions arguably started in earnest with Jan T. Gross’ (b. 1947) 2000 book *Neighbors*, on the 1941 Jedwabne massacre.<sup>45</sup> The discussions on Polish co-perpetration in the Holocaust were polarizing. National-conservative voices reaffirmed their commitment to a narrative centered on Polish victimhood.



## Lithuania: Genocide and Resistance Center

In October 1992, the *Saema*, the Lithuanian parliament, legislated that the entire Soviet period constituted “Soviet genocide.”<sup>46</sup> The law radically expanded the definitions of the 1948 UN Genocide Convention to include persecution on social and political grounds.<sup>47</sup> In the same month, the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (*Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras*, LGGRTC) and its affiliated Museum of Genocide Victims (Genocido aukų muziejus) were established in Vilnius, dedicated to “collect, keep and present historic documents about forms of physical and spiritual genocide against the Lithuanian people.”<sup>48</sup> The estimated number of genocide victims mentioned in public debates ranged widely from 350,000 to 800,000.<sup>49</sup> Debates in parliament listed 780,922 people between 1940 and 1952.<sup>50</sup>

The lumping together of population transfers of Poles from Wilno/Vilnius, Germans from Memel/Klaipeda and deportations of Lithuanians into the Soviet interior under Stalin with the wholesale murder of the Jews blurs the distinction between deportation, expulsion and genocide. What ensues is a vaguely defined “politics of genocide,”<sup>51</sup> or “losses during the occupation,” centered on the suffering of ethnic Lithuanians.<sup>52</sup> The absence of the Holocaust, in a genocide museum in a city once known as “the Jerusalem of the North,” where Jews constituted a proportion of 41% at the turn of the century, was anything but uncontroversial.<sup>53</sup> No less problematic is that the museum’s permanent exhibition glorifies Lithuanian nationalist groups, including some that took an active part in the Holocaust. Academically, this discourse is largely detached from the scholarly field of genocide studies. Sometimes referred to as the “double genocide” narrative, it has been criticized for appropriating the Holocaust discourse.<sup>54</sup>

International attention has necessitated changes to the center and the museum’s activities, including an exhibit addressing the Holocaust, though critics still regard the changes as insufficient, as described in this publication by Violeta Davoliūtė. After many years of sustained criticism, in April 2018 the museum was renamed the

Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights (*Okupacijų ir laisvės kovų muziejus*).<sup>55</sup>

An event similar in importance and impact to that of the publication of Gross’ *Neighbors* in Poland was the 2016 publication of the book *Our People* (*Mūsų šakai*). Written in a popular, semi-biographic format by journalist Rūta Vanagaitė (b. 1955) and Efraim Zuroff (b. 1948) of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, relatives of perpetrators and victims respectively, the book constituted the perhaps most serious challenge to the official narrative to date. It generated significant interest as well as emotional reactions. Indeed, many Lithuanians were deeply uncomfortable as the combative Zuroff laid out the uncomfortable facts about the Holocaust in Lithuania: “Of the 212,000 Lithuanian victims, about 5,000 were deported to death camps in Poland. The rest were rounded up in the cities, towns and villages. Some were shot on the spot, but most were marched out to a local forest or beauty spot, brutally shot, and buried in mass graves. Photographs and carefully recorded questioning reveal that in most cases the massacres were carried out by Lithuanians.

Sometimes no Germans were present.”<sup>56</sup>

Vanagaitė describes Zuroff as “Lithuania’s bogeyman, the person who made Lithuanian schoolteachers weep.”<sup>57</sup> *Our People* nevertheless became a best-seller in Lithuania, but was withdrawn from circulation in 2018, officially due to a factual error in regards to an anti-Soviet insurgent venerated by Lithuanian nationalists.<sup>58</sup> Zuroff brushed off

the emotional reactions, musing that he took comfort in the knowledge “that each copy of the 19,000 that were sold has been read by as many as five people, and that people are waiting to borrow it.”<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, the book has appeared in translations into many languages, while Vanagaitė is currently finalizing a new popular history on the Holocaust in Lithuania, this time with Christoph Dieckmann (b. 1960), the most authoritative scholar of the subject.

## The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory

In Ukraine, discussions on the Holocaust and local agency got underway later, but here, too, were largely triggered by outside inquiry. Half a decade after the Jedwabne discussion in Poland, Ukrainian-born historian

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“Photographs and carefully recorded questioning reveal that in most cases the massacres were carried out by Lithuanians.”

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Sofia Hrachova (b. 1977), pursuing her Ph.D. at Harvard University, played a key role in initiating the first earnest debates on the role of Ukrainian nationalists in the Holocaust. One impetus here was her work with Omer Bartov (b. 1954) as his research assistant during his work on his book *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine*, which spilled over into the pages of the journal *Krytyka*, a high-brow intellectual journal modelled on the *New York Review of Books*, in 2005.<sup>60</sup> In the debates that followed, local scholars with limited exposure to the field of Holocaust studies tended to take more conservative positions.<sup>61</sup> The discussions in Ukraine never approached anything like the intensity of the Jedwabne debates in Poland, and were eclipsed by the wave of civic protest referred to as the Orange Revolution. Swept to power by this peaceful protest, in May, 2006 the new “orange” government established a Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (*Ukrains’kyi Instytut Natsional’noi Pamiaty*, UINP), modelled on the Polish and Lithuanian examples, and launched a massive campaign to instrumentalize the recent Ukrainian past.

Under Viktor Yushchenko (b. 1954, president 2005–2010), the UINP placed a heavy stress on the *Holodomor*, which, together with a heroic representation of the ultranationalist Bandera wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, OUN(b) and its armed forces, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, UPA, became the center of the new “national memory.” On November 28, 2006, law 378-V, “On the *Holodomor* in Ukraine, 1932-1933” was narrowly passed by the *Verkhovna Rada*, formally recognizing the famine as *Holodomor* and “genocide of the Ukrainian people.” Parliament amended the wording of the presidential decree, changing “genocide of the Ukrainian nation” (*natsiia*) to “genocide of the Ukrainian people” (*narid*), switching the definition from ethnic to political.<sup>62</sup> The following month another bill was floated in the *Rada* that sought to amend the Criminal Code of Ukraine to criminalize not the denial of the 1932–33 famine as a fact but rejection the interpretation that it constituted a deliberate *genocide*.<sup>63</sup>

Yushchenko sought to persuade other governments to follow suit and follow his example of legislating history.<sup>64</sup> Most countries ignored his appeals; in Europe, other than Poland, only Lithuania, Estonia, and Hungary followed

suit – though countries with significant Ukrainian diasporas, such as Canada and Australia, passed similar bills.<sup>65</sup> In a gesture of solidarity, on December 6, 2006, Poland legislated history using near-identical terminology.<sup>66</sup> Despite several attempts, the criminalization of *Holodomor* denial has, to date, not been successful.<sup>67</sup> In March 2007, Yushchenko made a new, similarly

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“Despite several attempts, the criminalization of *Holodomor* denial has, to date, not been successful.”

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unsuccessful effort, calling upon the *Verkhovna Rada* to pass a law prohibiting the denial of either the Holocaust or the *Holodomor*.<sup>68</sup> Though the attempts at criminalization have been unsuccessful so far, the Ukrainian government, through the foreign ministry, has sought to restrict alternative interpretations of the famine other than the official one. A recent example of this is the

intervention of the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany to pressure the German-Ukrainian history commission to disinvite the prominent historian Heorhii Kas’ianov (b. 1964), author of a number of critical studies of Ukrainian memory politics.<sup>69</sup>

The legislating of the in-group into the role of genocide victims, paradoxically, went hand in hand with the rehabilitation of Ukrainian far right groups involved in systematic ethnic violence, not least against Poles and Jews. In particular, the designation of Roman Shukhevych (1907-1950), commander of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), and Stepan Bandera (1909-1959), the leader of the most radical wing of the far-right Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-Bandera) in 2007 and 2010, caused consternation in Poland.<sup>70</sup>

## De-Communizing Ukraine

Memory conflicts again came to the fore in connection with the second revolution against Yanukovich in 2014, followed by a Russian invasion and annexation of the Crimea. As part of the ideological mobilization of the home front, the Ukrainian government appointed the activist Volodymyr V’iatrovych (b. 1977) director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, which was tasked with the instrumentalization of history. V’iatrovych, who up until then headed a front organization of the clandestine Bandera wing of the OUN, immediately set out to draft laws aimed as “decommunizing” Ukraine.

The post-Yanukovich leadership has been ambivalent on the legacy of the OUN and UPA. While President Pet-



The former KGB building that hosts The Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights. PHOTO: ALGIRDAS /WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Execution room where prisoners were killed and later buried in mass graves outside Vilnius. Objects found in these mass graves are now on display within the glass cases located across the floor of the room.

PHOTO: KRISTIAN FRISK, KGB MUSEUM

ro Poroshenko (b. 1965, president 2014-2019) recognized the plight of the Jews in Babi Yar, he presented the OUN as co-victims of the Nazis, opening an oversized memorial to its martyrs on the grounds of Babi Yar. The OUN(b) greeting *Slava Ukrainy!* was adopted as a greeting for the Ukrainian armed forces and Ukrainian uniforms redesigned to resemble those of the UPA.<sup>71</sup> During his July, 2016 state visit to Poland, Poroshenko placed a wreath at the Warsaw monument to the victims of OUN and UPA, only to have the director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory deny this was genocide.<sup>72</sup>

In April 2015, the *Verkhovna rada* finally passed a legislation package drafted by V”iatrovych and Iuryi Shukhevych (b. 1933), son of the late UPA commander. Of these laws, two stood out as particularly controversial. Law 2538-1 outlawed “disrespect” for “fighters for Ukrainian statehood in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>73</sup> It was accompanied by law 2558, “Condemning the communist and national socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in Ukraine and banning their propaganda and symbols.”<sup>74</sup>

**T**he UINP has largely stayed clear of glorifying the 14<sup>th</sup> Ukrainian Waffen-SS Division Galizien,<sup>75</sup> but it is venerated by memorials, street names, and memorial plaques in several localities in West Ukraine. The application of law 2558 has, however, been uneven. V”iatrovych has publicly denied this Waffen-SS unit’s collaboration with the Nazis, and declared its emblem was not a Nazi symbol – thereby not subject to the ban on

“symbols of the totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, in May 2017, a Lviv court sentenced a young man to two and a half years in prison for posting Lenin quotes on Facebook.<sup>77</sup>

Critics such as historian Tarik Cyril Amar (b. 1969) of Columbia University emphasize that the laws are applied unequally.<sup>78</sup> “[T]he Laws are not, as claimed, targeting Nazism and Communism equally, in a spirit of ‘anti-totalitarianism’ and ‘double genocide’ symmetry, problematic in itself. The purpose of condemning Nazism is largely rhetorical – to reinforce the attack on Communism: if it were not, the simultaneous idolization of nationalist Nazi sympathizers and collaborators would be impossible.”<sup>79</sup>

### Ukrainian Nationalist Expertise

To the wealth of Ukrainian history laws was added No. 1780-VIII, “On the introduction of changes to some Ukrainian laws regarding the limitation of access to the Ukrainian market of foreign printed productions of anti-Ukrainian content,”<sup>80</sup> which came into force on January 1, 2017.<sup>81</sup> Article 28 of that law subjected international media to “specialist reviews” to prevent “propaganda of war, violence, or cruelty; the incitement of racial, national, or religious hatred; dissemination of pornography...; propaganda of communist and/or national socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes and their symbols.”<sup>82</sup>

On July 7, 2017 a 15-member “expert council” led by Bohdan Chervak (b. 1964), banned the import of twenty-five books for violating the new law.<sup>83</sup> The decision

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was announced on January 10, 2018, by the Department for the Development of the Sphere of Information and European Integration of Ukraine's State Television and Radio Broadcasting Committee (*Upravlinnia rozvytky informatsiinoi sfery ta evropeiskoi intehratsii pry Derzhavnoho komitetu telebachennia i radiomovlennia Ukrainy*).<sup>84</sup> Among the books banned were the award winning book *Stalingrad* by British historian Anthony Beevor (b. 1946) and Swedish journalist Anders Rydell's (b. 1982) *The Book Thieves: The Hunt for the Lost Libraries*.<sup>85</sup> Beevor's book was banned for mentioning a massacre of Jewish children by Ukrainian militia men in 1941, while Rydell's book was banned for containing a short reference to the 1919 pogroms carried out by the followers of Symon Petliura (1879-1926), the head of the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic.<sup>86</sup> Bohdan Chervak is neither a trained historian nor a dispassionate expert. The head of the Expert Committee of the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasts of Ukraine is also leader of the right-wing Melnyk faction of the OUN.<sup>87</sup>

### Poland – “an Effective Instrument to Defend its Good Name”

Official Poland, which had long kept a relatively low profile in regard to the difficult aspects of Polish-Ukrainian relations, now started to object more openly. In 2013 the Sejm characterized the events in Volhynia in 1943 as “ethnic cleansing with signs of genocide.”<sup>88</sup>

In July 2016, after the return of the national conservative Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) to power, Poland officially recognized the Volhynian massacres as genocide.<sup>89</sup> In January 2018 the Sejm banned the propagating of “Banderism,” and declared V’iatrovych persona non grata in Poland. Polish foreign minister Witold Waszczkowycz (b. 1957, foreign minister 2015-2018) announced that Ukraine would not be “joining Europe” with Bandera and pledged that Poland would use its veto against a membership in EU or NATO.<sup>90</sup> The two countries have thus legislated two antagonistic, mutually exclusive narratives of history; whereas “disrespect” for the OUN and Bandera is a criminal offense in Ukraine, promotion of the same is a criminal offense in Poland.

In Poland, discussions on memory have increasingly focused on terminology. In particular, the ahistorical term “Polish concentration camps” has caused great ire and consternation. The Polish Foreign Ministry keeps detailed track on how often the term “Polish Concentration Camps” is used in foreign media (“as many as 103” in 2009)<sup>91</sup> The working assumption of some of IPN-affil-



“The Gate of Death” in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Trains with victims arrived through that gate. PHOTO: LUKE / CREATIVE COMMONS

iated historians, such as Joanna Lubecka (b.1969) is that Germans are ignorant of Nazi atrocities in the east, that “knowledge about the Holocaust, despite an objectively considerable educational effort and imposing financial outlay, is on the whole rudimentary and limited” and that “crimes committed against other nations, and the Slavic in particular, are still consigned to a ‘black hole.’”<sup>92</sup>

On February 1, 2018, a new law banning the use of the term “Polish death camps”<sup>93</sup> was approved by the Polish senate. Officials from the governing PiS declared the purpose of the law was to prevent “insulting and slandering the good name of Poland,”<sup>94</sup> while the speaker of the senate stated that Poland had now “obtained an effective instrument to defend its good name.”<sup>95</sup> The law is not limited to Poland, but can be applied beyond its borders.<sup>96</sup>

**I**n the scholarly community, voices were raised that the new law could be invoked to stifle research on Polish collaboration and co-perpetration.<sup>97</sup> Yad Vashem expressed its concerns that “restrictions on statements by scholars and others regarding the Polish people’s direct or indirect complicity with the crimes committed on their land during the Holocaust are a serious distortion”<sup>98</sup> and warned that “the law passed last night in the Polish Senate jeopardizes free and open discussion of the part of the Polish people in the persecution of the Jews at the time.”<sup>99</sup> Havi Dreifuss (b. 1972), professor of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University, cautioned that though the legislation is supposed to except academics and artists, “this law is creating an atmosphere of fear in Poland to talk about these issues.... Poland has wonderful scholars who really changed our understanding of many aspects of the Holocaust, and the fact that they and their students – especially the students, who won’t be part of



the exemption – will have to think twice before working on these issues is something that is very very problematic.”<sup>100</sup> Yehuda Bauer (b. 1926), Honorary Chairman of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, wrote: “The legislation is designed to make research of a difficult and complicated subject [Polish participation in the Holocaust] impossible: it supposedly protects scientific or artistic works from criminalization. But who determines what such works are? What about an investigative journalist? An aspiring but not (yet?) recognized artist? Or a tourist guide explaining how the local population gleefully robbed the property of the Jews as they were being herded to be murdered? Or a simple B.A. student writing a seminar paper and asking for material at an archive – when they submit the paper, will they then serve three years in jail because they found that a group of villagers murdered their Jewish neighbors? I guess they will prefer not to write the paper. In such an atmosphere there can be no free research or publication. It is an authoritarian, illiberal, climate.”<sup>101</sup>

Indeed, allegations of anti-Semitism and collaboration in the Holocaust touch upon the rawest of nerves. The suggestion by Jan T. Gross that Poles probably killed more Jews than Germans during World War II prompted president Andrzej Duda (b. 1972) to launch an “offensive” against Gross, calling for the retraction of one of Poland’s highest honors.<sup>102</sup> Another target of ire is historian Jan Grabowski (b. 1962) at the University of Ottawa, who has similarly raised difficult and sensitive issues, unpopular with the authorities and much of popular opinion.<sup>103</sup>

Memory laws and instrumentalizing government agencies increase the pressure on dissenting historians: not least by means of ostracizing and shaming, in media old and new. Right-wing nationalist media venues have presented them as a team, accusing them of making “careers in anti-Polonism.”<sup>104</sup> Jan Grabowski’s 2018 two-volume book *Night without an End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties in Occupied Poland (Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski)*, co-written with Barbara Engelking (b. 1962), director of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research in Warsaw, prompted the IPN to publish a counter-publication in response to what the government agency called “numerous polemics and manipulations.”<sup>105</sup>

The politization of history, Grabowski maintains, has an adverse impact on scholarly research. One aspect, he cautions, is that German academia has become reluctant to address the issue of local co-perpetration in the Holocaust. In an article in *Haaretz* Grabowski argued that

“[T]he well-intentioned determination of German politicians and academics to take exclusive responsibility for the Nazi genocide is now aiding other perpetrators to whitewash their participation.”<sup>106</sup> The near-exclusive fixation on German perpetrators at the expense of other groups, including the Polish Blue Police and the OUN, Grabowski argues, plays into the hands of the instrumentalizing narratives of PiS, FIDESZ, and other such groups.<sup>107</sup>

**T**he centrality of the German responsibility for the Holocaust ought not discourage research into local agency of non-German perpetrators in the murder, argues Polish-born historian Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (b. 1979) at the Freie Universität Berlin. This German-centered approach, he argues, has an adverse effect on the understanding of the mechanisms of the Holocaust on the local level, but also plays into the hands of nationalist activists.<sup>108</sup> This “reductionist interpretation of the Holocaust,” he argues, “meets considerable interest among national politicians and historians in countries such as Ukraine, Poland, or Lithuania, as it aids them to dislodge the guilt of local perpetrators on the German occupiers and to present the Holocaust as a German-Jewish matter without participation of local actors.”<sup>109</sup>

### **A Call for Freedom of Interpretation, for the Abolition of Memory Laws**

Under the slogan “Ukraine remembers, the world acknowledges,” the UINP sought international affirmation of its claim that the 1932-33 famine was “genocide of the Ukrainian people,” in which seven, or ten, million Ukrainians perished in the republic. At the same time, its director angrily rejected Poland’s claim that the OUN(b) and UPA’s Volhynian massacres constituted genocide, expressing concerns over inflated victims tolls, denouncing it as a tasteless “hunt for victims.”<sup>110</sup> In regard to Armenia, the Ukrainian foreign department issued instructions that what transpired in 1915 was *not* genocide, instructing Ukrainians to desist from participating in any commemorative events, and to place the term “Armenian genocide” within citation marks.<sup>111</sup> Some of the largest atrocities of modern history are reduced to political rhetoric used for political mobilization. Whether this has contributed to understanding, reflection, and education is debatable.

As it enforced its program of decommunization, the activists of the UINP insisted that it was based “primarily on the ‘European experience’.”<sup>112</sup> This is a factually correct statement; the memory laws *are* based upon



precedents from western Europe. Laws that explicitly criminalize Holocaust denial were first introduced in France in 1990. In 1994, Germany followed suit. Since then, similar Holocaust or broader genocide denial laws have been introduced in at least fourteen EU member states.<sup>113</sup> Laws to deny the historicity of the Holocaust has been expanded to include the Armenian genocide, Stalinist crimes, and other atrocities. Their consequences are paradoxical. Some appear to underwrite division rather than reconciliation; while disrespect of the OUN and UPA is outlawed in Ukraine, their glorification is illegal in Poland. If it in France it is a criminal offense to deny the Armenian genocide, in Turkey its affirmation is forbidden. If the German practises of *Aufarbeitung* and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* are often regarded as a success,<sup>114</sup> the assessments of the parallel, post-Cold War trend of relying on legislation and courts to settle historical arguments or to prevent misrepresentation are more divided.

Today, micro-studies, including dynamics of local collaboration, are at the forefront of Holocaust research – not least in the areas of the eastern borderlands. These difficult issues would benefit from being researched and debated openly, without laws to defend the good name of contemporary politics or criminalizing disrespect of groups involved in mass ethnic violence.

Academic historians have organized themselves in order to speak up against memory laws and the legislation of history. One such project is *Liberté pour l'histoire*, led by Pierre Nora (b. 1931).<sup>115</sup> Another such initiative is *Historians Without Borders*, in which former Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja (b. 1946) – a historian in his own right – has played a central role. Tuomioja argues that “historical truths and interpretations should not be made into legislative issues.”<sup>116</sup> One of its members, Timothy Garton Ash (b. 1955), calls upon academic historians to “work within the European Union to...reverse all ... memory laws, to return to the good spirit of John Stuart Mill.”<sup>117</sup>

While the former eastern borderlands provide some of the more heavy-handed examples of instrumentalization and memory legislation, the discussion should not be limited to these three countries. It is not difficult to concur with *Liberté pour l'histoire* and *Historians Without Borders* about the desirability of keeping legislation away from the discipline of history; a similar call can be made in regard to government opinion making agencies in the field of history. ●

Note: The author wishes to acknowledge the very helpful comments and suggestions by David Gaunt, John-Paul Himka, Tora Lane, Ninna Mörner, Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe and Irina Sandomirskaja.

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# The Multi-Level Governance of Memory as a Policy Field

by Jenny Wüstenberg

**M**emory politics have been a crucial field of policy action for the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic since their respective creation in 1949, helping to bolster the legitimacy of each state to its citizens and in foreign affairs during the Cold War. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and unification, the confrontation with the past, particularly with the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the “two dictatorships” on German soil, has become absolutely central to the Federal Republic’s collective identity and *raison d’état*. “No future without the past” has become the official motto of federal cultural policy.<sup>1</sup>

The centrality of memory is evident in political rhetoric, as well as in the ubiquitous presence of commemorative symbols in public space. Germany is widely lauded for its decentralized landscape of remembrance, which suggests an in-depth but also pluralistic confrontation with history. The core principle of official memory policy since 1989 has been that the state, especially at the federal level, is regarded as “one among many actors” that cannot insist on “sovereignty of interpretation” (what Germans call *Deutungshoheit*) in matters of public memory.<sup>2</sup> In other words, despite a

significant increase in engagement with and funding for commemoration on the part of the state, its representatives consistently emphasize that they are not “in control.” The expansion of memory policy and of the landscape of remembrance has been accompanied by the development and growing sophistication of a multi-level system of governance of memory as a policy field, in which federal-level actors have become increasingly (albeit cautiously) more powerful. The most potent sign of this shift is the creation in 1998 of the Commissioner of the Federal Government for Culture and the Media (BKM) under the auspices of the Chancellery. At the same time, civil society has continuously been a dynamic force in the politics of memory, driving forward critical and controversial topics and keeping the state “on its toes.”

**T**his article begins by providing a short overview of the main phases of German memory politics, with special attention paid to the key debates that have taken place since 1989 and that have done much to shape the character of memory governance into the present. A key point here is that the interaction between different “pasts” and those groups who advocate for various ways of remembering these pasts has fundamentally impacted the policy

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Memorial of Dachau concentration camp.

PHOTO: DAVID PURSEHOUSE / FLICKR CREATIVE COMMONS

instruments and structures of state memory management.

Moreover, aside from state agencies, civil society as well as what I call “hybrid institutions,” play a crucial role in memory governance. I then discuss the processes by which memory politics (building on existing regulations) were institutionalized after 1989 and outline the most important agencies and policy instruments in this field. My main goal here is to illuminate the complex interplay between actors that represent local, state, and federal levels, and state, hybrid, and civic organizations, as well as different “pasts” in memory politics. Finally, I examine some of the challenges that current memory managers are faced with.

### Managing Different Pasts

Though not the top priority for the two newly founded and war-ravaged German states after 1949, public memory was nevertheless an important field of action as each sought to legitimize its government to its citizenry and in the context of Cold War competition. In the Federal Republic (FRG), federal and local governments mostly supported a commemorative agenda of remembering the victims of “war and dictatorship” indiscriminately and without referring to the perpetrators of the Holocaust and the German war of aggression against its neighbors and the world. This was buttressed by a whole

host of emerging civic and interest groups, including veterans’ associations, prisoners of war, expellees (those ethnic Germans who left East Central Europe in the wake of WWII), and victims of Stalinist repression in the Soviet zone of occupation, the USSR, and the German Democratic Republic. Key organizations to name here are the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (founded after WWI to take care of the graves of fallen soldiers and instrumentalized by the Nazis), the *Verband der Heimkehrer, Kriegsgefangenen und Vermisstenangehörigen Deutschlands e. V.* (an umbrella organization of German POWs), and the *Bund der Vertriebenen* (Federation of Expellees). While Holocaust survivors (such as the *Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes/Bund der Antifaschisten* and the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemals verfolgter Sozialdemokraten*) and a few emerging initiatives for German-Jewish reconciliation were not entirely silenced, they certainly did not receive much publicity or state funding. Support for the memory of victims of war and communism fit squarely into Cold War rhetoric and the Adenauer administration’s desire to be firmly ensconced in the Western camp.

At the same time, Adenauer recognized the need to acknowledge Germans’ responsibility for the Holocaust, pay reparations, and make at least some gestures towards commemorating this past. Thus, the Federal Republic supported

the selected marking of key sites of Nazi crimes, including the concentration camps at Bergen Belsen and Dachau, as well as a site in the center of Berlin symbolizing the most high-profile act of resistance in 1944. These places were then used for strategic speeches by German leaders to signal their contrition. However, into the 1960s, “German-centered” memorials received much more support, including through the Ministry of Pan-German Questions (*Ministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen*), as well as local policies such as city partnerships. With the rise of a liberal intellectual critique of the lack of reckoning with the past, as well as growing student mobilization in the 1960s, memory politics were clearly organized along partisan lines.

While the left became an advocate against remembering German suffering and for acknowledging Germans’ crimes (though often via a relatively simplistic Marxist framework), the right continued to be staunch allies of expellee, veteran, and anti-communist organizations. At the same time, the West German left tended to be relatively unconcerned with the human rights violations happening after 1945 in the Soviet bloc and the GDR (German Democratic Republic). This division essentially held until 1989 and remnants of these loyalties remain today.

In East Germany, the regime harnessed memory politics from the beginning to bolster its legitimacy as an anti-fascist state. The memory of communist resistance was elevated to state ideology while negative experiences of war, flight, incarceration, and of Jewish suffering were largely silenced. For example, former concentration camps in East Germany (some of which had also been NKVD special camps after the war) – Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Ravensbrück – were turned into national memorials (*Nationale Mahn- und Gedenkstätten*) where communist resistance was celebrated above all. Nevertheless, there were also efforts at more nuanced remembering in the GDR, for example by the Action Reconciliation/Service for Peace (ASF), a Christian reconciliation group founded in 1959 in West Germany and 1962 in East Germany. Moreover, elements of the op-

position movement that gained strength in the early 1980s regarded an honest confrontation with the Nazi past as essential to their challenge against dictatorship. Meanwhile, some of those who had fled or emigrated from the GDR became active in commemorating the victims of communism, especially in the aftermath of the crushed East German uprising in 1953.

From the outset, civil society was a crucial participant in the politics of memory in Germany (though it was largely silenced in the GDR). Advocates of “German centered memory” (expellees, veterans, victims of communism) did much to shape the character of public memory. Associations of Holocaust survivors did their best to safeguard and mark sites of Nazi terror. This situation began to shift in the 1960s with an official transformation of memory policy, which included the creation of the Ludwigsburg Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes in 1958 and of the state and federal offices for political education (*Landesstellen und Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* – LpB and BpB), which increasingly viewed the past as an important field of civic education. The LpB and BpB continue to be important players in shaping public memory and providing publicity and funding to memorial projects.

In the early 1980s, a development began that has strongly determined the nature of memory management in the Federal Republic to this day. As I have shown in detail,<sup>3</sup> myriad citizens’ initiatives and “history workshops” emerged and sought to practice historical research “from the bottom up”, thereby investigating the Nazi past at the local level and demanding recognition of society’s historical responsibility. They made up two separate but closely allied social movements, the Memorial Site Movement (*Gedenkstättenbewegung*) and the History Movement (*Geschichtsbewegung*). In the course of their efforts to expose the traces of Nazi rule and to understand what made the Holocaust possible, they insisted that a novel approach to the past was needed. This approach meant a focus on the perpetrators (and bystanders) in

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German society, on the diversity of the victims (Jews, Sinti and Roma, deserters, communists, gay men, the disabled, among others), and on the democratic principles that could prevent a repetition of the past. Memory work was explicitly regarded as crucial to democracy. Moreover, these “memory activists” saw in-depth historical research as an activity that was not to be left to professional historians, nor instrumentalized by politicians.

Through the work of these two movements, and at least initially largely against the will of state institutions, the FRG gradually acquired a decentralized landscape of commemoration of the Nazi past, made up of thousands of memorials – from small markers to large, publicly funded *Gedenkstätten* (what David Clarke refers to as “commemorative museums that are site-specific”<sup>4</sup>). Particularly the *Gedenkstättenbewegung* also laid the groundwork for an institutionalization of memorial sites. In 1981, a network of Nazi memorial sites was founded, which was coordinated initially by the ASF, as well as through a regular newsletter (*Gedenkstättenrundbrief*) and an annual meeting. In 1993, the coordination (*Gedenkstättenreferat*) was placed under the auspices of the Foundation Topography of Terror in Berlin, though it was still (and is to this day) headed by Thomas Lutz, who has had an outsize role in shaping memorial work in Germany.

The Foundation, founded in 1992 to run what has become one of the most important sites dedicated to remembering Nazi terror, has acquired a crucial role in the governance of commemoration generally, as it has become an umbrella organization for numerous Berlin sites and is routinely consulted in commemorative processes (for example on how to remember the victims of Nazi euthanasia or *Lebensraum* policies). The Foundation that runs the Topography of Terror is independent, but 50% of its financing comes from the federal budget. It was the site of Berlin’s central Gestapo headquarters, as well as key ministries of the Nazi state. A symbolic excavation was held on the site in 1985 by the association *Active Museum Resistance and Fascism in Berlin*, which demanded that it be turned into a memorial. For this reason, civil

society engagement is built into the fibers of the Topography, which is the most important instance of the key role played by activists in the formation of memorial institutions. In 2018, it saw 1.3 million visitors.<sup>5</sup>

Activists demanded not only that these sites of Nazi terror be marked and acknowledged, but that they be funded by the state as places for civic education. As these demands were increasingly successful, the activists were the most obvious new staff and even leaders for these new institutions: they had both the historical expertise and the necessary experience of undertaking memory work (organizing guided tours, devising exhibitions, interviewing survivors etc.). As they began working in salaried positions, the activists made sure that civil society continued to have significant influence in the commemorative museums and that the specific character of history work was perpetuated there. Again, this included unemotional historical representation, naming of perpetrators, depiction of differentiated experiences and victim groups of National Socialism, and anti-monumental design principles. Because these new institutions were an outcome of the pressure of civil society initiatives and they continued to be shaped by them, I call them “hybrid institutions” – entities with characteristics of both civil society and state. They play a central role in how memory policy writ-large is determined today. Moreover, the negotiations and compromises over what to do with the *Gedenkstätten* in East and West Germany after 1989 did much to shape what I refer to as multi-level memory governance.

The activists involved in memorial sites all over West Germany may have networked since the early 1980s, but their cooperation only acquired formal status in the 1990s and 2000s. During these two decades, almost all German states founded state-level memorial foundations, which fund and coordinate sites commemorating the Nazi (and in Eastern Germany also the GDR) past (see Table 1). These organizations and their member memorials are connected through ongoing bi-annual meetings and in the Working Group of Concentration

Camp Memorials, which have their origins in the civic memorial site movement. Within these organizational structures, the large concentration camp memorials have particular weight: Sometimes they have foundations of their own or are host to the larger state-level foundation, and they have significant staffing and funding levels. Most of the smaller memorials operate either under the auspices of local cultural or educational administrations (including the LpB) or they are run by volunteers.<sup>6</sup> These are

instances of “hybrid institutions” in that they combine state funding and some structural elements with considerable civic input and a decentralized modus operandi. These governing arrangements at the local and state level are also in line with the traditional and constitutionally mandated principle that cultural and educational matters are the prerogative of the states, not the federal government, although this principle was considerably undermined through the creation of the BKM in 1998.

**Table 1: State Memorial Institutions**

Name	Year founded	Website	Memorial sites and initiatives
Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätten	1993	<a href="http://www.stiftung-bg.de/">http://www.stiftung-bg.de/</a>	6 (including Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück)
Stiftung Sächsische Gedenkstätten	1994	<a href="https://www.stsg.de/cms/herzlich-willkommen">https://www.stsg.de/cms/herzlich-willkommen</a>	6 directly run, 10 supported/funded
Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Gedenkstätten und Gedenkstätteninitiativen in Baden-Württemberg	1995	<a href="https://www.gedenkstaetten-bw.de/lagg-aufgaben">https://www.gedenkstaetten-bw.de/lagg-aufgaben</a>	70
Der Arbeitskreis der NS-Gedenkstätten und -Erinnerungsorte in NRW e.V.	1995	<a href="http://www.ns-gedenkstaetten.de/">http://www.ns-gedenkstaetten.de/</a>	29
Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Gedenkstätten und Erinnerunginitiativen zur NS-Zeit in Hessen	1999	<a href="http://www.gedenken-in-hessen.de/">http://www.gedenken-in-hessen.de/</a>	43
Bürgerstiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Gedenkstätten	2002	<a href="https://gedenkstaetten-sh.de/home">https://gedenkstaetten-sh.de/home</a>	21
Stiftung Bayrische Gedenkstätten	2003	<a href="https://www.stiftung-bayerische-gedenkstaetten.de/">https://www.stiftung-bayerische-gedenkstaetten.de/</a>	Dachau, Flossenbürg, satellite camps, and concentration camp cemeteries
Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora	2003	<a href="https://www.buchenwald.de/nc/de/896/">https://www.buchenwald.de/nc/de/896/</a>	2 concentration camp memorials
Stiftung Niedersächsische Gedenkstätten	2004	<a href="https://www.stiftung-ng.de/de/">https://www.stiftung-ng.de/de/</a>	8 (including Bergen-Belsen)
Stiftung Gedenkstätten Sachsen-Anhalt	2006	<a href="https://stgs.sachsen-anhalt.de/stiftung-gedenkstaetten-sachsen-anhalt/">https://stgs.sachsen-anhalt.de/stiftung-gedenkstaetten-sachsen-anhalt/</a>	7 (both Nazi and GDR past)
Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Gedenkstätten in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	2008	<a href="https://www.gedenkstaetten-mv.de/">https://www.gedenkstaetten-mv.de/</a> , see also <a href="https://www.polmem-mv.de/">https://www.polmem-mv.de/</a>	17
Geschichtsverbund Thüringen. Arbeitsgemeinschaft zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur	2009	<a href="https://geschichtsverbund-thueringen.de/">https://geschichtsverbund-thueringen.de/</a>	18 sites related to the GDR past
Ständige Konferenz der NS-Gedenkorte im Berliner Raum	2009	<a href="https://www.orte-der-erinnerung.de/institutionen/staendige-konferenz/">https://www.orte-der-erinnerung.de/institutionen/staendige-konferenz/</a>	Regular meeting of memorial sites on the Nazi past in Berlin (funded by BKM)
Die Stiftung Hamburger Gedenkstätten und Lernorte zur Erinnerung an die Opfer der NS-Verbrechen	2019	<a href="https://www.gedenkstaetten-hamburg.de/de/">https://www.gedenkstaetten-hamburg.de/de/</a>	5 (including Neuenгамme)



## Institutionalization and Multi-level Governance

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Federal Republic saw an expansion of the landscape of commemoration as more and more sites related to the Nazi past were researched and marked, alongside the growing scope and sophistication of Holocaust historiography and the emergence of memory studies as an interdisciplinary field. These developments went hand in hand with the consolidation of a memorial culture driven by the two movements I have mentioned and then institutionalized in the sites they helped created. This culture is built on the notion that critical democratic remembrance had to be pushed through against the reluctance of state elites, that these achievements must now be safeguarded, and that remembrance of the Nazi past is a duty for a democratic society that must therefore be publicly funded. In other words, this memorial culture was founded on the paradox of a fundamental suspicion of the state (for long refusing to confront its responsibility) combined with the belief that remembrance must be supported and funded by the state. Out of this paradox emerges what German officials often refer to as *Staatsferne* (or remoteness from the state) of memorial policy<sup>7</sup> – which, again, may at first glance appear to be a contradiction in terms. Andrew Beattie has distinguished between “official memory” – memory produced by state organs or representatives – and “state-mandated memory” – memory promoted by other actors, which is subsidized or endorsed by state. He argues that while during the first phase after unification, the state intervened directly, over time the approach has shifted to one of providing funding to non-governmental memory work.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as the then-President of the German Bundestag, Norbert Lammert, stated, while memorialization was a crucial responsibility for the government, “in a democratic and pluralistic society, national memory can neither be formulated officially nor regulated through a bureaucracy.”<sup>9</sup>

**T**he actors, policy instruments and rules that are operative today have developed through the coming together of the memorial

cultures emerging from the struggle to force a reckoning with the Nazi past on the one hand and the post-1989 need to address the GDR past on the other. The unification treaty in 1990 already laid down the need to support memorial institutions in principle.<sup>10</sup>

Another measure taken by the unification agreement was the creation of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the GDR (for short: Stasi file authority; German: BStU) and its state-level equivalents (Landesbeauftragte zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur). The first BStU was the well-known GDR dissident Joachim Gauck (who later became president of the FRG) and subsequent commissioners have also been prominent leaders in the opposition movement. This has provided them with significant legitimacy as they have had to maneuver contentious debates about how long to keep the Stasi files – of which there are 111 kilometers of documents, in addition to film footage and more – and how to make them accessible. The task of the BStU is “the safekeeping and securing of archival holdings” as well as providing “people access to files that concern them. They can then clarify what influence the Stasi had on their destiny.” Moreover, “the Stasi records are also made available to scholars and journalists who want to engage in a historical and political reappraisal of the GDR dictatorship.”<sup>11</sup> The legal basis for this agency was created in November 1991 through the “Stasi File Law.”<sup>12</sup>

Between 1991 and the end of 2019, there have been 7.3 million requests to view Stasi files, with most coming from citizens seeking to view files about themselves. This continues to be possible through filling out an application form. Researchers and the media can gain access through a separate application process.<sup>13</sup> There are also fourteen regional and advisory offices, which together employ over 1300 staff (down from 1600 at its peak in 2015).<sup>14</sup> The BStU runs a museum in the former headquarters of the Stasi in Berlin, as well as providing temporary and traveling exhibits, and educational materials. In November 2020, the Bundestag sealed the decision to move all Stasi files to the Federal Archives and to close the BStU, but files will



An exhibition room at the Stasi Museum in Berlin.

PHOTO: STASI MUSEUM

remain accessible. In sum, the BStU has been an important actor in memory politics, as well as a key archive and pioneer in the reconstruction and processing of archival sources. Each East German state has an equivalent commissioner (LStU), which is essentially a local agency tasked with supporting the working through of the communist past through providing advice and organizing dedicated events. All are headed by former dissidents. Their budgets and exact range of activities vary.

In addition to rapidly addressing the issue of secret police files – a measure that emerged directly out of the occupation of Stasi buildings by the opposition movements in 1989/90 – the post-wall period witnessed some other immediate measures of transitional justice. These included judicial procedures, of which the most high-profile were the *Mauerschützenprozesse* (trials against regime leaders and border guards for the shoot-to-kill order). Most important for the future direction of memorial governance were the establishment of two *Enquete Kommissionen* (parliamentary commissions of inquiry), which heard hundreds of testimonies about the SED-regime and its legacies, from 1992 to 1994 and from 1995 to 1998, respectively.<sup>15</sup> According to several observers, the commissions' composition in terms of proportional

representation of members and speakers heard gave them a great deal of democratic legitimacy. They also explicitly recognized the important role of memory in the transition period: “In democratic memory culture, the memorial sites in remembrance of the Nazi and communist dictatorships are of central importance. They give an irreplaceable testimony to the memory of terror, repression and resistance. They are signs of the acknowledgement and moral rehabilitation for the victims of the dictatorship by the democratic state.”<sup>16</sup>

Two developments emerged from the Second Enquete Commission that fundamentally shaped memory governance in conjunction with the increasingly pro-active intervention of federal actors. First was the creation of the *Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur* (Federal Foundation for Reappraising the SED-Dictatorship, short: *Stiftung Aufarbeitung*) in 1998 on direct recommendation of the Enquete. The motto of the Foundation is “Memory as Mandate” and its main tasks are to support the “working through” of the causes, history, and legacies of dictatorship in the Soviet occupied zone and the GDR. Together with domestic and international partners, it seeks to raise public awareness of communist repression and of the revolutions of

1989 as key events in the history of democracy.<sup>17</sup> The Foundation supports memorial projects, exchange programs with international partners, and research projects, as well as hosting events (including the annual history fair or *Geschichtsmesse* in Suhl), offering training to memorial staff, and being engaged in consultative processes in various memorials related to the GDR.

It also offers a range of exhibitions that can be shown at flexible locations. For 2020, the Stiftung Aufarbeitung had a budget of €8.03 million, of which almost €6 million came from the BKM (though this budget is expected to decline somewhat in the future).<sup>18</sup> With the Stiftung Aufarbeitung, in short, the federal government created a central agency to advocate for the memory of the SED-dictatorship. As Beattie has argued, though this does not translate into the establishment of a unitary memory regime, the federal government has clearly supported the central role of memory of repression (as opposed to approaches focused on everyday life).<sup>19</sup> There is no equivalent to this Foundation for the Nazi past, though several specific memorial institutions take on roles that reach beyond their immediate remit, including the Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe<sup>20</sup> and the aforementioned Foundation Topography of Terror. The Foundation *Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft* (EVZ – Remembrance, Responsibility and Future) was established in 2000 in order to make restitution payments to former forced laborers under the Nazi regime. After those payments were completed in 2007, the EVZ has continued funding remembrance, educational and research projects,<sup>21</sup> but it does not have a role that is equivalently central to memorial policy as the Stiftung Aufarbeitung.<sup>22</sup>

**T**he second outcome of the Enquete Commissions was the gradual creation of an informal but widely accepted *modus operandi* for dealing with Germany’s dictatorial pasts and the ongoing competition for recognition and resources. Simultaneously, the federal state significantly increased its intervention capacity and developed key policy instruments with the creation of the BKM in 1998 and the passing of

the first *Gedenkstättenkonzeption* (memorial concept law) by the Bundestag (federal parliament) in 1999,<sup>23</sup> which built directly on the Enquete’s work and was renewed and expanded in 2008.<sup>24</sup>

**W**ith unification, it was clear that the large GDR memorial sites had to be revised and funded, as the GDR regime had instrumentalized the Nazi past in a highly problematic manner, as well as silencing any commemoration of repression in the GDR. Historical research was needed on those sites, including on their usage as Soviet Special Camps by the NKVD. Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, in particular, became focal points for disputes between the two dictatorial pasts and over their respective meaning for collective identity in unified Germany. Representatives of both pre- and post-1945 victims clashed directly at these sites. In order to decrease the emotional intensity of these debates, the historian Bernd Faulenbach proposed a “formula” for addressing the dual past, which was subsequently picked up by the Second Enquete Commission and (in slightly altered form) found its way into the *Gedenkstättenkonzeption*: “Nazi crimes may not be relativized through the reckoning with Stalinist crimes. Stalinist crimes may not be minimized through the reference to Nazi crimes.”<sup>25</sup>

The Faulenbach formula did not prevent continued struggles and competition between various memory actors, but it did offer a useful guide for practitioners. According to Thomas Lindenberger, “it did not prevail because it was accepted as an articulation of objective truth, but because it offered a tailor-made rationality to the necessity of devising and inventing an integrative and non-divisive policy of dealing with the past. Although originally invented to suit specific, locally defined needs, it proved to be an indispensable guideline for national politics of history.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the immediate challenges of dealing with the GDR sites were clear, but it was just as important to drive forward large-scale memorial projects that served to underline the central importance of remembering the Nazi

past in a unified state to Germany's international partners. This necessitated more direct involvement of the federal level in cultural affairs. Breaking with the tradition of dealing with culture and memory at the local and state level, the BKM

**comes with its own bureaucratic apparatus, complete with an undersecretary of state, a respectable budget and control competences (sic) over several federal institutions of vital importance for a modern society's dealing with the past. Institutions such as the Federal Archives (*Bundesarchiv*) and the above Commissioner for the Stasi Files, both formerly integrated into the Ministry of the Interior, or the coordination of Germany's policy of restitution and repatriation of cultural assets ('looted art') are essential to its portfolio. Among the manifold tasks of this ministry dealing with state sponsorship of culture in a more general sense we also find the supervision and administrative control of the foundation dealing with the SED dictatorship (*Stiftung Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur*), the Foundation for the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe (the so-called Holocaust memorial in downtown Berlin) and the federal state's activities in maintaining memorials (*Gedenkstätten*) of national relevance, such as the concentration camp memorials Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen and Neuengamme, to name but a few.<sup>27</sup>**

Despite its powerful position, the BKM also adheres to the principle of "remoteness from the state" – mostly by providing funding and facilitating networking among the civic, hybrid and state actors involved in memorial management. When it comes to figuring out the future direction of federal memorial policy, expert commissions have often been instated. The most prominent instance was this was the Sabrow Commission on working through

the SED dictatorship, led by historian Martin Sabrow in 2005/6, whose recommendations were not directly implemented due to a change in government, but which were nevertheless influential. Similarly, an expert commission came up with a "wall concept" for Berlin, which shapes the memory of the separation in the capital. The BKM's activities and funding decisions are overseen by a parliamentary committee (*Bundestagsausschuss für Kultur und Medien*), which was created at the same time. They are guided by the Gedenkstättenkonzeptionen, which Erik Meyer has called "the central instrument of memory-political regulation."<sup>28</sup>

These laws lay out the principles for memorial funding (including authenticity of the site, its national and historical significance, a well-founded educational and didactic conceptualization, the engagement of victims and civic representatives, and matching funding by the respective states). The laws also name specific sites of the Nazi past with their specific profiles that are to be supported and provides a detailed structure for reckoning with the GDR past, including through archives, educational institutions and memorial sites (which are again divided up into four categories).<sup>29</sup>

Detlef Garbe has explained in detail how the Gedenkstättenkonzeption translates into federal funding mechanisms, including permanent institutional financing, project support, and one-off investment in memorial sites. Overall, federal funding in the memory field has increased significantly since 2008.<sup>30</sup>

**T**hese policy structures have emerged primarily from the interaction between the need to commemorate the Nazi past in a differentiated and decentralized manner and the need to address the communist past. Other aspects of German history are also represented in public life, but have not had the same weight in terms of the politics of memory management. Thus, such topics as the loss of German lives during the First World War, the "expulsion" from East-Central Europe in 1944-46, and the bombing of cities are remembered through memorials and heritage activities. The most recent transformation of the politics of memory

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When it comes to figuring out the future direction of federal memorial policy, expert commissions have often been instated.

has emerged with calls to remember the atrocities of German colonialism and to repatriate artifacts and human remains to their places of origin. The fact that the memory of colonialism is beginning to change – some streets have been renamed, for example – is partly a reaction to global calls to address colonial and racist legacies, but also to long-standing activist demands (by such groups as Berlin or Hamburg Postkolonial).<sup>31</sup> The grand project of rebuilding the Berlin Palace in the center of the city and making it host to “ethnological collections”<sup>32</sup> has moved the question of restitution and colonial heritage squarely into the spotlight.

Officials in Germany so far seem to view the issue primarily through the lens of provenance research and returning stolen artifacts, rather than acknowledging the need for a fundamental rethinking of German history.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in January 2019, a new Department for Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts was created within the German Lost Art Foundation, with the mandate to support research and raise awareness about the colonial past.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to colonial memory, there have been efforts to commemorate Germany’s history of migration, with major museum projects in Friedland, Hamburg, Bremerhaven, and Cologne,<sup>35</sup> and the history of social democracy and labor movements.<sup>36</sup> With each memory-political issue arising, various actors seek to receive public funding and to lobby for their issue to be integrated into important historical institutions, above all the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic in Bonn. In sum, the German memory landscape and the institutions that govern it have been shaped strongly by the struggle over how to commemorate the two German dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they must also contend with a growing pluralism of what is represented in public space.

## Conclusion

The number of memorial sites has multiplied in Germany since 1989 and they attract millions of visitors every year. Accordingly, the management of these sites, of related educational and

research facilities, and of archives has become a policy field of crucial importance. It is characterized by a complex web of policy instruments and responsible agencies and actors (federal, state and local, as well as governmental, civic and hybrid) that shape and fund public commemoration in a framework of written and unwritten rules. The governmental agencies that engage in memory management are careful to stress the principle of “remoteness from the state,” while memorial institutions and foundations maintain their autonomy and the importance of civil society involvement in their work, leading to what I have termed “hybrid institutional” arrangements.

However, the state nevertheless intervenes through funding decisions that are based on criteria such as “professionalism” and “historical groundedness,” that may exclude some advocates for remembrance and shape how newcomers (including those who demand reckoning with colonialism) can acquire state support.

Leaders of German memorials have pointed out that they must continuously guard against increasing intervention from politics and bureaucracy in order to maintain their decentralized structure, their independence, and their creativity.<sup>37</sup>

A fundamental point about memory management in the Federal Republic has been and continues to be the important role played by civil society and the basic openness of institutions to its involvement. The strong reliance on civic associations and volunteers, however, also presents a challenge: the current generation of staff and volunteers is aging<sup>38</sup> (along with survivors of both Holocaust and the communist repression). Despite funding increases, memorials are faced with insufficient and often precarious employment structures, which cannot be compensated by activist enthusiasm. Funding needs are likely to increase: Archival collections are waiting to be digitized,<sup>39</sup> testimony must be collected and archived, and the diversification of German society demands new educational programs. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, memorials will be faced with the dilemmas of social distancing, hygiene, and the need to



development new modes for dissemination and outreach. Thus, while the memorial sectors is strongly supported in Germany, its future will certainly not be devoid of challenges. ●

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# Fractured and Contested Memory Regimes

by Violeta Davoliūtė

Like other countries in the region and indeed throughout Europe, the past is used in Lithuania as a critical resource in the ongoing task of nation building, and as a proxy sphere of contestation among various political interests. There is little that is new in this approach, which dates to the historicism of the nationalist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued throughout the various national and foreign occupational regimes that have been established on this territory up to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

In order to characterize the structure and agency behind the production of memory in today's Lithuania, it is useful to draw on Bernhard and Kubik's typology of 'memory actors' and the three ideal types of memory regimes: unified, pillarized and fractured. In a unified memory regime, there is one dominant interpretation that is not contested. In a pillarized regime, several contrasting interpretations co-exist; memory actors may debate but they accept that there can be different points of view.<sup>2</sup>

In Lithuania today, the memory regime is arguably fractured due to the prominence of 'memory warriors' who cannot accept the discrete validity of certain other interpretations of the past. The main point of contention concerns interpretations of WWII and the accent placed on the traumatic events that took place at the

time, including the Holocaust under German occupation and the mass repression, deportations and collectivization that took place under the Soviet occupation.

The ongoing significance of these traumatic events is entangled with the loss of national sovereignty to the USSR during WWII (1940), followed by three years of German occupation from 1941 to 1944, and the Soviet re-conquest in 1945. Since the restoration of national sovereignty in 1991, the memory of WWII has evolved in tandem with various projects of nation building and identity politics.

For example, in the spring of 2019, an aspiring politician demonstratively hammered down a commemorative plaque to the side of a building in the center of Vilnius. The plaque was dedicated to the anti-Soviet partisan fighter, Jonas Noreika (1910–1947), drawing attention to his role in the Holocaust. Revered by many for his defense of Lithuanian statehood during and after WWII, Noreika had indeed collaborated with the German occupation as the head of a local administration. A few hours later, several competing politicians appeared at the same spot, calling on Lithuanians to stand by heroes like Noreika who sacrificed his life for the sake of national independence. Since then, the plaque has become the object of a

never-ending saga of public manifestations and quarrels among groups with different perspectives on the history of WWII and the future of the region.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the motto of the National Union party that ran for the Parliamentary elections this fall, *Raise Your Head, Lithuanian!* is the title of an anti-Semitic pamphlet published in 1933 by the same Noreika, in which he urged Lithuanians to ‘liberate themselves from economic slavery to the Jews.’

Since Lithuania regained its independence in 1991, national efforts to address the abuses of past occupational regimes have been largely centered on the Soviet period, with comparatively little attention given to the short, but brutal German occupation, and the murder of over 90% of Lithuania’s Jewish population during the Holocaust. While transitional justice measures in post-Soviet Lithuania had to initially focus on the crimes of the outgoing and long-lasting Soviet regime, the German occupation of Lithuania from 1941–1944 makes it difficult to disentangle the legacy of Soviet and Nazi rule.

The difficult task of balancing the relative attention given to one or the other period of foreign rule is the key challenge facing the two state-sponsored agents of memory: the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (*Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras*, LGGRTC) and a supplementary platform that was established later – and largely under international pressure – in the framework of Lithuania’s accession to the EU, the International Commission for the Evaluation of Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania. One could assert that the history of these two institutions – the LGGRTC and the Commission – mark two different periods of coming to terms with this difficult historical legacy.

## Two State Memory Institutions

The initial process of coming to terms with the past in the late 1980s was dominated by various non-state actors that coalesced under the wing of *Sąjūdis*, including the Freedom League of Lithuania and the Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees of Lithuania. These non-state

groups publicized Soviet crimes through mass rallies, cultural events and independent press outlets such as *Sąjūdžio žinios* and *Atgimimas*, among others.

They contributed to the creation of a powerful narrative about the “fighting and suffering” Lithuanian nation, with a focus on the mass deportations and repressions under Stalin and on the anti-Soviet resistance. Adopting the vocabulary used by the politically active Lithuanian diaspora in the West, mostly composed of the elites who had escaped from Lithuania before the arrival of Soviet troops, these non-state actors started to use the term “genocide” to condemn Stalinist deportations and repressions. This term later became part of a name used by a state-supported memory institution, the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania.

**T**he history education programs created by the LGGRTC have primarily targeted high school students. Since the 1990s, in cooperation with the Ministries of Defence and Education, the LGGRTC has organized a popular student contest called *Lietuvos kovų už laisvę ir netekčių istorija* (History of Lithuania’s struggles for freedom, armed forces and losses) during which students were invited to use writing and other creative talents to depict historical themes related to “national traumas” (that is, the Stalinist deportations and repression campaigns) and the anti-Soviet war of resistance.

The LGGRTC has cooperated with several non-governmental organizations on memory issues and has worked with community groups such as *Lemtis* (Fate) on organizing joint educational events. Since the times of *Sąjūdis* (the late 1980s), groups interested in preserving the memories of Stalin-era deportations organized “expeditions” to the sites, took care of abandoned graveyards in Siberia and returned the remains of deportees to Lithuania.

The LGGRTC has actively collaborated with the Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees of Lithuania to build monuments for anti-Soviet resistance fighters, collect witness memoirs, and organize public commemorations. Sometimes such relations have created tensions, as

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The memory of WWII has evolved in tandem with various projects of nation building and identity politics.



The International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania initiates the commemoration of the International Day of Tolerance – November 16, 2018 in Lithuania.

the Union has embraced a dogmatic, almost religious, sense of history related to deportations and anti-Soviet resistance, while the LGGRTC has attempted to publish critically-oriented research on similar topics.

Since around 2000 the LGGRTC has increased its attention to the Holocaust, showing a more active promotion of this traumatic memory. For example, the Museum of Genocide Victims, an annex to the LGGRTC, incorporated two sections devoted to the Holocaust and World War II. The LGGRTC sponsored the translation and publication of several Holocaust testimonies, such as Kazimierz Sakowicz's *Ponary Diary (1941–1943)*, which documented the brutal killing of the Jews in Paneriai (Ponar), a

town close to Vilnius. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, an academic journal published by the LGGRTC, has also devoted more attention to the Holocaust, especially in the Lithuanian provinces, and Lithuanian participation in it (as perpetrators, not only savers of the victims).

The LGGRTC also integrated Holocaust-related materials into teacher education programs focused on the anti-Soviet partisan war of resistance and related themes, such as partisan publications and everyday life during the struggle. However, many aspects of the anti-Soviet resistance have been omitted, particularly certain repressive measures against those Lithuanians who were termed collaborators with the Soviet regime, the fate of the guerrilla members who survived the battle, the involvement of some of the anti-Soviet fighters in the Holocaust, or the fate of the guerrillas who survived deportation and returned to Lithuania. These omissions seem to perpetuate a rather simplified and de-contextualized picture of resistance as a timeless, heroic struggle, “forgetting” about the moral dilemmas it entailed, the perspective of non-combatants and the intra-communal tensions that are part and parcel of the war of resistance and its aftermath.

Still, the LGGRTC has arguably become more active in addressing the Holocaust and the multiple historical traumas that occurred in Lithuania during WWII, rather than maintaining a selective focus on the Soviet past, thereby contributing to the historical truth-finding associated with transitional justice. Nevertheless, the LGGRTC comes under frequent criticism by parties who feel that it is biased and that the balance has not yet been restored.

The International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania was formed by President Valdas Adamkus on September 7, 1998. Whereas the LGGRTC emerged in the context of the movement against Soviet rule, the Commission emerged in the context of Lithuania's attempts at political, social and cultural integration with Europe.

The Lithuanian Commission was formed at the same time as analogous presidential com-



missions in Latvia and Estonia – part of a joint Baltic strategy of pursuing memory politics and attempts to establish transitional justice. Towards the end of the 1990s, recurrent controversies and intense criticism by Western state actors and organizations over issues of historical accountability with respect to the Holocaust were perceived as obstacles to further integration into the European Union and the broader international community. As such, the establishment of the presidential commissions was “a conscious effort by the states to mediate in this conflict and to facilitate a reconciliation of interpretive and mnemonic divisions within and beyond their borders.”<sup>4</sup>

While the aims of the International Historical Commission are similar to those of the LG-GRTC (establishing the truth about the crimes of totalitarian regimes, commemorating the victims, educating the population), the structure of the Commission ensures that the Holocaust in Lithuania receives as much attention as Soviet crimes. The first members of the Commission were equally divided between Lithuanian and international scholars, including Jewish historians from Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The Commission is divided into two sub-commissions – one for the Soviet occupations and one for the Nazi occupation – intended “to clearly distinguish between the crimes committed by the two occupational regimes and to avoid superficial analogies during their analysis and evaluation.”<sup>5</sup> The sub-commission on the Nazi occupation published three volumes and several studies, and the sub-commission on the Soviet occupation published six volumes.

At the April 2005 meeting of the Commission, its members agreed to continue research on the Holocaust and the Stalinist phase of the second Soviet occupation (1945–1953). However, the Commission’s work was quickly enveloped in controversy resulting from an investigation launched by Lithuania’s Prosecutor’s Office into crimes against humanity allegedly committed by a Jewish Soviet partisan unit on Lithuanian territory in January 1944. Given Lithuania’s perceived reluctance to prosecute collaborators with the Nazi regime, the Prosecutor’s

activism in questioning Itzhak Arad, an Israeli historian of Lithuanian origin and a Holocaust survivor who was also a member of the Commission, caused an international furore. The investigation was dropped in 2008 due to lack of evidence, but the scandal resulted in a long hiatus in the truth-finding work of the Commission, even as established educational programs (described below) continued unabated.

The Commission was formally reinstated in August 2012 by a presidential decree that appointed new researchers to the two sub-commissions. The first sub-commission includes two representatives of the Israel-based Yad Vashem organization (Dina Porat and Arkadiy Zeltser), Andrew Baker of the American Jewish Committee, Saulius Sužiedėlis of Millersville University and Kęstutis Girnius of Vilnius University. The second sub-commission on Soviet crimes includes Alexander Daniel of the Russia-based Memorial organization, Nicolas Lane of the American Jewish Committee, Timothy Snyder from Yale University, Françoise Thomas from Sorbonne University, Hungarian historian Janos M. Rainer and Arvydas Anušauskas, chairman of the Seimas Committee on National Security and Defense.

**T**he Commission is yet to resume a significant level of historical investigation. According to Lithuanian Holocaust historian, Arūnas Bubnys, who was commissioned to conduct research on the Holocaust in the Lithuanian provinces, the Commission lacks funding and perhaps even the administrative will to embark on an ambitious research, publication and publicity program. Instead, the Vilnius State Gaon Jewish Museum has gained recognition for its publications and discussions on the Holocaust. Ronaldas Račinskas, the Commission’s executive director, admitted that the state-funded organization “works like a non-government organization,” with project funding coming almost exclusively from the European Union and other grants.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the Commission’s most palpable contribution are educational programs that are administratively separate from its historical investigations. They have received consistent,



albeit rather humble, funding from external sources and have continued without interruption. In 2002, the Commission was tasked with implementing broad-based programs designed to inform young people about the crimes of the totalitarian regimes, as part of Lithuania’s membership of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, recently renamed the *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance*.

In 2003, the Commission established a special program on tolerance education called *Teaching about the Crimes of Totalitarian Regimes, Prevention of Crimes against Humanity and Tolerance Education*. The program, implemented in schools across the country, includes a) developing a tolerance education network; b) training secondary school teachers; c) preparing a comprehensive national curriculum; and d) initiating and coordinating secondary school project activities. Thus far, the Tolerance Education Network has established 46 Tolerance Education Centers (TECs) at secondary schools, non-governmental organizations and museums in eight administrative units of Lithuania.

The Commission is currently developing a Comprehensive National Curriculum comprising an educational program, pedagogical and methodological publications, a list of recommended historical and fictional literature, and visual materials (posters, maps, documentary and feature films). It also provides some support to schools, non-governmental organizations, museums and other groups seeking to initiate their own tolerance education projects with information and consultations on the preparation, fundraising and implementation of projects. To date, the Commission has assisted over 1,500 teachers at secondary schools involved in tolerance-oriented education activities.

The TECs provide educational modules for use in various school subjects, organize seminars on human rights and historical themes, and commemorate the victims of totalitarian regimes. This includes field trips for students to maintain and visit local monuments and graves. Teacher training activities aim to create exper-

enced and trained professionals. Translations of foreign language works, including classical texts such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, were also made available to pre-university students through TEC outreach.

### Criticism, Debates and other Viewpoints

The operations of the LGGRTC and the Commission and their influence on the production of memory in Lithuania have come under frequent criticism and debate.

With regard to their impact on education, Christine Beresniova’s study of six commonly used textbooks published from 1998–2009 highlighted several key themes: resistance and the fight for independence; victimization of the nation; and the culpability of (primarily) the Nazis in carrying out the Holocaust on Lithuanian soil. She revealed a highly simplified, glorified and romantic portrayal of Lithuanian resistance movements, particularly the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF). The texts ignored the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the LAF leadership and the collaboration with the Nazi powers, creating the false impression that all Lithuanians had resisted the Nazi occupation. The suffering of the Lithuanian nation, defined in historical, linguistic and ethnic terms, received the most detailed and emotional coverage, while the Holocaust was described in a distant and abstract manner. Most but not all textbooks discussed the participation of Lithuanians in the Holocaust, but only partially addressed issues of personal responsibility, empathy, tolerance and human rights.<sup>7</sup>

In the years before the LGGRTC increased its focus on the Holocaust, the use of the term ‘genocide’ to refer exclusively to Soviet crimes caused a great deal of confusion and consternation, particularly among visitors to the museum. However, even after the LGGRTC brought some balance to its focus, critics allege that it is reluctant to confront the legacy of Nazi collaboration and the participation of Lithuanians in the Holocaust.

Efraim Zuroff, of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, has long criticized the LGGRTC and the Lithuanian government for failing to prosecute Holocaust perpetrators. He and

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The use of the term ‘genocide’ to refer exclusively to Soviet crimes caused a great deal of confusion.



The school communities walk the “Memory Road” to the Jewish massacre sites, to mark the Memorial Day for the Genocide of the Lithuanian Jews. The students carry stones bearing the names of Jews who lived in their community.

PHOTO: INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE ALLIANCE

other like-minded critics such as Dovid Katz (defendinghistory.com) argue that the attempt of the LGGRTC and the Commission to develop a balanced approach to the crimes of the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes are little more than a state-sanctioned effort to whitewash the role of Lithuanians in the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> A similar argument is presented in a recent book written by the political scientist, Jelena Subotić.<sup>9</sup>

**O**n a more personal and grassroots activist level, Grant Gnochin, an American of South African origin, who lost many relatives to the Holocaust in Lithuania, launched a court case against the LGGRTC, challenging a report made by the centre in 2015 which concluded that the above-mentioned anti-Soviet partisan Jonas Noreika was not involved in the mass murder of Jews. Gnochin has teamed up with Sylvia Foti, the American granddaughter of Noreika, to publicly denounce his heroization and raise awareness of his involvement in the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup>

While it is recognized that Noreika, as the German-appointed chief of the Šiauliai district, signed orders establishing a ghetto for the local Jewish population and expropriating their property, the report of the LGGRTC phrased its conclusions in a manner that appears intended

to relieve Noreika of any responsibility for his action, as he was acting on the orders of the German authorities. Specifically, it states that while the Nazis “succeeded in involving him in handling the affairs connected to the isolation of Jews, he “did not take part in mass extermination operations against Jews in the districts of Telšiai and Šiauliai during the German occupation.”<sup>11</sup>

Gnochin’s lawsuit was rejected on administrative grounds and the court refused to order the LGGRTC to conduct more research and revise its conclusions. Although the LGGRTC was sharply criticized by professional Lithuanian historians for its sophistry on Noreika’s wartime record, and while some mainstream Lithuanian politicians have taken measures to remove monuments honoring Nazi collaborators, the political and administrative elites appear reluctant to take any decisive action that would challenge the status of any anti-Soviet activists. The plaque to Noreika was restored and stands to this day.<sup>12</sup>

Significant popular polemics were ignited by the publication of a book called *Our People* (Mūsų šaliai) by Lithuanian author, Rūta Vanagaitė. Vanagaitė’s book featured testimonies from Soviet trials of Holocaust perpetrators

and she wrote her account from the perspective of a descendant of Nazi collaborators. Her polemical style and scathing critique of official and social indifference to the legacy of the Holocaust had a strong impact on the public. Her books were scandalously withdrawn from public circulation in 2018 by her publisher after she made (by her own admission) a false comment about a famous anti-Soviet partisan that many found offensive. In 2020, Vanagaitė returned to the public stage in Lithuania with the publication of a new book on the Holocaust, together with German historian, Christopher Dieckmann.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the controversies swirling around controversial figures like Noreika and the uncomfortable legacy of collaboration, academic research and debate over the most difficult moments of Lithuania's past continue. The archives are freely accessible and the 'special collections' libraries have many files that were classified under the Soviet regime. Moreover, they are increasingly digitized and easy to find remotely. Files can be requested from abroad and, for a small fee, copies will be made and delivered. Hopefully, this accessibility and the continuous, albeit not always easy, debate will help Lithuanians fill in the blank spots of this still painful and complicated historical legacy. ●

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# The Politics of Memory in Belarus: Narratives and Institutions

by Aliaksei Lastouski

A distinctive feature of the Belarusian case is the exceptional stability of the political situation in post-communist transformations (events August 2020, however, casts doubt on this thesis). Since the relatively short transition period from 1991–1994, the country’s presidential office still belongs to Aliaksandr Lukashenka. This has resulted in an excessive and even exaggerated level of state control over the politics of memory. The main institutions for the production of historical knowledge are subordinate to the state, which appoints loyal rectors and directors who implement the occasional ideological cleansing of ordinary employees.

In 1991, the independent Republic of Belarus inherited the main institutions of science and education from the Soviet Union. The research work was organized through the centralized system of the *Academy of Sciences of the BSSR* (which later became the *National Academy of*

*Sciences of Belarus*) divided into specialized institutes with the Institute of History being responsible for historical knowledge. The Ministry of Education controls secondary and higher education. In the 1990s, private universities (though subject to state licensing) were created as an alternative, and many state universities also achieved a certain degree of autonomy. However, along with the centralization of power driven by Lukashenka, this sphere was also regulated, primarily through the establishment of a procedure for rectors’ appointments by the president, which significantly narrowed the possibilities for the universities’ autonomy.

The introduction of administrative control was largely attributable to a ‘struggle for historical truth.’ In the early 1990s Belarusian historical science was defined by a national narrative that was distinctive to Central and Eastern Europe and which glorified the heroic medieval past (firstly, the period of the Grand

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Museum of the Great Patriotic War, Minsk, Belarus.  
PHOTO: ADAM JONES

Duchy of Lithuania), followed by a long period of national oppression. The national concept of history was largely based on the Soviet Marxist historiographical tradition, only this time, the priority shifted towards the search for Belarusian statehood and ethnicity in history, the creation of a long genealogical line of the national state as a foundation for the formation of national identity. The emphasis on the European character of Belarusian history also meant the ultimate distancing from Russia (which was implicitly given the status of an Asian state). In fact, an anti-colonial revision of the past took place. However, after being elected in 1994, the country's President Aliaksandr Lukashenka (who remains president to this day) set the priorities of historical policy as follows: orientation towards integration with Russia and a positive image of the Soviet past as a tool for mobilizing political support among the masses.

The national narrative highlighted the constant wars with the Russian state, which were associated with barbarism and slavery, while the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was seen as a tolerant state governed by the rule of law, a part

of the European cultural and political space. At the same time, in the state's version of history, the cultural unity of the Russian Orthodox civilization that had been subjected to oppression and the forced Polonization in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, were more important. For the national narrative, the rebirth of national statehood resulted from the activities of national revival representatives who created the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918, which ceased to exist after a short period while it was under pressure from the Soviet and Polish states.

The BNR was not recognized by other states but the attempt to create its own state was of great symbolic significance. The Soviet period is initially associated with mass repression against virtually the entire national democratic intelligentsia. The state narrative, however, exclusively views the Soviet period in a positive vein, with the greatest importance attributed to the Great Patriotic War as an exceptional event in which Belarusians suffered heavy losses but demonstrated supreme heroism. In this paradigm, the independent Belarusian state is to be



declared the legal successor of the Soviet period, the heritor of the traditions of social justice and military heroism. The Belarusian people's act of bravery in the Great Patriotic War is becoming the main source of legitimacy for the president as the main keeper of the memory, while his political opponents are consistently associated with collaborators and adherents of Nazism.

**A**s already noted, the most important feature of the entire period of Lukashenka's rule is the establishment of ideological control over the sphere of historical knowledge production. The rewriting of school history textbooks was initially carried out in 1996, followed by the revision of university textbooks. The next wave was 'cleansing' state institutions of politically unreliable teachers and researchers. Historians who dared to publicly criticize the ruling regime were dismissed with a 'ban from the profession,' meaning they would be unable to find employment in public research institutes and universities. Most of them were forced to emigrate or leave the scientific and research field.

'Inconvenient' research topics which – in the opinion of the officials dealing with history – should not be addressed, have also been outlined. These comprise the Stalinist repression and aspects of the Great Patriotic War that do not fit into the heroic and sacrificial pattern (any criticism of the partisan movement is taken extremely painfully). For example, the Higher Attestation Commission did not allow Iryna Kashtalian to defend her dissertation on everyday life in the era of late Stalinism. The regulation of these zones also affects access to the archives. Thus, even though archive files are to be declassified after 75 years according to the law, an important archive like the archive of the State Security Committee (KGB) remains closed to outside researchers. The only way to gain access to the cases of former political prisoners is by being one of their direct descendants. However, for historians, this virtually denies them the opportunity to fully investigate such topics as Stalinist repression. Some scholars have started turning to the archives of other

countries, primarily Ukraine, in which the Soviet service archives are available to researchers.

A set of restrictive and repressive measures have led to the establishment of an ideological division in the historical environment into 'national and court historians,' according to Rainer Lindner's apt definition. In fact, in many respects this division remains, although the situation was not and is not black and white. Despite all the cleansing and disciplinary measures, the creation of historical institutions that were ideologically loyal to Lukashenka was a failure. The authorities are forced to rely on loyal officials, while most of the time, ordinary historians openly support the national narrative.

However, leaving state institutions is a heavy blow for historians since resources in the independent field are extremely limited. External support (through Western funds and scholarship programs) has become one of the major sources of historical knowledge renewal after a long period of control by the Communist Party. In the 1990s, the Soros Foundation and its Polish branch, the Stefan Batory Foundation, ACLS and some other institutions were actively working in Belarus. While authoritarian trends strengthened in the late 1990s, many independent historical institutions (initially journals) began receiving external aid through civil society support in Belarus. The turn of the 2000s represented the peak of external infusions, which made it possible to support the publication of magazines and the arrangement of various conferences. A significant trend that greatly influenced the reformation of the entire field of independent history was the sharp reduction in funds allocated to support civil society in Belarus after 2010. In fact, this resulted in a sharp decline in research and publication activity, during which time independent historical journals either disappeared or drastically reduced their periodicity.

**N**evertheless, there has been an important exception in terms of external support. This refers to the long-term and purposeful humanitarian policy of Poland, which organizes various scholarship programs for young and



Unlike the scholarship programs in other countries, historians have always enjoyed unconditional priority here.

professional historians and other humanities scholars (the program of the Polish Government for young scientists, the Mianowski Fund, etc.). Unlike the scholarship programs in other countries, historians have always enjoyed unconditional priority here. This resulted in a situation in which most of the active Belarusian historians participated in one of the Polish scholarship programs (the virtual absence of a language barrier further facilitates this). This was one of the important factors that promoted a positive change in the Belarusian national narrative towards the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the early 1920s, Poles, along with Russians, were perceived as being the main enemies of Belarusian statehood, and the reaction to the Polonization of local elites from the sixteenth to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was particularly sharp. However, the established contacts with Polish historians and the acquaintance with Polish historiography significantly softened these hostile intonations.

**F**or a certain period, the European Humanities University became one of the main centers for independent historians. During the first period of the university's existence, history was not one of the priorities of this educational institution. However, after the university's closure in Belarus for political reasons and its forced migration to Lithuania in 2005, a department of history was opened. The EHU succeeded in bringing together prominent Belarusian historians who had been dismissed from state institutions, and two important journals were published (the *Belarusian Historical Review* and *Homo Historicus*). However, the university gradually started being torn apart by internal conflicts between staff and administration, as well as problems arising from the recruitment of students to the department of history. As a result, this center of independent historical life is gradually fading away.

The 'Historical Workshop,' a small institution created jointly by Germany and Belarus, remains the only island of relative prosperity in terms of external funding. Its range of topics is limited to the Second World War, with forced labor and the Holocaust being the priori-

ties. The 'Historical Workshop' was actively involved in the creation of the Trastianets Memorial (the location where many Belarusian Jews and Jews interned from Europe were executed) and is focused on various educational projects, again highlighting the prevalence of public history.

Another important attempt to create institutional support for Belarusian historians is the formation of the Center for Belarusian Studies at the University of Warsaw. Most of the Center's employees are also Belarusian historians who were dismissed from state institutions. The Center holds conferences, publishes its own magazine, but has unfortunately dropped out of Belarusian intellectual life.

In general, Belarusian historical science remains extremely isolated from the international academy. This has been influenced by a combination of factors: a deliberately isolationist policy by the institution's administration, a lack of international exchange, as well as poor knowledge of foreign languages (with the exception of Polish). In most cases, Belarusian historians only attend conferences in the neighboring countries and their publications are hardly known outside the region.

Thus, the resources for an independent historical field are extremely limited. When it comes to academic research, it virtually doesn't exist.

At the same time, a transition has taken place towards working with a mass audience. A change in the publishing policy of the *ARCHE* magazine which, at the beginning of the 2000s, was primarily of a political nature, became a certain kind of marker. The reduction in grant support for democratization programs resulted in the magazine being forced to increase its focus on public demands, which virtually transformed it into a history magazine in the second half of the 2000s. The themes of the books published by *ARCHE* also shifted to the field of history, which, according to the editor Valer Bulhakau, was due to the readers' demands. At the same time, the magazine retained a high-quality professional level in its publications.

The creation of the *Our History* magazine, the first issue of which was published in 2018,

evidenced the beginning of a new era. It was a completely new format for Belarus, a monthly magazine published on glossy paper, well-designed and aimed at a wide audience (with a circulation of around 5000). Professional historians like working with the publication and while articles are written in a popular style, the principles of scientificity have been preserved. The magazine remains committed to the national historical narrative with a notable shift to the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is of greater interest to the audience. At the same time, the harsh anti-Soviet rhetoric distinctive of the early 1990s has been rejected. The unconditional success of this publication resulted in the *ARCHE* magazine beginning to focus on the same popular format, meaning that another resource for historical publications of an academic nature disappeared.

In the early 2000s, a thesis on two alternative cultural spaces existing in Belarus became popular. Indeed, the sphere of non-governmental organizations had lined up and the independent media had gained popularity. However, in the historical sphere, the initiative to build alternative institutions virtually failed as the few centers and institutions that existed were closed every now and again running a fever from the lack of funding. Informal courses with a historical component (the Belarusian Collegium, the Flying University) also failed to provide a high-quality alternative to traditional universities and faced the same problems of funding shortage and difficulty in transitioning to self-financing. With external grant support gradually diminishing, civil society in Belarus made the painful switch to internal support resources, of which crowdfunding became the basic mechanism. However, this significantly impacted historical knowledge production: an orientation towards mass readership began to dominate, long-term research projects virtually ceased, and public history replaced academic history.

Meanwhile, important changes were also taking place in the state's historical policy. In the early 2000s, Lukashenka switched from unconditional loyalty to Russia to an attempt to

create a Belarusian state ideology committed to sovereignty and internal legitimacy building. This culminated in an important change in the state's historical narrative which by inertia was not noticed by all experts. Prior to this change, the eras of *Kievan Rus* and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were considered through the paradigm of the unity of East Slavic peoples. However, this approach has been replaced by a 'long-term genealogy' that views the past through the consistent formation of Belarusian statehood. Within such a model, the Principality of Polatsk acquires the features of an independent state, emphasizing the predominance of the ethnic Belarusian element in the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

It cannot be said that the Belarusian authorities have simply adapted the national narrative of the early 1990s, although the appeal to medieval statehood is its most important element. The fundamental difference is that the national narrative is built around the concept of nation, which drastically increases the significance of such components as a revival of the native language, the cult of national leaders (prominent enlightenment figures), a sharp contrast to and separation from hostile neighbors, in opposition to whom the national identity is built. The official Belarusian historical narrative is based on the statist version in which territory and the continuity of state institutions is of the greatest importance. The question of language then becomes secondary, enlighteners are replaced by public officials (from princes to the leadership of the Belarusian Communist Party), and the desire to erase and retouch the conflicting pages of historical relations with neighbors becomes greatly noticeable.

This narrative shift took place due to the combination of two groups of factors. Firstly, after the 'Crimean spring' of 2014, tensions in Belarus-Russian relations have been growing and the authorities have started paying significantly more attention to the symbolic space and the humanitarian sphere. Thus, the 'ribbon of Saint George' was virtually banned, the 'Immortal Regiment' initiative was marginalized – i.e. the symbolic measures to commemorate the Great

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In general, Belarusian historical science remains extremely isolated from the international academy.

Germany  
Lithuania  
Belarus  
Ukraine  
Czech Rep.  
Poland  
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or another,  
there are no  
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Belarus.

Patriotic War initiated in Russia are negatively perceived by the Belarusian authorities as a means of soft power to create a common cultural and political space. What was once perceived as appropriate is now becoming suspicious. At the same time, there appears to be a need for a stronger version of national identity compared to the one constructed before, and this requires an integrative historical narrative. The previous version of historical memory based exclusively on the victory in the Great Patriotic War no longer meets the new requirements since it anchors Belarus in the post-Soviet space, in the zone of immediate Russian influence. References to the Early Middle Ages borrowed from the national narrative resemble a fair compromise that would not irritate Russia and at the same time have the potential for building a historical memory that would distinguish Belarusians from their eastern neighbors.

The government's request for an update of the national narrative revealed certain contradictions among existing historical institutions. This time, the conflict was not ideological like it was in the 1990s but lay in the struggle for symbolic capital and resources. A question was raised regarding who should build a new version of Belarusian history, i.e. publicly present it, and influence the main channels of historical knowledge translation, primarily through school and university education. In fact, a struggle regarding who would be responsible for determining the curricula of educational courses and the content of textbooks – the Academy of Sciences' Institute of History or university teachers (primarily from the Belarusian State University) – had been there before. Since universities are directly subordinate to the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for school curricula, it is quite predictable that academic scientists were virtually pushed out of the resource of school and university education.

**T**he interest group for the Institute of History is headed by Aliaksandr Kavalenya. Having served as the Director of the Institute from 2004–2010, he is currently the Academician-Secretary of the humanitarian section at the Academy of Sciences. Back in 2011, under

his auspices, the concept of Belarusian statehood was created. According to the concept, the centuries-old history of statehood leans on two inextricably linked forms: historical and national. Historical forms of statehood refer to the territory of Belarus, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were transformed into a national form of statehood incorporating the national content of the title ethnic group. It is difficult to find any theoretical and methodological meaningfulness in this concept. Of greater importance is the fact that a public appeal was made to create a unitary and integrative concept of the country's history with an emphasis on statehood. And, in line with Hegel's dialectic of spirit, the entire history acquires significance as an evolutionary development with the modern Republic of Belarus at its peak. The first revision of the *History of Belarusian Statehood* was published in 2011–2012 and covered the period from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. In 2018, this project gained a much wider scope and the first volumes of the planned five-volume edition began to appear. The history of Belarusian statehood became millennial, though judging by the content of the first volume, it actually starts in the Stone Age. Essentially, it was a claim to power and control over all the historical resources available to the state which, naturally, sparked a response from the university campus.

This campus also acquired its vibrant leader, Ihar Marzalyuk, a historian from the University of Mahiliou (it is important to highlight that this is Alexander Lukashenka's alma mater). Marzalyuk, who began his career as one of the leaders of the national democratic movement in Mahiliou in the early 1990s, gradually became the main apologist for Lukashenka in the historical environment, which earned him a senatorial seat. He managed to surround himself with associates who gradually took rector positions in the leading Belarusian universities (Belarusian State University, the universities of Hrodna and Mahiliou). It may seem paradoxical, but nothing better than the *History of Belarusian Statehood* (sic!) was proposed as an alternative to the project at the Institute of History. However, in this particular case, the stake was immediately placed on the control over

education. Thus, at the end of 2018, a task force for developing an appropriate university course was created under the Ministry of Education. It has been planned that the new course will be lectured at all universities in the country. At this point, a textbook on the history of Belarusian statehood has only been announced. At the same time, it is difficult to find any conceptual differences between the two projects. Instead, there is a clan struggle for the distribution of resources. After the degradation of state ideology, there was a new request from Lukashenka for a version of history that would revolve around the overarching values of the Belarusian state. And, as in the case of Belarusian ideology, the state demand has triggered a struggle for distribution and control, primarily in the field of education.

**W**hile Belarusian historical science is being isolated from the international academy (as previously mentioned), the trends in historical policy are different. Possibilities of transferring institutions for the regulation of historical knowledge that exist in neighboring countries are regularly discussed in the Belarusian context. The topic of the fight against the falsification of history, which is routinely mentioned in official sources and in the speeches of Lukashenka, was borrowed from the Russian environment. However, it never came to the initiative of creating a commission to combat falsification, as per the Russian example. Naturally, the Institute of Historical Memory, which is well known in Belarus for its Polish and Ukrainian examples, appears to be a convenient model for regulating history in the public space.

In 2018, the aforementioned Igor Marzalyuk also advanced the idea of creating a similar institution in Belarus in order to track the historical policy of neighbors and opponents, as well as to promptly respond to attempts to falsify and distort the history of Belarus. Predictably, the Academy of Sciences' Institute of History opposed this initiative, rightly believing that the creation of such an institution would further weaken its public position and lead to the strengthening of Marzalyuk's camp.

One way or another, there are no centralized

institutions for the implementation of historical policy in Belarus. The main reason for this is not about keeping a balance but is about the extraordinary degree of regulation of the academic (and public) space in Belarus. In such situations, special institutions seem excessive.

## Conclusion

Among the countries in the region, a distinctive feature of Belarus is the enormous degree of state control over the production of historical knowledge. This is achieved through the preservation of Soviet institutional forms (the Institute of History, state universities). This enables the easy production and dissemination of the type of historical knowledge that is tailored to Lukashenka's political interests. Critical voices are being pushed out of the state-controlled field into a space in which resources are extremely limited. An important trend in recent years is the growth of self-organization in Belarusian society, which makes it possible to create new forms of historical knowledge production in which the national narrative is reborn as new commercial and popular forms. ●

Note: This study has been conducted as part of the Research project "Religion in post-Soviet Nation-building: Official Mediations and Grass-roots' Accounts in Belarus" (61/2017), supported by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.



# Memory Nodes Loaded with Potential to Mobilize People

by Yuliya Yurchuk

In Ukraine, several topics have become the focus of memory politics since the end of the 1980s and have remained the focal points of memory until now. These

topics have become memory nodes that have triggered discussions, disputes and tensions in Ukrainian society. At the same time, they have united masses of people into a group that finds meaning in these memories and builds national identity around them. To put it briefly, these memory nodes have a great potential to mobilize people who are both for and against certain ideas and political agendas. These memory nodes include *Holodomor* (which means *deliberate death by hunger* in Ukrainian and refers to the famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine), the Second World War, the attempts at state building in 1917–1921, as well as the Soviet repressions (especially in connection with the Great Purge of 1937). Since 2014, two new memory nodes have been formed: the memory of the *Euro-aidan* protests (which are referred to as the

*Revolution of Dignity* in memory space) and the memory of the fallen soldiers of the ongoing military conflict in Donbas.

There are common characteristics to all the topics of memory politics that developed between 1991 and 2014. They all function as “chosen traumas”<sup>1</sup> and most of them are addressed because they were tabooed or disfigured by the official Soviet historical narrative.<sup>2</sup> This approach to memory that was silenced by the Soviet regime largely defines the post-colonial character of memory work, i.e. memory is framed as a liberation project by a society that claims its right to tell its own history.<sup>3</sup> Another important common feature of these memories is the fact that the forms of remembrance of these historical events were shaped by the diaspora of politically- active émigrés who very often had direct memories of the events and transmitted them as communicative memories to subsequent generations. In such a way, the

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memories developed in the diaspora functioned as molds into which the cultural memory of the nation had been fused when they entered Ukrainian terrain in the late 1980s/beginning of the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> All these memories also share the fact that the active memory work directed at them was initiated in the public space by non-state agents. Most often, it was non-governmental organizations, intellectuals, groups of former political prisoners, local activists and amateur historians who took up the historical narratives that had been silenced during the Soviet regime and promoted them as memory events. In the beginning, they initiated the building of monuments and organized regular commemorations on a grassroots level. Later, the state authorities joined these initiatives and supported them through legislative provisions, which strengthened the status of these memories nationally. In this report, I will present some of the “hottest” topics in the memory politics of Ukraine and discuss the main approaches taken by memory actors to deal with these topics.

### **Holodomor as an Historical Event and Memory**

The famine of 1932–1933 can be regarded as the main memory node in Ukrainian memory politics.<sup>5</sup> Thematically it is connected to the memory of Soviet repression but because of the distinguished features of this memory and because it is one of the main building blocks of national identity, *Holodomor* should be discussed separately.

In 1932–1933 the famine claimed around four million lives in the Ukrainian Republic.<sup>6</sup> The famine was the result of state-led policies that included increased grain requisitions, the confiscation of grain reserves, restrictions on people’s movement to other parts of the country, as well as the refusal to provide state aid. Researchers explain these policies in line with the state’s politics of collectivization and as deliberate actions against the Ukrainian peasantry who unsettled a series of rebellions against the state in the decades preceding the famine.<sup>7</sup> During the Soviet regime the famine was mainly silenced. If it was mentioned, it was only regarded as the outcome of the unlucky play of

natural forces. At the end of the 1980s, when, as a result of the Soviet politics of *glasnost*, it became possible to address historical issues that had previously been taboo, the theme of the famine resurfaced in the public space. The main memory agents interested in the topic were intellectuals who became politically active when Ukraine became independent (they had also often been political prisoners and dissidents during the Soviet regime, such as Levko Lukyanenko or Vyacheslav Chornovil).

**T**he mere possibility of mentioning the famine in the context of Soviet repressions was regarded by intellectuals as an act of liberation. In the 1990s, the topic of *Holodomor* was included in the school curricula. Often, books written by historians abroad were used as textbooks before new textbooks were published. This was the case for Ukrainian-Canadian historian Orest Subtelny’s book “Ukraine: A History”.

A Ukrainian translation was published in 1991 and widely used in schools and universities. Books of fiction which depicted the years of the famine were introduced to the literature courses in schools and universities (such as Ulas Samchuk’s novel “Maria”, first published in 1934). In this way, education became one of the main channels of disseminating knowledge and the formation of the memory of *Holodomor* institutionally. At the same time, a film about *Holodomor* “Harvest of Despair” was shown to a Ukrainian audience on the main TV channel. The film was made in 1984 by Sviatoslav Novytsky and Yuri Luhovy and was supported by the Committee of the Studies of Ukrainian *Holodomor* in Toronto. Thus, we can see in practice all the transnational entanglements in memory work mentioned above.

In 1993, the Ukrainian government, under the first President of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk (president from 1991–1994), issued the state order “On Honoring the Memory of the Victims of *Holodomor* in Ukraine in 1932–1933.”<sup>8</sup> It was the first state-sanctioned commemoration of *Holodomor*. This state order was amended several times up to the 2000s. In 2000, the special *Day of Memory of the Victims of Holodomor*



The National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide in Kyiv.  
PHOTO: ANDRIY155 / CREATIVE COMMONS

and Political Repressions was introduced by the government to the national calendar (in 2004 it was renamed the *Day of Holodomors and Political Repressions* and included the memory node of the *Holodomor* famines of 1921–1923 and 1946–1947).

The memory of *Holodomor* has become the only topic to be promoted under the rule of every president since 1991 (a slightly different approach was taken by Viktor Yanukovich, 2010–2014). In 2006, under the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, the Ukrainian Parliament recognized *Holodomor* as an act of genocide. In the same year, the Institute of National Remembrance of Ukraine was established following the example of Poland. The institute had the status of an executive government body tasked with managing and controlling the memory work in the country. One of the main aims of the newly established institute was to organize the commemoration of *Holodomor* on a national level. In 2008, under the auspices of the institute, the Museum of the Victims of Holodomor was opened in Kyiv on the hills of the River Dnieper (in 2010, it was renamed the National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide). Located in the center of the Ukrainian capital, close to other important national heritage sites, the museum was listed by the state protocol orders as a

site of interest to official foreign delegations.

*Holodomor* became a symbol of Soviet repressions in Ukraine. In 2010, the Court of Appeal of Ukraine closed the case on *Holodomor* by declaring the Soviet regime guilty of the act of genocide against the people of Ukraine (seven individuals were named as being personally guilty in the genocidal politics, including Josef Stalin, Vyacheslav Molotov who, at the time of the famine was the Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, and Lazar Kaganovich, who was a Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party).<sup>9</sup> It should be stressed that the main narrative theme of the memory of *Holodomor* is victimhood and the sacrifice of the Ukrainian nation. The memory carries strong religious undertones expressed in different forms of commemoration through crosses, special prayers, books of victims (that remind martyrologues and hagiographies – lists of martyrs and saints respectively – of the Orthodox tradition). The topic of the local perpetrators only started being discussed recently and is primarily addressed by scholars.<sup>10</sup>

### The Second World War and the Wartime Nationalist Movement

The narrative of the Great Patriotic War played the role of a foundational myth in the Soviet Union as it was the biggest historical experi-

ence shared by all the nations of the Union.<sup>11</sup> In the glorifying and triumphal narrative of war, many histories were silenced. The latter included the experiences of the war in the Baltic States or in Western Ukraine where their fight against the Soviet army was one of the most distinguished features of the war. However, in the Soviet Union, the non-Russian nationalists who fought against the Soviets were framed as Nazi collaborators and, until today, this image is effectively used in attempts to denigrate the Baltics or Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

**B**ecause of its central role in Soviet identity, the narrative of war became the main topic to be addressed by historians and other memory actors after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The new narrative included experiences that had been excluded by the Soviet regime. In Ukraine, these experiences related to the wartime nationalist movement (represented by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its military arm the Ukrainian Insurgent Army – UPA). At the beginning of the 1990s, education became the main channel through which the new narrative of history was introduced. The Second World War was no longer called the Great Patriotic War. Throughout the 1990s, two parallel names were often used: the Second World War, indicating the period from 1939–1945 and the Great Patriotic War from 1941–1945.

The OUN and UPA began to be glorified as a “resistance movement” and “freedom fighters” because of their anti-Soviet struggle. The memory of the OUN and UPA was initially activated on a grassroots level, in small villages and towns in Western Ukraine which had a direct connection with the wartime nationalists. Local non-governmental organizations such as Prosvita and unions of veterans of the UPA became the main memory agents who took care of the memory projects related to the OUN and UPA (mainly building monuments in a rather simple form using crosses or grave tombs funded by private individuals or with the help of local villages/town councils). Similar to the memory of *Holodomor*, the forms of commemoration saturated by national and religious symbols, as

well as anti-Soviet narratives that focused on the victimhood of the Ukrainian nation, were borrowed from an already existing repertoire of memory developed and preserved in the diaspora.<sup>13</sup> This glorious and sacral form of memory has been broadly criticized by scholars engaged in the history of the OUN and UPA because this memory neglects the most difficult aspects of the OUN and UPA: the ideology of OUN, which has many traces of the fascist movements of that time, the massacre of Poles in 1943 in Volhynia<sup>14</sup>, the question of collaboration with the Nazi regime, and the participation in the Holocaust.

The problem is that historical knowledge grounded in academic studies came long after the memory forms had been established. The archives that permitted robust research to be conducted were only opened after the collapse of the Soviet Union (a lot of important materials were only opened in the 2000s). The thorough studies about the most problematic episodes in the history of the OUN and UPA were published even later, because quality research and publishing take time. Thus, the formation of a communicative memory of the diaspora and in Ukraine in the 1990s preceded the formation of knowledge that was used as the basis for the critique of memory work. This gap between a communicative memory and the possibility of conducting research and producing historical knowledge is seldom approached by memory scholars.

However, this discrepancy is an important factor because it reveals incongruities between memory and history as a scholarly discipline. In a concrete Ukrainian situation, this gap indicates that memory work took place in a context in which practically no other form of knowledge – except the Soviet narrative about Nazi collaborators – was accessible to memory actors. Consequently, they heavily relied on glorifying the memory of the anti-Soviet fight (imported from abroad). Orest Subtelny’s history, which has previously been mentioned and which was used for educating about the war in Ukraine, dedicated several paragraphs to the OUN and UPA in which the narrative of the anti-Soviet struggle prevailed. The role of the

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OUN and UPA in the Volhynian massacre was described in several paragraphs of this book but it was not enough to build a more nuanced understanding of the nationalist movement which would combine both the anti-Soviet struggle of the nationalists with the difficult aspects of their past.

In 1990s, Leonid Kuchma commissioned a special group of historians to evaluate the wartime nationalist movement. The group reached the conclusion that it was too hard to propose a single narrative on the movement, as it was neither exclusively glorious nor exclusively villainous.<sup>15</sup> However, it was not only the state's commission that was involved in research about the movement. The main institution to propagate the glorifying approach to the movement was the *Center of Research of the Liberation Movement* in L'viv, which was founded in 2002. It was led by young historian Volodymyr Vyatrovych who, in 2014, became the Director of the Institute of National Remembrance (which will be discussed later).

### **Institutionalization of Memory and History in the Hands of Politicians**

On the national level, all discussions about the Second World War and the wartime nationalist movement were highly politicized, culminating in the contestation in 2003 between the two presidential candidates Viktor Yanukovich and Viktor Yushchenko. At the time, the glorification of the OUN and UPA was taken up by Yushchenko. As his entire presidential campaign was framed as a pro-European and pro-democracy vector for development of the country, the memory he propagated became associated with his democratic ideals. As promptly noted by Per Anders Rudling, a paradoxical situation could be witnessed: the democratic forces used the memory of undemocratic organizations in their power games.<sup>16</sup> Yushchenko's association with the OUN and UPA was used by his opponents who tried to depict him as a fascist, referring to a well-known Soviet narrative. However, these attempts failed and Yushchenko won the elections.

Viktor Yushchenko tried to institutionalize

the normative approach to history using the main directive of decommunization when he sanctioned the opening of the Institute of National Remembrance in 2006, mentioned above. Between 2007 and 2014, the main topics of interest outlined on the website of the Institute of National Remembrance were *Holodomor*, the national liberation struggle (1917–1920) and the Second World War. In 2007, Yushchenko granted the posthumous title of “Hero of Ukraine” to Roman Shukhevych, the commander of the UPA. Before leaving his presidential post in January 2010, Yushchenko also awarded the posthumous title of ‘Hero of Ukraine’ to Stepan Bandera, the leader of the OUN. This decision was broadly discussed and vehemently disputed in both Ukraine and abroad.<sup>17</sup> Those who approached the presidential decision with understanding primarily argued for the anti-Soviet meaning of Bandera's figure.<sup>18</sup>

When Viktor Yanukovich, Yushchenko's main opponent in the 2003 campaign, was elected as President of Ukraine in 2010, the politics of memory regarding the WWII changed. The first illustrative step in this direction was a common Ukrainian-Russian-Belarusian celebration of the victory in the Second World War and the return to the name ‘Great Patriotic War’ in the public statements of politicians. Yanukovich also appointed a new director of the Institute of National Memory, the historian Valeriy Soldatenko, who was also a member of the Communist Party of Ukraine. He hesitated to refer to the famine of 1932–1933 as *Holodomor* and had a ‘negative attitude’ towards the UPA leaders – Shukhevych and Bandera, who had received honorary orders from Yushchenko.

The dissatisfaction with Yanukovich's decision to suspend the signing of the association agreement with the EU culminated in mass protests in November 2013 that lasted until the end of February 2014 and were called the *Euro-maidan*. It is noteworthy that the memories of the OUN and UPA were actively used in these mass protests, both in 2004 (during the Orange Revolution) and in 2013–2014 (the Euromaidan Revolution).<sup>19</sup> During the Euromaidan protests,





Holdomor Remembrance Day in Lviv, 2013.  
PHOTO: DIXOND / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the topic of WWII was broadly used by Russian propaganda, describing Ukrainians as fascists, a junta and *banderovtsi* (the term refers to the Soviet depiction of the OUN and UPA referring to the OUN's leader, Stepan Bandera).<sup>20</sup>

The symbolic expression of the demand for regime change on the part of the protestors was the so-called *Leninopad* – the falling down of Lenin's statues – which started during the protests in Kyiv and spread throughout the country. Directly after the protests, when Yanukovich had fled and Russia had annexed Crimea, the interim government appointed a new director of the Institute of National Remembrance – Volodymyr Vyatrovych (previously mentioned). The final institutionalization of the glorification of the OUN and UPA took place in 2015, when the “Decommunization Laws” were adopted by the Parliament of Ukraine.

### Decommunization Laws and Memory Work in Times of War

The Memory politics in Ukraine, starting with 2014, should be considered in the context of a military conflict in the eastern part of the country and in the shadow of the Russian annexation

of Crimea. Taking into consideration the fact that information plays one of the central roles in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, often called the “hybrid war”, it is difficult to overestimate the role of historical narratives.<sup>21</sup>

Many scholars regard these politics in terms of the securitization of the past in which history is framed as a matter of national security.<sup>22</sup> “The Decommunization Laws” can be regarded as part of the securitizing process by which questions of history are presented as a matter of national security.

**T**he laws on decommunization were adopted in May 2015.<sup>23</sup> They were presented by the authorities as a necessity in a society in which the Soviet past was seen as a threat to the present and future existence of the nation. The sympathies with the Soviet past were presented in these laws as sympathies with Russia and with the pro-Russian rebels in the eastern part of the country. The ‘Laws on Decommunization’ comprise four separate laws that are quite different in the themes, motivations and subjects with which they deal. The laws include the law on the commemoration of the victory

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It is explicitly stated that these historians see history as a weapon in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

over Nazism in the Second World War from 1939–1945, the law on the condemnation of the Communist and National-Socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in Ukraine and a ban on the propaganda of their symbols, the law on the status and commemoration of the fighters for the independence of Ukraine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, last but not least, the law on granting access to the archives of the repressive institutions of the Communist totalitarian regime from 1918–1991. Before they were signed, these laws were criticized by many historians in Ukraine and abroad as they were considered to limit freedom of speech.<sup>24</sup>

Volodymyr Vyatrovych replied to this critique by stating that these laws were directly associated with national security issues and, had they been adopted earlier, there would probably not have been any conflicts in the eastern part of the country.<sup>25</sup> Five years after the adoption of these laws, we can state that the most tangible changes to result from the laws is the celebration of the Day of Reconciliation marking the end of the Second World War on the 8 May, which is synchronized with the commemorations in most European countries. The law that guarantees access to the archives has generally been positively received not only by scholars in the country but also by scholars from abroad who can work on documents that had previously been classified.

It should be added that in the context of war, new memory initiatives appeared. For example, historians from the Institute of History of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences organized the group “*Likbez. Historical Front*”, which states that its purpose is to fight the historical myths propagated by Russia.<sup>26</sup> This group has collectively published ten volumes of history of Ukraine under the title “*History without Censorship*”, as well as many volumes of individual books devoted to different questions about Ukrainian history. In the introductions to many volumes of *Likbez* history, as well as in the interviews I conducted with *Likbez* historians from 2016 to 2018<sup>27</sup>, it is explicitly stated that these historians see history as a weapon in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

### The most Recent Changes in the Ukrainian Memory Scene

In spring 2019, Volodymyr Zelens’kyi was elected President. As he positioned himself as being radically opposed to Poroshenko’s politics in all issues, a radical change of Ukrainian memory policies could be expected. However, after one year of his presidency, there is no evidence of any radical change in practice, although there are changes in the official discourse of the president. For example, in his New Year Eve’s speech on December 31, 2019, Zelens’kyi declared that “the name of the street is not important if it is illuminated and paved.”<sup>28</sup> This could mean that the glorious memory of the wartime nationalist movement promoted by the previous regime would no longer be the focus of state memory policies but would most likely be the focus of regional memory politics.<sup>29</sup>

In December 2019, a new director, Anton Drobovych, was appointed to the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. At the time of his appointment he was only 33 years old and, prior to his appointment, had worked at the National Pedagogical Drahomanov University in Kyiv and at the Holocaust Memorial Center “Babyn Yar”. Drobovych stated that “the Institute of National Remembrance will continue its search for heroic personalities but with an emphasis on personalities who will unite Ukrainian society and who will finally help us come to terms with who these personalities are.”<sup>30</sup> As an example of such personalities, Drobovych named avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich, as well as famous football player and coach, Valeriy Lobanovskiy. He also stated that the UINP would continue to work on decommunization and on such topics as *Holodomor*, the Holocaust as well as the Chornobyl catastrophe, as well as fight against historical myths.<sup>31</sup>

Zelens’kyi’s history policies do not appear to be returning to the approaches once promoted under Viktor Yanukovych from 2010–2014. Instead, Ukraine’s new leadership apparently wants to preserve some earlier established fundamentals while distancing its approach from the hagiographic approach to the OUN and UPA propagated by Vyatrovych under Poroshenko’s rule.

## The Holocaust Memorial Center “Babyn Yar”

The most recent dispute over memory in Ukraine – which reached the scale of a memory war – started in spring 2020, when Ukraine, like most other countries in the world, was locked into quarantine because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The dispute started when Ivan Kozlenko, the Ukrainian film director and the (then) Head of the Dovzhenko Cinema Art Center, wrote a debate article about the Holocaust Memorial Center “Babyn Yar”, stating that its newly appointed art director, the Russian film director, Ilya Khrzhanovskiy, in his program of development of the museum of Babyn Yar applied methods which are ethically unacceptable in the 21st century.<sup>32</sup> Parallel to this, it became known that the main historian who had worked on the project since its creation in 2016, the prominent expert on the Holocaust in Ukraine, Dutch historian Karel Berkhoff, left the project accusing the new leadership of the center of unethical approaches to memory.<sup>33</sup> Throughout April and May, intellectual discussions in the country never stopped. Two public letters were signed by hundreds of intellectuals in Ukraine and abroad demanding that a project that goes against all ethical and moral norms be stopped.<sup>34</sup>

**T**he project in question cited the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Milgram Shock Experiment as the inspirational sources that influenced the main approach to the organization of a new museum. The main idea was to immerse visitors in “the real life” of Kyiv in 1941 when the city was occupied by the Nazis and the mass extermination of the Jewish population started. In the beginning, the visitors had to take a special psychological test that would indicate the group to which the respective visitor belonged: perpetrators, witnesses or victims.

Although most of the critics focused on the unacceptability of such methods, whereby gamification and immersion practices trivialized the meaning of the tragedy of the Holocaust and negated the dignity of the visitors, they were attacked by their opponents for their alleged narrow-minded nationalism which did not

allow them to accept a Russian director (this sounds particularly problematic because many of the people, including the former head historian of the project, Karel Berkhoff, demonstrated a solid and unbiased approach to history in their works).

**B**ecause of the limits of this report, it is not possible to go into the details of the controversy. Suffice to say, it still has not been resolved and two parallel projects are being conducted in the memorial space of Babyn Yar: one of them managed by the Institute of History and commissioned by the state – National Historical Memorial Preserve Babyn Yar, and the other – Holocaust Memorial Center “Babyn Yar”, a private initiative funded by three oligarchs of Ukrainian-Jewish origin who live in Russia (although the latter is a private initiative, these two projects are supported by the state). The “Babyn Yar” memory controversy should be positioned in a broader context of discussions about the limits of representation and ethics of memory work.

In the Ukrainian situation, this controversy can be zoomed down to the discussion of the concept of dignity, which became actualized by the Euromaidan protests (in memory space, the protests are called “the Revolution of Dignity”). While Ilya Khrzhanovskiy tries to show in his methods that every human being can be stripped off dignity (a statement that he repeats again and again in his interviews), the opponents of these methods speak about the need to protect human dignity. Interestingly, the new director of the UINP, Anton Drobovych, who worked with the previous team at the center, also mentions dignity as the main trope in the critique of the new Center’s project.<sup>35</sup>

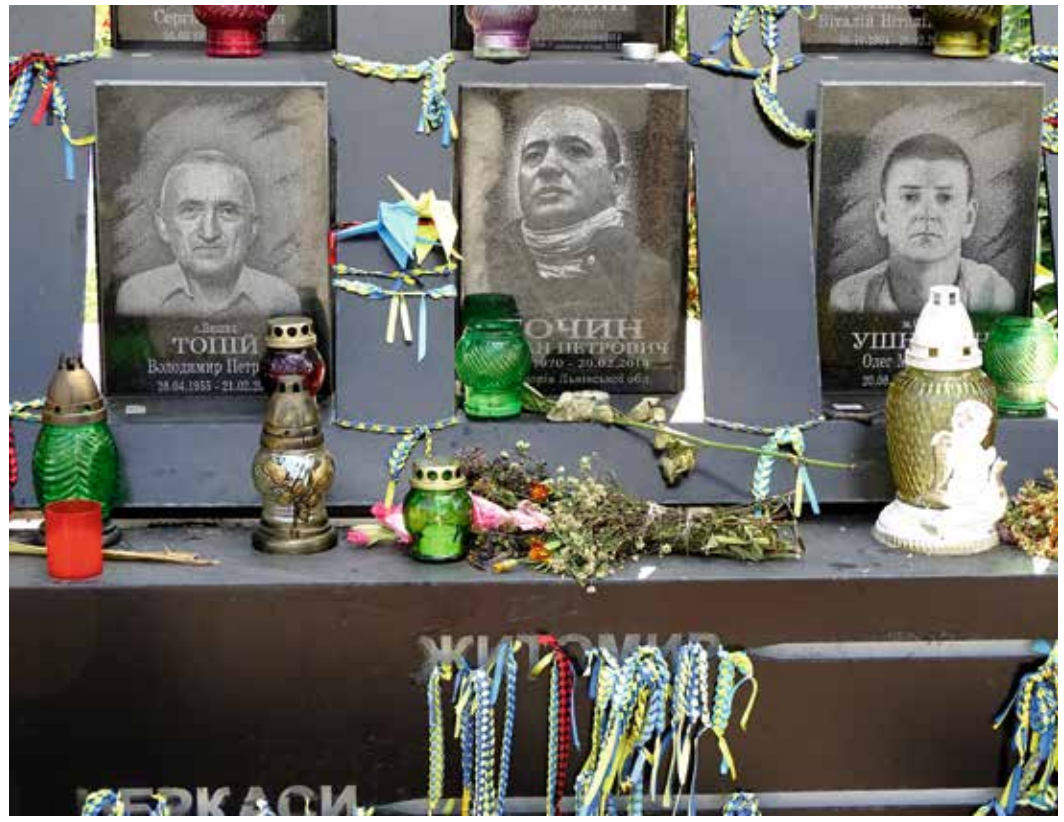
## The Heavenly Hundred and ATO veterans

During the Euromaidan protests, more than 100 protestors were killed by the police and special security forces. Their deaths formed the distinguished memory node of the *Heroes of Heavenly Hundred*, which draws on the martyrological and hagiographical mnemonic narratives developed in the Ukrainian memory culture.<sup>36</sup> The





Euromaidan remembrance, Heavenly Hundred heroes in Kyiv.  
PHOTO: U.S. EMBASSY KYIV UKRAINE



Street Memorial to Heavenly Hundred Euromaidan Victims, in Kyiv.  
PHOTO: ADAM JONES

monuments to the protestors who fell in the Euromaidan were erected throughout Ukraine directly after the events. The part of the street in which the main shootings took place, Instytut'ska Street in Kyiv, was renamed the *Alley of the Heavenly Hundred*. The Institute of National Remembrance is currently working on the project of the Museum of the Revolution of Dignity (officially called the *National Memorial Complex of Heroes of Heavenly Hundred – Museum of the Revolution of Dignity*).<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that symbolically the memory node of the *Heroes of Heavenly Hundred* is often closely related to the memory node of the heroes of the OUN-UPA, in which all the fallen and the dead are presented as “Defenders of the Motherland” who sacrificed their lives for the nation.<sup>38</sup>

**T**he soldiers who fell in the war in Donbas (which was officially called an “anti-terrorist operation” – ATO by the government) are honored national heroes. Monuments to their memory have been erected in the villages, towns and cities where these soldiers were born or lived. Many schools and universities that the soldiers attended have memorial plaques acknowledging their sacrifice. They are usually funded by local initiatives (families, local councils, schools, universities).

Many museums in the country have special expositions devoted to the ongoing war, as well as to the Heavenly Hundred (like the Museum of the Second World War in Kyiv, the Museum of ATO in Dnipro). War experiences are transmitted through the special genre of literature – war literature, written by established writers, journalists and veterans of war (sometimes these roles coincide, as in the case of Artem Chekh, a prominent Ukrainian writer and war veteran). Veteran literature is the most numerous in this genre; thousands of books have been written.<sup>39</sup> Many documentaries and fictional films also deal with both the Euromaidan and the ATO. All of these cultural products are important channels in the formation of the memory of these historical events that allow us to witness how communicative memories of recent events find their way into a broader cultural memory. ●

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# Codeword “Criminal”: Moral Remembrance in National Memory Politics

by Muriel Blaive

**E**ver since the 1989 Velvet Revolution, official Czech institutions have endeavored to shape a collective memory that has depicted the communist past as illegitimate and criminal. After its 2004 accession to the EU, the country also lobbied to raise European awareness of “communist crimes.” One institutional actor has been particularly active: the parliament of Czechoslovakia, after 1993 of the Czech Republic. Lawmakers swiftly enforced a memory politics predicated on the unlawfulness of the communist regime. In doing so they attempted to symbolically externalize the communist period as alien to the nation’s history and traditions.

## Legal Milestones Aimed at Criminalizing the Communist Past

In 1991 and 1992 the parliament passed two laws dubbed “big lustration”<sup>1</sup> and “small lustration”<sup>2</sup> that disqualified any citizen who had been an officer or collaborator of the secret police before 1989 from holding a senior post in

the administration, army and police, as well as any head of a section of the Czechoslovak Communist Party section from the district level up.

In 1991, the Ministry of the Interior created a department called Office for the Documentation and the Investigation of the Activity of the State Security. Four years later, it was renamed Office of Documentation and Investigation of the Crimes of Communism (ÚDV). Since 2002 this office has constituted a unit for criminal investigation within the police force.<sup>3</sup>

In 1993 the parliament passed law 198/1993 “On the Illegality of the Communist Regime and Resistance to It.”<sup>4</sup> The wording of this law is remarkably strong. It affirms that the communist regime was “criminal, illegitimate and worthy of contempt.” The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was a “criminal and contemptible organization; this also applies to other organizations which carried out an activity based on its ideology with the aim to repress human rights and the democratic system.”

Communist Party members, i.e. 1.7 million people at the time of the Velvet Revolution out



Images of Velvet Revolution 1989. Museum of Communism, Prague. PHOTO: ADAM JONES

of a population of 15 million, were declared collectively responsible: "... the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, its leadership and members are responsible for the way of governance in our country in 1948–1989." The list of damages attributed to the previous regime includes the "purposeful destruction of traditional principles of European civilization", the "deliberate violations of human rights and freedoms", the "moral and economic decline accompanied by judicial crimes and terror carried out against those with different opinions", the "replacement of a functional market economy by a directly controlled economy", the "destruction of traditional principles of property rights", the "abuse of education, science and culture for political and ideological purposes", and the "inconsiderate destruction of nature."

**H**owever, the 1993 law simultaneously affirmed the legal continuity with the previous regime, i.e. laws adopted under communism would remain valid unless or until explicitly abrogated. The Constitutional Court estab-

lished that the continuity of "old laws" did not hinder a "discontinuity in values" nor signify the "recognition of the legitimacy of the communist regime." Legality could not "become a convenient substitute for an absent legitimacy."<sup>5</sup> That this legal stance was quite contradictory was underlined by almost no one in the Czech Republic, apart from former dissident Petr Uhl.

### The Issue of Hatred and Genocide

The parliament additionally voted in 2000 to add several new articles to the Czech Criminal Code (§400 to 405 in the updated criminal law 40/2009)<sup>6</sup> in order to further criminalize the support and/or propaganda for movements oppressing human rights and freedom. Anyone supporting national, race, religious, class, or group hatred could now be imprisoned for one to five years, or for three to eight years if they advertized this crime or committed it as a member of a group. "Class hatred" as a new crime category testifies to the continual concern of the lawmaker with criminalizing the communist past. Moreover, a person who expresses sympa-

”  
Lawmakers swiftly enforced a memory politics predicated on the unlawfulness of the communist regime.





Detail of the Monument to the student manifestations of November 17<sup>th</sup> in Prague, that led to the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia.

PHOTO: YAIR HAKLAI

thy with such movements could be punished by imprisonment from six months to three years. Ironically, despite the 1993 law and these new Criminal Code articles, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), while perhaps not actively promoting “class hatred”, was still allowed to exist and actually continued polling 15% to 20% of the vote. Thus, these legal norms appear to be mainly symbolic.

**F**inally, the criminal code states: “Anyone who publicly denies, disputes, approves or attempts to justify a Nazi, Communist or other genocide or Nazi, Communist or other crimes against humanity or war crimes or crimes against peace will be punished by imprisonment from six months to three years.”

If it is clear that the “Nazi genocide” refers to the Holocaust against European Jews and Roma during the Second World War, the notion of “communist genocide” is more problematic. Since the Czech political sphere has never displayed any interest in the Khmer Rouge activities in Cambodia, this article must have intended to punish denial of the *Holodomor* – the famine in Ukraine organized by Stalin’s regime from 1932 to 1933, which resulted in several million victims. However, the *Holodomor* is not recognized as “genocide” by any international organization. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe only acknowledged it as a “crime against humanity.”

Moreover, there is no public “denial of the Holodomor” to speak of in the Czech Republic.

As to a potential communist genocide in Czechoslovakia itself, a hint to which might have been another aim of this law, the number of victims of the communist regime from 1948 to 1989 is currently estimated to be around 4,500. However, it cannot be conceptualized as genocide as the repression did not target any particular group but was widespread throughout society. Thus, the introduction of the term “communist genocide” as a punishable offense appears to be an ideological act that participated in the criminalization of the communist past.

## The Creation of a National Memory Institute

The culmination point in the memory laws was law 181/2007, which created the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and its twin organization, the Security Services Archives, situated in Prague.<sup>8</sup> This institute was expressly devised to shape Czech collective memory. Indeed, it functions as a national memory institute on the German and Polish models. The law originated in the initiative of 19 lawmakers, of whom 17 were from the conservative party (ODS.) It was not the first attempt. For instance, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, an earlier draft had drawn an explicit parallel between “communism” and “Islamism” as two comparable versions of “terrorism.”<sup>9</sup>

**A**ccording to the preamble of this law as finally adopted, the institute’s mission is multifold:

- Pay tribute to the victims by implementing various commemorative and honorific actions, laying wreaths, honoring victims, etc. (“preserve memory”)
- Promote a historical narrative of resistance (“reflect the citizens’ struggle”)
- Assist the state in vetting its personnel and the recipients of its victims’ compensation laws, as well as assisting the justice system in the case of trials, by checking individual records in the security services archives (“assist in indemnifying and convicting”)
- Curate the archives of the former security



services and place them at the disposal of the public (in order to “not to forget unlawful acts of any totalitarian or authoritative regime”)

- Digitize the archival records and make them available online to an even wider public
- Educate the public, in particular school children, on the communist and Nazi periods.

The lawmaker signaled once again its objectives in terms of historical agenda and memory politics, systematically emphasizing the “criminal” character of the communist and Nazi rule while keeping silent on collaboration as a social practice under either regime or even on popular accommodation to the Nazi or communist rule. Believing that full transparency would contribute to demonstrating the criminal character of the communist regime, the secret police archives have been open with virtually no restrictions since 2008, including no anonymization of either “collaborators”, “victims” or third parties.

**S**everal directives of this law, however, are new in the Czech context.

The first element of notice is that the institute is supposed to cover the period from 1938 to 1989, however the period from May 4, 1945 to February 25, 1948 has been explicitly excluded from this historical research with the exception of the “acts relating to the preparation of the totalitarian takeover of power by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.”

This convoluted definition conveys the appreciation on the part of the lawmaker that historical research on the 1945-48 period is acceptable as far as it is related to the preparation of the communist takeover. However, research on the 1945-48 historical development is deemed unsuitable when linked to the transfer/expulsion/ethnic cleansing of the Sudeten German minority from Czechoslovakia. The memory shaping of the pre-1948 period has thus taken the form of an imposed silence about these events, at least on the part of this particular state memorial institution that is most intimately related to the Czech state (other

historical institutes of the Academy of Sciences can and do study it.)

The reason for this taboo is that the expulsion was initiated by President Beneš and the postwar democratic political elites, yet was extremely brutal. Given the individual acts of cruelty and torture that were perpetrated by Czechs against Germans in the immediate postwar period in retaliation for the ghastly exactions committed by the German troops on Czechs during the Nazi occupation, even local Czech authorities were occasionally appalled.<sup>10</sup> By the time order had been restored in fall 1945 and the expulsion was fully carried out in 1947, 30,000 to 40,000 Germans had perished. Even if the legitimacy and legality of this Sudeten German expulsion were internationally affirmed at the 1945 Potsdam Conference, this historical episode can hardly be raised as an ideal type of the irreproachable behavior that the Czech state would like to associate with the democrats as opposed to the “criminal character” expected of the “communist totalitarian regime.”

The second element promoting a specific vision of communism in law 181/2007 is one that explicitly criminalized the communist regime in the historiography being produced by this institute. Taken to the letter, article 4, points a), b) and e) of the law indicates that historical research should be pursued in order to: “Study and objectively evaluate the time of non-freedom and the time of communist totalitarian power, investigate the antidemocratic and criminal activity of state bodies, and its security services in particular, and the criminal activity of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and other organizations based on its ideology”; “Analyze the causes and way of the democratic regime liquidation at the time of communist totalitarian power, document the involvement of Czech and foreign persons in supporting the communist regime and in resistance against it”; and “Document Nazi and communist crimes.”

### **Equivalence between Nazism and Communism**

The third striking element of law 181/2007 is the implied sign of equality placed between



The archives of the secret police have been open practically without any restriction since 2008.

Nazism and communism. Since the Czech Republic and its Central European neighbors acceded to the EU in 2004, the criminalization of the communist past has indeed been complemented by the growing affirmation of a specific Central European identity: memory entrepreneurs from the four Visegrád countries have endeavored to lead the European Parliament to affirm the equivalence of Nazi and communist crimes.<sup>11</sup>

It is in 1996 that the volume *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, authored by several anticommunist French and Central European intellectuals<sup>12</sup>, had introduced a victimhood competition between Nazism and communism by proclaiming on its cover “One hundred million victims [of communism].” The volume lent superficial academic credibility to the thesis of the superior criminogenic character of communism. Despite the strong methodological doubts raised by the French and international scholarly community, and notwithstanding that the figure of 100 million victims was revised down to 80 by the French publisher before the book even appeared, the volume was validated with little or no epistemological scrutiny by historians and the wider public in the former communist countries, including the “one hundred million” figure.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the volume gave an expression to the frustration of many intellectual elites and/or unacknowledged victims. It validated their conviction that the suffering inflicted by the communist regimes was not sufficiently recognized by Western countries.

In June 2008, the Czech government and parliament jointly initiated a conference and a formal written statement entitled *Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism*, signed by such personalities as Václav Havel, the former Czech president, and Joachim Gauck, the first director of the German national memory institute (BStU), who would later become the President of Germany.<sup>14</sup> The declaration called for a “Europe-wide condemnation of, and education about, the crimes of communism.” It placed an explicit sign of equality between Nazism and communism: “Many

crimes committed in the name of Communism should be assessed as crimes against humanity serving as a warning for future generations, in the same way Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg Tribunal.” It also called for August 23, “the day of signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact” in 1939, to be recognized as a “day of remembrance of the victims of both Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes, in the same way Europe remembers the victims of the Holocaust on January 27.” As opposed to the Czech Criminal Code, however, this declaration refrained from mentioning the term “genocide.”

As a result of this and other lobbying efforts, the European Parliament indeed adopted the date of August 23 as a “Europe-Wide Day of Remembrance for the Victims of All Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes.” It also passed a resolution in 2009 on “European Conscience and Totalitarianism” that recognized “Communism, Nazism, and fascism as a shared legacy” and appealed to strengthen public awareness about these crimes.<sup>15</sup>

In December 2010 finally, six formerly communist countries of the EU called upon the latter to turn the “approval, denial, or belittling of communist crimes” into an EU criminal offense. Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg compared the denial of communist crimes to the denial of Nazi crimes. However, thus far, the EU has not taken any further steps to recognize or punish the “denial of communist crimes.”

## Capital and Division

The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes is covered by an independent state budget chapter (chapter 355). Thus, its funding is directly related to the government and it negotiates its budget with the Ministry of Finances. For 2020, this budget was approximately 171 million crowns, and that of the archives of approximately 87 million crowns, i.e. a total of approximately 258 million crowns or 10 million euros. The institute has around 140 employees, including 66 researchers. The archives have 152 employees. While the budget of this twin institution is modest on an international scale,



Replica of Concentration camp in Mauthausen at Karlovo náměstí in Prague. It was organized in May – July 2012 by Association Post Bellum in memory of 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich and following repressions by Nazi regime.

PHOTO: KENYH CEVAROM

it is unusually high for the Czech Republic, and the ratio of administrative personnel to researchers is also unusually high. This has prompted public criticism that the institute is squandering public funds that would have been better allocated to institutes of the Academy of Sciences or university research institutions.

**B**ut the capital of the the institute is at least as, and perhaps even more, symbolic (political, institutional, professional) than financial. Due to the inflamed political atmosphere surrounding the creation and running of the institute, there has been considerable turnover in personnel. The respective directors, deputy directors and prominent researchers, as well as their allies and friends, have regularly run for office, and occasionally been elected, in particular to the more conservative chamber of parliament, i.e. the Senate. Their campaigns have intensely drawn on this criminalizing of communism in memory politics and the candidates' vigorously proclaimed "anti-communism" has served as their main argument for discrediting left-wing adversaries.

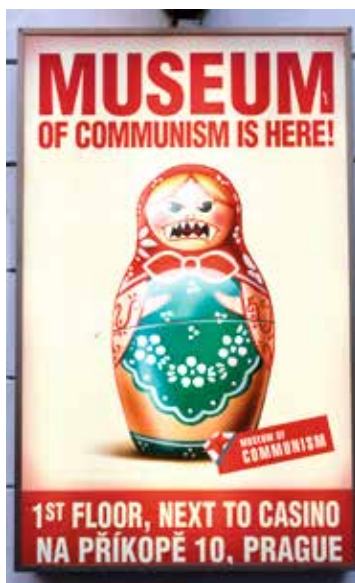
Since 2014 the institute has endeavored to depoliticize itself and to step up to international research standards by hiring new academic researchers. This has led to the entrenchment of two opposed camps within its ranks – to the point that there are now two parallel research departments on communism.

## Mandating Memory is not a Neutral Act

In this fierce political, institutional, and memorial battle, the Czech official memory politics concerning the communist past is a textbook example of contemporary policies of dealing with the painful pasts described by sociologist Lea David in her 2020 volume. Its title is self-explanatory: *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights*. It is based on her analysis of the conflicts in former Yugoslavia and in Israel/Palestine.

The international human rights turn of the 1990s developed as a follow-up of the memory turn of the 1980s. Inspired by the bloody conflicts in former Yugoslavia and by the genocide in Rwanda, it centered on what Lea David has dubbed the policy of "moral remembrance." As it progressively became an ideology of its own, she argues, "moral remembrance" has served to conceptualize memorialization processes. It is itself predicated on a triple agenda: "facing the past", "duty to remember", and "victims."<sup>16</sup>

The victim-centered agenda has led to a standardized memorialization practice based on "simplified and purified categories of victims/perpetrators/bystanders." In the Czech Republic, where communism did not translate into mass violence comparable to that of a genocide, the figure of the "bystander" is replaced in these symbolic politics by that of the "secret



Museum of communism in Prague.

PHOTO: HENRY MÜHLPFORDT, ADAM JONES

police collaborator”, i.e. any civilian convinced or coerced into writing reports for the secret police about their neighbors, colleagues, friends, and even family.

**B**ut as in all other national cases, this triangle victims/perpetrators/collaborators became an “ultimate prison.” Indeed, in this vision of the past dictatorship, the ideological imperative of purity and normativity mandates to consider all three types as homogenous categories. Victims can no longer be held responsible for anything, nor can they be criticized; but they can also no longer express any dissenting views anymore from the prescribed narrative. They lose all individuality: apart from being all innocent and apolitical, they are also all equal. The victims are not remembered anymore for who they are, but for what happened to them. They are, in fact, forced to redefine their past lives to frame their individual story within the prescribed narrative. Seeing themselves now exclusively through the lens of victimhood specifically prevents them from remembering happy moments in their lives.

Victimhood is the ultimate status that individuals and nations aspire to achieve, one that confers moral and material privileges. It therefore creates rivalry and jealousies. For instance, the restitution of the property nationalized by the communist regime was granted only to Czechs residing in the country. When the

Czechs who had fled the regime protested, the Constitutional Court abolished the residency requirement. However, the deadline for submitting restitution claims had already passed and the Court refused to review the deadline.<sup>17</sup>

**W**hat Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has referred to as “oppression Olympics”, i.e. victimhood competition, either between countries or between groups of victims within a single country, creates according to Lea David an emotional energy geared to identifying certain groups as “sacred”, while “polluting others as profane.” Hence, she concludes, human rights have become an ideology that has contributed in fact to a binary vision of the world. The ideal-types of victims, perpetrators, and collaborators leave no space for nuance and thereby for the understanding of human behavior and of history. This type of memory politics does not lead to reconciliation, but to an ever-greater division of society. It also denies the very possibility for humans to change.<sup>18</sup>

Most importantly, it is a form of continuation of past practices. In 1992, a Czech citizen who had participated in a resistance movement in the 1950s at his life’s peril found himself on the list of secret police collaborators – he had been coerced into collaboration precisely because of his resistance activity. He wrote to Petr Cibulka, who published this list, obtained illegally, in the name of a virulent anticommunist ideology: “You became in my eyes ... an extended hand of Bolshevism, which persecuted me for 41 years.”<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

“One thing is clear”, write Sandrine Lefranc and Sarah Gensburger: “The development of memory policy has not been associated with the development of a more tolerant or peaceful society.”<sup>20</sup> The memory politics of the Czech state, like that of nearly all post-communist countries, has seized on an international trend concerning memory and human rights that developed from the 1990s onwards. Czech memory activists have appropriated this vocabulary and transformed it into an “anticommunist grammar”



(Laure Neumayer.) Seen from the outside, it appears as a legitimate narrative aimed at promoting democracy and reconciliation in the Czech Republic. However, when analyzed in more detail, it appears as a form of political instrumentalization primarily aimed at appropriating victimhood for political capital.

**N**early all aspects of the Czech measures aimed at dealing with the communist past fit to Lea David's description. First, we can underline their collective character: rehabilitations were issued collectively to all those condemned on the basis of repressive law 231/1948 without the need for any individual application (victims considered as a group); communist party members were denounced as contemptible and criminal on the basis of law 198/1993 (perpetrators considered as a group); "collaborators", finally, were also denounced as such on the Cibulka list without any details or circumstances (collaborators considered as a group.)

Second, victims have indeed become trapped in the anticommunist narrative. It has become politically incorrect to remember anything positive that might have characterized communism, for instance the relative generosity of the communist welfare state, but also such trivia as trade-union sponsored vacations to the seaside. This is why "nostalgia" is a taboo word in Czech memory politics concerning communism. Society at large is considered a "victim" of communism. Thus, a longing for the past has no place in the official narrative. Consequently, nostalgia could only find an outlet under the codename "retro" and in alternative narratives almost exclusively promoted by the arts and popular culture, particularly cinema and television.<sup>21</sup>

**T**hird, different victim groups were led to compete against each other. We have seen the difference concerning restitutions between resident Czechs and exiled Czechs; but we could also mention the Jewish victims of the Second World War, who seldom received any compensation, as opposed to the Czech victims of communism. We could also

mention law 262/2011<sup>22</sup> that aimed to reward the "participants to anticommunist opposition and resistance", i.e. to create heroes out of anti-communist resistance. As the applicants who signed an act of collaboration with the secret police are excluded by principle, even though such resisters were the prime target of the secret police, 60% of the applicants have been turned down. This selection has proven to be to the advantage of the promoters of this law, i.e. the former dissidents from the 1970s and 1980s, who could more easily document their activities against the regime and who had been in a better position to refuse to collaborate with the secret police insofar as labor camps and political executions had disappeared by this time.

And finally, the ideological imperative of purity and normativity has mandated to consider victims, perpetrators, and collaborators as homogenous categories. The mission of historians, it is understood in this frame, is to document this prescribed narrative of pre-ordained guilt and victimhood. It is not about complexifying the historical picture, or even worse, attempting to understand the behavior of social actors by contextualizing it. As a result, the work of socio-political historians has been regularly denounced as "revisionist" by anticommunist activists and the mainstream media, which mirror their conservative views, with an increased intensity before each election. As a consequence, not a single historical work has been dedicated to the phenomenon of collaboration as a social practice, be it with the Nazi occupational forces or with the communist regime.

To sum up, in the framework of its EU integration process the Czech Republic (like its Central European neighbors) has learned to weaponize the Western "human rights grammar." Learning this new language gave their pre-existing efforts to criminalize communism a new international legitimacy. However, in so doing, anti-communist state actors skipped the revisionist stage that had preceded the memory and human rights turn in the West. France and Germany had experienced a painful, soul-searching exercise when confronted in the 1970s and 1980s with their own culpability



during the Second World War. Born under such premises, the “duty of memory” had situated the Holocaust as a unique phenomenon. In contrast, the Central European revised “duty of memory” has served to relativize the Holocaust by equating it with the “crimes of communism.” It has not been inspired by the will to critically examine the past so much as by a desire to attain purification. ●

Acknowledgement: This article was written in the framework of a Senior Fellowship for the winter semester of 2020 at the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften (IFK) in Vienna, Austria. I would like to thank Gérard-Daniel Cohen for his critical remarks on the text.

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# History “Wars” and the Battle for Truth and National Memory

by Joanna Beata Michlic

In the last thirty years of post-communist Poland, we can differentiate between two major phases of shaping the historical memory of the national past.<sup>1</sup> The first two decades of the post-communist era from 1989 to 2010 saw the crystallization and development of a pluralistic and liberal restorative memory phase.

During this phase, a multitude of “frozen memories” of the pre-communist and communist past had entered the public sphere for the first time since 1945, and different memory agents, representing a variety of scholarly and ideological perspectives concerning the national past, began to be active without being subjected to political and social pressure or legal constraints by the state. Since the late 1990s, this phase became preoccupied with the most purged, neglected and shameful memo-

ries of the national past, namely, the memories of the dark past concerning the attitudes and treatment of Polish Jews and other ethnic and religious minorities such as the Lemkos by the majority – the ethnic Polish and Catholic population. And it is these memories which, since they were uncovered, have begun to be the topic of heated public debates, poignant commemorative practices, new artistic productions, as well as careful new studies by professional historians.

The latter has borne many salient fruits such as the first school of critical history writing about Polish society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The pluralistic restorative phase of historical memories reached its peak in the first half of the first decade of the third millennium, 2000–2005. Since 2010, it has gradually declined as



The Museum of World War II in Gdansk

PHOTO: JROEPSTORFF / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the main model of mnemonic practices in the state, although it has still been bearing important new fruits in scholarly works, historical education, remembrance sites and grassroots public history and commemorative projects.

The best examples of its achievements during the latter period are the Museum of the Second World War (*Muzeum II Wojny Światowej*) under the directorship of Paweł Machcewicz, (May 2008–April 2017), the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (*Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich*), (2013 until the present) and the European Solidarity Centre (*Europejskie Centrum Solidarności*) (2014 until the present), devoted to the history of the first Solidarity movement and anti-communist opposition in Eastern Europe.

**B**y late 2015, the pluralistic memory phase had been abruptly replaced by the current restorative phase of historical memory which, in fact, constitutes an assault on the former. The latter can be defined as a radical counter-revolution driven by a narrow, ethno-nationalist vision of mono-cultural and mono-religious Poland and its values, symbols and traditions,

manifested in a variety of forms ranging from mild to extreme.

Thus, the Poland of 2020 resembles a “bloody battlefield” over a vision of national culture, identity, public memory and history. The famous Orwellian statement of 1949, from his novel “1984”, “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past” appears to be the key slogan on the banners on this memory battlefield wherein 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish history constitutes the main target over which an aggressive war has been fought for the last five years since the double victory of the conservative and right-wing party, PiS (Law and Justice Party) in both the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2015.

### PiS's Narrative of the Past

Poland from 2015 to 2020 represents the case of a country in which the government in its intensive and systematic efforts to reshape memories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Polish society does not hesitate to launch a pretty systematic “zero-sum war” against scholarly research, national cultural institutions, social media and various NGOs that do not support its vision of

the national past and national future. The PiS government does not hesitate to put forward a single, hegemonic, anti-pluralistic and skewed master narrative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Poland in order to eradicate from the government-controlled public sphere knowledge of historical events and their interpretations of which it disapproves and condemns. The PiS's hegemonic single narrative of the past is forcefully disseminated throughout all government-controlled national institutions, mass media and social media. The heavy-handed re-writing of the political and social history of Polish society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century encompasses the following five key areas: 1) the communist era 1945–89; 2) the first Solidarity movement of the early 1980s; 3) the entire history of the Third Polish Republic after the fall of communism and the establishment of liberal democracy (1989–2015); 4) the history of the devastating impact of violent anti-Semitism on Polish Jews before, during and after the Holocaust; and 5) Polish society's relations with other ethnic and cultural minorities, and the Polish state's relations with neighboring countries.

**T**he main instrument in reshaping and enforcing the PiS's vision of the national past is historical policy (*polityka historyczna*) which, in the eyes of the PiS government, protects the Polish nation's dignity, honor and reputation from national dishonor, indignity and the loss of its international reputation.<sup>3</sup> *Polityka historyczna* aims to build and reinforce "national dignity and national feelings".<sup>4</sup> PiS's understanding of the concept of the nation follows the ethnic, collectivist model in which membership is believed to be naturally determined. Thus, in the popular imagination, the concept of the nation tends to be limited to ethnic Poles of Catholic origin defined as the "true" members of the Polish nation, though in the Preamble to the new Polish Constitution of 1997, the Polish nation is defined in a broader sense than Catholic.<sup>5</sup> Members of the PiS government and its core electorate tend to treat ethnic and cultural minorities as guests of this "true" ethnic Catholic Polish nation. Consequently, the PiS's historical policy aims to primarily protect the

ethnic Catholic Polish collective, past and present from being dishonored by those who are defined as "others" and "traitors" both within and outside the nation.

An interlinked major purpose of the PiS's intensive and systematic reshaping of the national past is to create a solid long-standing future – a populist authoritarian democracy, based on the collectivist, ethnic model of Polishness that would not allow for any political and cultural change, debate and opposing to official mnemonic practices. Of course, the rejection of debate lies in the nature of all ethnic collectivist nationalism. Democracy within this type of nationalism is always authoritarian and difficult to change.<sup>6</sup>

**A**ctually, the PiS government is not the only government in the region to draw on collectivist ethno-national, political and cultural traditions in order to rewrite the future along the authoritarian model of democracy. In fact, the PiS government has followed in the footsteps of the authoritarian government of Victor Orbán in Hungary, which, after taking power in 2008, has embarked on an illiberal "occupation" and "colonization" of the state and has replaced 1989 – the year of peaceful transformation from communism,<sup>7</sup> with 2008 being "year zero" in the history of post-communist Hungary.<sup>8</sup> In October 2011, after the election defeat, Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the PiS, openly promised that "the day will come when there will be Budapest in Warsaw".<sup>9</sup>

Since the PiS's victory in 2015, the PiS government has systematically attempted to replace 1989 with 2015 as "year zero" in the history of post-communist Poland by emulating the Hungarian model of reshaping public memory and society. In both cases, the bright future of the nation relies on the "full and final" implementation of the ethnic collectivist model of nationalism that does not permit freedom of thought and the proliferation of heterodox ideas and a pluralistic public memory of the national past in society<sup>10</sup> but, instead, is driven by exclusionary, illiberal and purifying policies directed at both the national past and contemporary society.

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Democracy within this type of nationalism is always authoritarian and difficult to change.

Germany  
Lithuania  
Belarus  
Ukraine  
Czech Rep.  
Poland  
Hungary  
Romania  
Bulgaria  
Turkey

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None of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) governments succeeded in the total and full implementation of their communist memory politics.

What key factors have led to the weaponization of the national past by the PiS’s governing political party during the third decade of post-communist Poland? What changes have occurred in the character of memory governance during the last three decades that have led to the PiS’s implementation of the “total counter-memory revolution of the national past”?

This article begins with a short overview of memory politics in communist Poland from 1945 to 1989, followed by a discussion about the main phases of Polish memory politics since the political transformation and the ascendancy of liberal democracy in Poland in 1989 until the present, paying particular attention to the key memory agencies, major events, debates and developments. However, given the broad scope of the subject, not all aspects of memory politics can be equally and fully treated in this paper.

### Key Agents and Key Problems of Memory Production

In general, during the communist era in the Polish People’s Republic (PRL), communist memory politics were characterized by manipulation, falsification, suppression and rejection of any events from the 20<sup>th</sup> century political, social and cultural history of Poland that clashed with the communist ideological interpretations of the past.

Yet, none of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) governments succeeded in the total and full implementation of their communist memory politics. In fact, they failed to conduct what historian Anna Wolf-Powęska calls “memory genocide” (*pamięciobójstwo*) in Polish society<sup>11</sup> because of three main memory agents: 1. the Catholic Church; 2. Radio Free Europe, and 3. the “private, underground memory banks” of multi-generational Polish families, particularly of the intelligentsia.

With the crystallization of the first Solidary movement in the early 1980s, a new, powerful and pluralistic agency of “underground and counter memories” emerged in the public sphere that aimed to produce and disseminate all memories of suppressed, falsified and erased

historical events from the pre-communist and communist past.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, one can agree with the thesis of anthropologist Rubie S. Watson who, in 1994, contended that socialist states such as the PRL failed to convince society of its interpretation of the past and that, as a result, alternative “underground memories” always existed and were kept alive.<sup>13</sup> This position holds true in Polish society with respect to public memories of the pre-communist and communist past, including the bloody events of the *Poznań* Protests of 1956 and the Polish Workers’ Strike on December 14–19, 1970. However, regarding the most shameful memories of the troubling relations with Polish Jews and other minorities before, during and after the Second World War, this position is false. These shameful memories were not kept alive in the “underground memory bank”, except for some individual members of Polish cultural elites and intellectual milieus in Poland and abroad,<sup>14</sup> the left-wing democratic section of the first Solidarity movement of the 1980s, and Polish-Jewish survivors themselves. In fact, as argued by Michael Steinlauf in a pioneering study of the memory of the Holocaust in Poland, the official communist way of dealing with the memory of the Holocaust – an expulsion of it – ultimately reflected a popular need.<sup>15</sup> It was socially acceptable and accepted.

The troubling memories of the relationship between the Polish non-Jewish majority and Polish Jews before, during and after the Holocaust would become the main subject of highly emotional debates about the national past starting from the 1990s up to the present. They are still at the center – at the heart – of Polish debates about Polish democracy and the model of Polishness that Poles should endorse. In some ways, from the beginning, they have acted as the main trigger of the intense and systematic memory politics advocated by the PiS party and its right-wing ethno-nationalist allies, and continue to remain one of the main subjects of contention in the PiS’s official *historical policy*, and among the more extreme right-wing, ethno-nationalist and fascist groups, including political parties and youth





International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Holocaust. Celebrations in Warsaw, January 2020.

PHOTO: RAFAL ZAMBRZYCKI

movements, historians and pundits, as well as members of the so-called Closed Church. Currently, such groups and organizations are engaged in disseminating a radical version of the new, falsified Holocaust “anti-memorialization” by reworking the pre-1989 anti-Jewish tropes to suit the current political, cultural and social needs. The radical right wing social and mass media such as *wSieci*, *w Do Rzeczy*, *wPolityce.pl*, *Nasz Dziennik* and *Gazeta Polska* are conducting an “assault” on the memory and memorialization of the Holocaust that had arrived, only after 1989, from the West in Poland and other post-communist countries.

### The Jedwabne Debate and the Rise of Memory Politics

In 2000, anti-Jewish narratives forcefully reemerged in the self-defensive position adopted by the right-wing conservative and ethno-nationalist camp, in the most salient national debate of the first three decades of the post-communist period. This debate was triggered by the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross’s book *Neighbors* in Polish in May 2000.<sup>16</sup> The book set out a definite counter-memory to all narratives of the post-1945 accepted, biased, hegemonic historical canon of Polish-Jewish relations and Polish society during

World War Two, manifested in both communist and anti-communist models of remembering. Crucially, it was Gross’s *Neighbors* that influenced the mission, aims and strategies of the PiS’s historical policy that had been fully developed during the Jedwabne Debate in the early 2000s as a fearful response to Gross and his supporters’ vision of retelling the national past of WWII anew, in a critical fashion. Gross’s camp was represented by politicians and members of cultural elites of left-wing and liberal provenance and members of the Open Catholic Church, who advocated coming to terms with the difficult past in Polish-Jewish relations by exposing anti-Semitism before, during and after the Holocaust. Their actions gave a green light to new history research, educational projects and commemorative events and remembrance practices devoted to deceased Polish Jews on both local and national levels, in which the wrongdoings to the Jewish minority on the part of individuals and groups within Polish society is fully acknowledged.<sup>17</sup>

### The Boom of Memories and their Agents, 1989–2000s.

The Poland of 1989 experienced what historian Padraic Kenney called a “carnival of revolution” in communist Eastern Europe.<sup>18</sup> The carnival

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It led to public outbursts of fear among the right-wing conservative Solidarity camp over Germany's wish to rewrite the history of WWII.

was marked by the explosion of a plethora of “underground memories” into the public sphere. The peaceful political transformation and the ascendancy to power of liberal democracy in the early 1990s opened the free flood of “suppressed and falsified memories” of the past and allowed for various skeletons from the national closet to be exposed to daylight for the first time since 1945. From 1989, the communist version of the national past began to be swiftly expelled from all spheres of public space. Spectacular removals and the destruction of around 2000 monuments, commemorative plaques, street names and statues representing communist “bearers of memories”, such as figures of Lenin and obelisks featuring the Red Army, had taken place throughout Poland by 1993.<sup>19</sup> However, in the eyes of the PiS party and its allies, the process of removal of “communist heroes/anti-heroes” had not been completed in the 1990s. As a result, the issue of removal of “communist heroes” re-emerged as a part of emotionally-charged debates during the tenure of the first PiS government (2005–2007) and most recently during the current rule of the PiS government (2015–2020).

With the removal of communist monuments, new monuments, plaques and street names primarily dedicated to the non-communist and anti-communist heroes of national political, military and cultural history began to appear in the 1990s. Many monuments associated with World War II and commemorating the heroic struggle of the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) were erected in Warsaw.<sup>20</sup> On the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising of August 1, 1944, the first monument to the Uprising was inaugurated in the capital, marking a major shift in the official memorial culture of the early post-communist era.

**T**he early 1990s witnessed the emergence of new and important memory agents representing civil society in different parts of the country, such as Lublin-based Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN, Sejny-based Pogranicze<sup>21</sup> and Olsztyn-based Borussia,<sup>22</sup> which are still active. For these institutions, memory work has been explicitly regarded as crucial to building

a democratic, forward-looking, pluralistic Poland that educates about and commemorates its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural past. From the beginning, these memory agents have addressed the need for a dialogue with local ethnic, cultural and religious minorities and neighboring states. They are supported by grants from different institutions and foundations, as well as by private donors.

**A**nother important memory agent representing civil society, which was officially established in February 1990, is the Warsaw-based Centre Karta (Ośrodek Karta), originally founded as an underground organization by Zbigniew Gluza in 1982 during the period of Martial Law. From the outset, Centre Karta focused on documenting anti-communist activities, Soviet repression and Polish society during the communist Poland (PRL), as well as on strengthening democracy and tolerance. Its mission has been to “discover, safeguard and popularize history as seen from the perspective of the individual. Thus, we ensure that the past becomes the basis for understanding, for building a civic community and encouraging reconciliation. And that is how we repair the future.”<sup>23</sup> The Centre Karta currently has an archive comprising 1500 meters of documents, testimonies and memoirs, 6000 oral histories, 400,000 photographs, as well as precious private archival collections of leading deceased Polish intellectuals such as Jacek Kuroń, Hanna Świdawa-Ziemia and Jerzy Jedlicki, among others.

The Centre Karta also has its own publishing house and runs innovative and interactive educational historical programs on a wide range of topics such as the impact of the Second World War on individuals, totalitarianism, Polish-German and Polish-Jewish relations, discrimination and xenophobia. These programs are directed at youth, educators and the broader public. It cooperates with the Russian Memorial Foundation and the German Foundation Memory, Responsibility and Future, and is a member of the Platform of European Memory and Conscience. The Centre Karta is supported by annual grants from foreign and local

foundations, donations from local government sources, gifts and sales of publications, as well as archival and publishing services.<sup>24</sup>

## The Emergence of Splits in the Memorialization of the National Past

In spite of the emergence – in the early 1990s – of salient memory agents representing civil society, the restoration of the “frozen anti-communist and non-communist memories” from the communist period was not a smooth, unifying and unified process.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it could not have been smooth and unifying, given the growing divisions in the post-Solidarity movement between the radical right-wing, conservative faction representing the vision of Catholic and exclusivist ethno-nationalist Poland on the one hand, and on the other, the left-wing and moderate center camp of the Solidarity movement, representing the civic model of the Polish state.

The new developments on the map of the post-Solidarity political elites of the early 2000s, namely, the emergence in 2001 of the PiS from the Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS) and the establishment of the main rival of PiS, the Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO) as a split party from the liberal democratic Freedom Union (*Unia Wolności*, UW) the same year, further intensified the process of discordance and contestation over the national past.

The troubling political and social developments in Germany in the spring of 2000, particularly calls by the radical organization of the German Federation of Expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen*, BdV) to hold Poland and the Czech Republic responsible for the forced migration of Germans in the aftermath of WWII from Poland and then Czechoslovakia, and the BdV's desire to veto accession to the EU by Poland and the Czech Republic, touched a raw nerve in Polish-German relations. It led to public outbursts of fear among the right-wing conservative Solidarity camp over Germany's wish to rewrite the history of WWII.<sup>26</sup>

This fear would continue into the first two decades of the third millennium. As a result, the national past, particularly the memories of WWII, have become defined as “precious gold”, which must be fought over until the end.

This, in turn, has heavily influenced the ways in which the PiS and different radical right-wing domestic parties have evaluated the painful process of coming to terms with the difficult past in relation to Polish Jews before, during and after the Holocaust. A good illustration of this fear are the various pronouncements of Jarosław Kaczyński. In contrast to his tragically deceased brother Lech, he is known for articulating the extreme version of this fear: “We are faced with a situation where in the next few decades or less World War II will be understood as two great crimes: the Holocaust, in which Poles had allegedly taken part, and the expulsion of the Germans [from Poland in 1945], in general, the outcome of Polish actions.”<sup>27</sup>

An article called “Hitlers europäische Helfer beim Judenmord,”<sup>28</sup> published on May 18, 2009 in the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, in which the authors astutely discussed various official and non-official collaborators and voluntary perpetrators in the murder of six million Jews in Nazi occupied Europe, caused a similar reaction on the part of Jarosław Kaczyński and his political camp. In one voice, they accused *Der Spiegel* of foisting guilt for the Nazi crimes off onto others and announced that Germans had no right to refer to Hitler's European helpers.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, the competing and divisive remembering of the national past, including the central aspects of contemporary history – the end of communist Poland and the first Solidarity movement – were already visible in the early 1990s. The first post-communist government headed by Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki advocated the so-called policy of the thick line (*gruba kreska*), which oriented itself towards the future and building a forward-looking, pluralistic Poland based on the matrix of civic nationalism. Mazowiecki's government was against launching a witch hunt – a total vetting (*lustracja*) of people who had been compromised by the communist governing powers of the past. However, the right-wing conservative section of the post-Solidarity movement did not accept the thick line policy of Tadeusz Mazowiecki and accused the left-wing Soli-

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parity movement of being compromised – of being pink, (*różowi*) – by the cooperation with the communist camp and the post-communist political elite – the so-called red ones, (*czerni*).<sup>30</sup>

In January 1993, representatives of the right-wing conservative Solidarity faction led by Jarosław Kaczyński burnt an effigy of Lech Wałęsa – the legendary leader of the first Solidarity movement – in front of the Belweder Palace, the residence of the Polish President in the capital.<sup>31</sup> In this act, the future black legend of the first Solidarity movement was initiated and was followed by a chain of accusations against Wałęsa as being “a traitor and communist collaborator” allegedly known as “Bolek, a secret communist agent”. As part of creating the black legend of the first Solidarity movement, the right-wing Solidarity camp raised questions about the importance of the Round Table negotiations of 1989 with the last communist government, which led to the peaceful and negotiated end of the PRL.

The vicious attacks on Wałęsa and the Round Table negotiations of 1989 increased in the 2000s and continue up to the present day.<sup>32</sup> They have resulted in a radical version of the history of the first Solidarity movement from which Lech Wałęsa, as the leader of the movement and national hero, has been erased. As part of the installment of radical mnemonic practices pertaining to the most recent history, the PiS has also created its own version of the first two decades of the post-communist era, claiming that the Third Polish Republic (1989–2015) was still widely tainted by communism and it was 2015, when the PiS came to power, that marked the rebirth of a truly independent Poland, known as the Fourth Republic.<sup>33</sup>

The 1990s witnessed growing discontent among the right-wing conservative faction of the Solidarity movement. This was directed at the ways in which the left wing and liberal democratic elites were dealing with the national past.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to the right-wing conservative Solidarity camp, the liberal democratic elites did not want to pursue a “hardcore” historical policy and did not define the memorialization of the national past as being a central

element of governing the country. The liberal democratic camp focused on the economic transformation of the state and on building a forward-looking, pluralistic and civic nation that would confidently join the European Union. Thus, it also accepted the Western requirement for the memorialization of the Holocaust as an international and European project that serves to educate civil society. It did not impose censorship on historical research, left the writing of history in the hands of professional historians and viewed professionalism as the key criteria for funding historical research. It also gave the green light to collaborative international historical projects about the mutually difficult past in Polish-German and Polish-Ukrainian relations, which continued throughout the first decade of the third millennium.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in 2008, a group of Polish and Russian historians convened to discuss difficult aspects of Polish-Russian relations.<sup>36</sup> The latter discussions began to be increasingly challenging as a result of the implementation of the Russian hardcore memory politics by Vladimir Putin, which led to an outburst of old resentments in Poland and Russia in the post-2010 period.

During the peak period of work on the new Polish Constitution in the mid-1990s, a symbolic continuity with the traditions and values of the pre-modern, multi-cultural and multi-religious Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Second Republic (1918–1939) was acknowledged and invoked as a precious past enriching a future democratic Poland. Thus, this symbolic continuity was inscribed in the new Polish Constitution of 1997, signed on July 16 that year by the (then) President of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who represented the post-communist political camp which, given its dark communist past, wished to concentrate on the future.

## The Crystallization of Historical Policy

At the same time, the right-wing Solidarity political movement found intellectual support for its vision of making the national past the central element of governing the country and reshaping national memories along the ethno-nationalist



model of a mono-cultural and mono-religious Poland. It was the milieu of conservative historians and philosophers such as the late Tomasz Merta, Marek Cichocki and Rafał Matyja who, in 1995, created the intellectual think tank, the Warsaw-based Club of Political Critics (WKPP), devoted to the development of historical policy. These young conservative thinkers, who were mostly born in the 1960s, became closely linked to Lech Kaczyński, who won the presidential election of 2005.

**T**hus, the period from 1997 to 1998 witnessed a crucial moment in the development of the concept of historical policy as a vital instrument to be used by the future PiS governments. Three years after the party was created by Jarosław Kaczyński and his twin brother Lech Kaczyński, the concept of historical policy was articulated during the meeting of the Political Council of PiS in the same month, during which Jarosław Kaczyński called for “modern historical policy and for greater state patronage of culture.”<sup>37</sup> The same month, historical policy was endorsed in the first program of the PiS party of September 2004. The key ideas behind the hardcore version of historical policy was the creation of a “sacred” monumental, affirmative history of a national past that cannot be debated, on the one hand, and on the other, the eradication from the public sphere of critical history writing and critical patriotism described by advocates of historical policy as the *unpatriotic pedagogy of shame* (*pedagogika wstydy*).<sup>38</sup> Therefore, in the conceptualization of national history as proposed in the hardcore historical policy, there is no room for portraying complexities, nuances and paradoxes. Instead, moral assessment of events, people and their deeds is prescribed as an integral part of commemorating the past, history writing and historical education.

The swift and spectacular establishment of the modern Warsaw Uprising Museum (MPW) in the capital, which opened on August 1, 2004 on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Uprising, was the first realization of the right-wing conservative vision of historical policy.<sup>39</sup> The museum was created thanks to a decision by Lech Kaczyński,

who was mayor of Warsaw at the time (2002–2005) and the conservative intellectuals belonging to the Club of Political Critics (WKPP). The museum commemorates the heroic yet doomed efforts of the Home Army in its lonely battle against the German occupants and the immense human and material losses in the city during the Uprising. It also fulfills a symbolic act of de-communization of the capital.<sup>40</sup> Since its opening, the museum has become a popular site that attracts around half a million visitors each year, which illustrates that there is a grassroots “hunger” for affirmative, heroic and martyrological accounts of the national past.<sup>41</sup>

### **A Growing Hunger for the History of the National Past**

Throughout the first decade of the third millennium, this “hunger” appeared to be organically growing in different sections of Polish society, including members of football clubs and their fans. Ordinary Poles from different generations began playing the role of “spontaneous memory agents” through their active participation in the popular annual singing of patriotic songs dedicated to the memorialization of the Warsaw Uprising of August 1, 1944 and to Poland regaining its independence on November 11, 1918. Singing old patriotic songs together and participating in the popular reconstruction of historical events are not only good illustrations of a bottom-up growing interest in the national past, but also of a strong emotional attachment to that past in Polish society. Unsurprisingly, during the same decade, polls conducted by the well-known statistical institute Pentor in 2005 and 2009, respectively, indicated that Polish society was still not yet ready to accept the model of critical history that challenges soothing national memories.

According to the first poll conducted a few months before Poland joined the European Union in May 2004, only 3% of those who were interviewed felt ashamed about the negative attitudes towards Jews in World War II.<sup>42</sup> The name *Jedwabne* was not mentioned in any of the statements. The second poll conducted on the eve of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War II confirmed the results garnered

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Polish nationalist political party, National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR*). Anniversary Day demonstration in Kraków, Poland, 2007.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



A demonstration by the *Unia Polityki Realnej (UPR)* in support of the *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (IPN; Institute of National Remembrance)* held in Kraków, Poland, 2007. PHOTO: DACZOR / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

five years earlier.<sup>43</sup> According to this poll, 73% of those interviewed were convinced that Poles had many reasons to be proud of their conduct during the war, including rescue activities extended to Jews, whereas only 17% stated that there were wartime events about which Poles should feel ashamed. Though Jedwabne was recalled by many of the interviewees, there was widespread cognitive confusion about the real perpetrators of the massacre; many of the interviewees attributed the crimes to the Germans and not to the local Poles. The poll also showed

that Poles still consistently perceived the war as being the embodiment of Polish collective martyrdom and heroism. With this background in mind, we can better understand the social acceptance of memory politics aimed at recreating a predominantly positive portrayal of the collective and the strikingly persistent difficulty of integrating both the positive and negative aspects of national history together – integrating the difficult past into the national history of WWII.<sup>44</sup>

## Shift to the Extreme right

Importantly, by the end of the first decade of the third millennium, the social “hunger” for an “affirmative soothing national past” became partially hijacked by extreme radical ethno-nationalist and home-made fascist organizations such as the Polish National Community (*Polska Wspólnota Narodowa*), National Revival of Poland (*Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski, NOP*), All-Polish Youth (*Młodzież Wszechpolska*) and its co-founded National Movement (*Ruch Narodowy*) and National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR*).

All these organizations became active memory agents of a radical version of the Polish national past with strong xenophobic, anti-Semitic and racist aspects. From 2009 to 2012, an increasing fragmentation and radicalization of the memory landscape in mainstream public life began to appear as a result of the flood of public events and activities staged by these radical groups on the streets and in social media. The radicalization of the memory landscape particularly manifested in the emergence and increasing social acceptance of new “national heroes” such as the extremist anti-communist National Armed Forces (*Narodowe Siły Zbrojne, NSZ*) during the Second World War and its direct military and ideological continuator between 1945 and 1950 – the anti-communist underground military camp whose members became to be known as the so-called “cursed soldiers”. From the beginning, the memorialization of NSZ as a “chief collective hero” has been a clear indication of the fundamental aim of the radical ethno-nationalist historical counter-revolution:

to make an extreme version of the national past a central part of the mainstream memory of the national past.<sup>45</sup> The “cursed soldiers” were discovered in the 1990s by Warsaw-based memory activities chaired by a radical right-wing journalist Leszek Żebrowski and linked to a new social memory agent, the association of the Republican League (*Liga Republikańska*) and the right-wing NGO, We Remember.<sup>46</sup> But, the 2000s also saw the emergence of serious scholarly works dedicated to the anti-communist underground and its partisans by first class professional historians such as Rafał Wnuk.<sup>47</sup>

The critical history works of Wnuk and others about the activities of the anti-communist military units in early post-war Poland reveal the complexities of their history, including the key dark aspects – large scale theft, the murders of Catholic Poles and ethnic cleansing, resulting in the murder of Polish Jews, Lemkos and Belarussians by certain units and military commanders.<sup>48</sup> However, at the same time, the legend of the “cursed soldiers” as the forgotten “national heroes” without any blemishes on their past increased as a result of the writings of right-wing historians and memory activists. Ironically, their idea that the “cursed soldiers”, as victims of the communist regime, deserved to be institutionally commemorated was accepted by most of the political elites, including the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (*Socjusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD*) in the Polish parliament on February 3, 2010 and led to the establishment, in 2011, of an official National Day of Remembrance of the Cursed Soldiers on March 1.<sup>49</sup>

**T**he deep political crisis in the country in the aftermath of the plane crash in Smoleńsk on April 10, 2010, which resulted in the deaths of 95 representatives of the Polish political and cultural elite, including Polish President Lech Kaczyński and his wife Maria, no doubt played a pivotal role in the finalization of the official recognition of the cursed soldiers. It was the successor to President Lech Kaczyński, Bronisław Komorowski, from the Civic Platform, who signed the law making the

National Day of Remembrance of the Cursed Soldiers an official “sacred day” in the Polish national calendar.<sup>50</sup>

Hence, by late 2015, it appears that the “cursed soldiers” and their direct predecessor, the NSZ, including the military unit of the Holy Cross Mountains Brigade (*Brygada Świętokrzyska*), which openly collaborated with Nazi Germany, have begun playing the same parallel role in the national pantheon as the Home Army, the chief mainstream “collective national hero of WWII”. This is another unprecedented act that reveals the internal shift to the radical right on the part of the PiS government and state institutions.

**A** good, current illustration of radical attempts to reshape the national pantheon is the wide range of annual national and local commemorative events for the “cursed soldiers” which, for example, lasted not just one day, but for two months between late February and early April 2017,<sup>51</sup> the erection of six hundred monuments, memorial sites and plaques related to the “cursed soldiers” throughout the country, as well as annual educational activities about the “cursed soldiers” for youth, both in the country and abroad.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the most disturbing symbolic example of this process was the laying of a wreath on the tomb of the soldiers of *Brygada Świętokrzyska* on February 17, 2018 by the PM, Mateusz Morawiecki, during his official visit to Munich in Germany.<sup>53</sup> Not only does this indicate a radicalization of the current PiS’s historical policy, but it actually demonstrates the ongoing merger of this historical policy with the extreme ethno-nationalistic vision of the national past, advocated by the political parties and movements in contemporary Poland that have clear domestic fascist, xenophobic and racist roots in the pre-1939 period. This situation constitutes another unprecedented and dangerous development, not only for history writing and mnemonic practices of the national past, but also for the state and civil society in Poland.

In comparison to the inter-war period in Poland from 1918 to 1939, in which the post-1930s right-wing conservative Sanacja government at-

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The year 2000 witnessed the emergence of the Institute of National Memory, a public institution, ‘born in pain’ to deal with the legacies of the communist past.

tempted – not always successfully – to contain the radical fascists groups in order to prevent street violence, the post-2015 PiS government encourages radical organizations such as the above-mentioned Polish National Community, National Revival of Poland, All-Polish Youth and National Radical Camp to be an integral part of mainstream political life, including engaging in commemorations of “sacred” national events. Already in the early 2010s, these organizations have been empowered by being given a platform in the major annual national celebrations of Poland’s Day of Independence on November 11 to celebrate the reinstatement of sovereignty after the end of World War I in 1918,<sup>54</sup> and in conducting their own commemorations of the Warsaw Uprising of August 1, 1944. At no point after their revival in the post-1989 period did any of these organizations condemn and dissociate themselves from their pre-1939 fascist, racist and anti-Semitic ideological heritage. However, the current Ministry of Culture and National Heritage unquestionably supports these radical groups by offering them grants for the development of their exclusivist mono-religious and mono-cultural vision of a national past and national future that is tainted by racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. For example, thanks to a grant in 2020 from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the newly established Digital Library of National Thought (*Cyfrowa Biblioteka Myśli Narodowej*), “a self-proclaimed organization of young people who want to serve their homeland”, launched a new, free online library of pre-1939 works by various authors, including many publications by Roman Dmowski – the founding father of Polish modern ethnic collective nationalism and the core pre-1939 ethno-nationalist party and movement, the National Democrats, known as *Endecja*. This online library offers no critical commentaries about its contents.<sup>55</sup>

### The Rise of the IPN – the Ministry of Memory

The year 2000 witnessed the emergence of the Institute of National Memory, a public institution, “born in pain”<sup>56</sup> to deal with the legacies of the communist past. After a long political

struggle, the act on the IPN of December 28, 1998 was passed in the Polish parliament and enabled the establishment of the IPN, modelled on the successful German Office of the Federal Commissioner for Preserving the Records of the State Security Services of the former GDR, also known as the Gauck Institute. However, in contrast to the German institute on which it was modelled, the IPN was given much more power and became a “national institution of great significance to the people in power and those who want to come to power”.<sup>57</sup>

Not only was the IPN made the official “guardian” of the secret archives of the communist secret services, but also the official “investigator” and “prosecutor” of two sets of major crimes: firstly, the Nazi German crimes of WWII from 1939–1945 against the Polish state and the Polish nation and, secondly, the newly defined communist crimes against Polish citizens or on Polish soil between September 17, 1939 and July 1990. By the late 2000s, 70% of the cases under IPN investigation comprised communist crimes, 20% comprised Nazi crimes and 5% of the crimes were defined as crimes against peace, humanity and war crimes, mainly committed by Ukrainian fascist and ethno-nationalist military forces against Polish citizens, ethnic Poles and Polish Jews in Volhynia from 1943 to 1944.<sup>58</sup>

**A** part from collecting, preserving and managing the archives of the communist security services and investigating and prosecuting Nazi and communist crimes, from the outset, the IPN has been engaged in research and education about the history of Poland between 1939 and 1990, and disseminating its finding in both Poland and abroad. Thus, its third major function has been to generate knowledge. In order to fulfil this function, a special department – the Public Education Office – was created within the IPN structure. The IPN also has its own impressive publishing house. One of its most popular journals is the IPN Bulletin (*Biuletyn*), aimed at popularizing and shaping historical awareness among youth and educators. In the second half of the 2000s, 12,000 copies of the Bulletin from the 15,000 in





Memorial of the Jedwabne massacre.  
PHOTO: SYLWESTER GÓRSKI

circulation were distributed free of charge to every type of secondary school in Poland.<sup>59</sup>

Since 2006, during the short rule of the PiS (2005–2007) after its first double victory in the presidential and parliamentary election in 2005, the IPN was also put in charge of lustration, for which another separate department, the Lustration Office, was formed, employing 10% of the entire IPN staff. Towards the end of the first decade of the third millennium, the IPN already enjoyed the privileged status of being the wealthiest public national institution with a budget that steadily increased from 84 million złotych to 213 million złotych.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, the internationally renowned POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews had a budget of 37,601,688 złotych in 2015, 34,108,589 złotych in 2016 and 35,190,048 złotych in 2017.<sup>61</sup> In 2020, the IPN budget reached the huge sum of 405 million złotych and increased to 423 million złotych, a budget that no other academic center or national institution could match.<sup>62</sup>

In 2012, Dariusz Stola compared the IPN to “the Royal Navy dominating the sea” of research on 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish history and warned that the IPN was engaging in the

unhealthy practice of maintaining a monopoly over historical knowledge in the state.<sup>63</sup> However, Stola still then evaluated the IPN as a “Ministry of Memory”, not in an Orwellian sense, but as a self-centered, cost inefficient and overblown bureaucratic institution.<sup>64</sup> However, since late 2015, we can talk about the IPN as being an institution that is on the path to becoming a “Ministry of Memory” in the original Orwellian sense.<sup>65</sup>

A good illustration of this troubling process is the reshuffling and removal of in-house historians from the Department of Research and Education who do not agree with the PiS’s historical policy and do not implement it in their own research. Another example is the outright dismissal of a number of renowned historians such as Krzysztof Persak, a key expert on the history of Jedwabne and the Second World War.<sup>66</sup> Because of intellectual and ethical disagreements with the top-down implementation of the PiS’s historical policy, many other first-class historians have also left the IPN at different times since 2006.

The process of purifying the guardians of national memory in the institution is well captured by historian Marta Kurkowska-Budzan,

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The more extreme members of the LPR condemned the IPN findings and launched personal attacks against Kieres.

who argues that the IPN replaces historians who represent “a critical historiography” with “young missionaries who undertake their tasks with a passion and fully identify themselves”<sup>67</sup> with historical policy.

**H**owever, during the early period of its activities from 2000 to 2005, the IPN was characterized by a plurality of voices about historical knowledge of the national past among its staff. During the leadership of its first Chairman, Leon Kieres, (June 30, 2000–December 29, 2005), the IPN was an apolitical national institution with a mission to serve the whole nation by investigating and popularizing knowledge about different aspects of the contemporary history of Poland.

Thus, the IPN was committed to the vision of a forward-looking, pluralistic and liberal Poland that also aimed to come to terms with its dark past. For this reason, it also enjoyed an international reputation as an excellent professional institute, particularly for conducting a painstaking historical and forensic investigation into the Jedwabne massacre, described in Gross’s *Neighbors*.

However, representatives of the PiS and then PiS’s parliamentary allies, Liga Polskich Rodzin (League of Polish Families LPR) and Self-Defence (*Samoobrona*), were extremely critical of the IPN’s diligent investigation into Jedwabne – “the Polish heart of darkness” – led by the IPN’s legal and historical staff. The more extreme members of the LPR condemned the IPN findings and launched personal attacks against Kieres.<sup>68</sup> The most severe personal attack took place on February 27, 2002 during a session of the Polish parliament during which Kieres delivered a report on IPN activities conducted between the summers of 2000 and 2001, the period of peak events with respect to the Jedwabne massacre. He was called a “servant of the Jews” and was blamed together with (then) President Aleksander Kwaśniewski for “stoning the Polish nation.”<sup>69</sup>

Under the rule of the PiS between 2005 and 2007, the IPN, with its newly appointed chairman, the late Janusz Kurtyka (1960–2010), became both an instrument and an implement-

er of historical policy, weaponizing the field of history for ideological goals. As a result, between 2005 and 2010, the pluralistic perspective on research on the contemporary history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Poland began to be systematically replaced from the IPN’s mission by a monolithic agenda of promoting “one and only one true version” of Polish history in which there was no room for any critical perspective. Prior to being appointed the President of the IPN, Kurtyka was involved in memory activism dedicated to the unknown heroes of the anti-communist underground from 1945–1950. As Chairman of the IPN, Kurtyka emphasized the memorialization of the anti-communist underground, the “cursed soldiers” and opposed critical history writing pertaining to the ethnic cleansing of Slavic minorities in the aftermath of WWII and to various acts of mistreatment and hostilities towards Polish Jews by members of the Polish ethnic/Catholic majority.

A clear illustration of the latter is the official IPN’s reaction to Jan T. Gross’s next book to be published after *Neighbors – Fear* – which first appeared in English in the summer of 2006 and then in Polish on January 11, 2008.<sup>70</sup> *Fear* analyses the well-known massacre of Polish Jews in the early post-Holocaust period, the pogrom in Kielce on July 4, 1946, and discusses the etiology of the early post-war anti-Jewish violence. The book became the subject of serious critical academic discussion by Polish historians outside the ethno-nationalist school. However, the champions of historical policy reacted to *Fear* with extreme hostility and unequivocally rejected it. The IPN launched an exhaustive promotion of the Polish translation of Marek Jan Chodakiewicz’s *Po Zagładzie. Stosunki polsko-żydowskie 1944–1947*<sup>71</sup> as a “counter-memory” work to and official “whip” at Gross and *Fear*, one that would block the book’s positive reception and unmask its alleged anti-Polish character.

**I**n the response to *Fear*, the IPN initiated a skillful new strategy of marginalizing critical history writing about Polish-Jewish relations before, during and after the Holocaust. This strategy is characterized by three main ele-



ments: The first is to present and promote a central “counter-memory” to counterbalance the “dark history”; the second is to systematically underscore the “feel-good soothing history” of which Poles can be proud of concerning their relations with the Jewish community. The latter has particularly been achieved through the political manipulation of the history and memory of Polish rescuers of Jews, a subject that deserves a comprehensive study and that could be essential in educating civil society. However, at present, the history of rescuers has been almost entirely hijacked by the right-wing conservative political elites.

As a result of the implementation of PiS’s historical policy, various local and national initiatives devoted to the history and memory of the Polish rescuers of Jews have begun to appear in the country, regrettably without addressing “the grey zone” aspects of the rescue: rescuers for profit, rescuers-abusers and rescuers who turned into perpetrators of Jewish charges, as well as denunciations and killings of “dedicated rescuers” by their co-patriots for sheltering Jews, the post-1945 hostilities towards the rescuers and their families, as well as the rescuers’ silence about their wartime deeds in their own local communities.

The opening by the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, on March 17, 2016<sup>72</sup> of a new museum devoted to the memory of the remarkable Ulm family in Markowa, Southern Poland, as well as the creation of an annual institutionalized National Day of Remembrance of Poles Rescuing Jews, established on March 24, 2018, on the initiative of President Andrzej Duda, are two examples, among many, of the ways in which the history of Polish rescuers is currently being weaponized in memory politics and presented in a skewed form, devoid of nuance and wartime and post-war complexities and contexts.<sup>73</sup>

**T**he third element of the IPN’s strategy to eradicate critical history of Polish-Jewish relations is the orchestration of a wide “against campaign” in the mass and social media and in institutes of higher education in both Poland and abroad. A parallel milieu of both experts

and members of non-elites – strong supporters of PiS’s historical policy – participates in the “against-campaign” as guardians of moral knowledge about the national past. The latter group also defines itself as offended and dishonored Poles by Gross. In the aftermath of the heated debate about *Fear*, the IPN’s three-element strategy would be employed as a model for opposing and “shutting down” any future important historical works belonging to the critical history writing about Polish-Jewish relations and for reinforcing and sustaining “soothing and comforting memories of the national past solely”.

Under its current chairmanship of Jarosław Szarek (2015 to the present day), the IPN has fully implemented this model.<sup>74</sup> One of its best recent examples is the official IPN reaction to the collective two volumes edited by Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, (“Night without End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland”) and published in early 2018. *Dalej jest noc* analyses the everyday struggles and survival rates of Polish Jewish fugitives on the Aryan side in the Polish countryside in nine districts.

The 1700 page study reveals that 60% of the Jewish fugitives were denounced or killed by their Christian neighbors during the last phase of the Holocaust from 1943 to 1945. In order to oppose these devastating findings, the IPN extensively promoted a 72-page critical review of *Dalej jest noc*, produced in 2019 by a young in-house historian called Tomasz Domański. In September 2020, the IPN launched and promoted Domański’s 110-page report, *Korekty ciąg dalszy* – a second response to the response of the editors-in-chief and individual authors of *Dalej jest noc* towards Domański’s first report of 2019.<sup>75</sup> Simultaneously, to counteract the scope of the dark past exposed in *Dalej jest noc*, the IPN orchestrated a variety of conferences, seminars and exhibitions in Poland and abroad devoted to the history of Polish rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust.<sup>76</sup>

In addition, an international conference, organized in Paris between February 20 and 22, 2019 to present the latest findings of the



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Polish critical history school of the Holocaust to French academia was interrupted by a loud “against campaign” group that had accused the conference’s participants of “spreading lies about Poland”.<sup>77</sup>

### “Polish Holocaust Laws”

Interestingly, two weeks prior to the publication of *Dalej jest noc*, the infamous “Polish Holocaust Laws,” first stipulated in September 2016 by Zbigniew Ziobro, Minister of Justice and Prosecutor General, were approved by the Polish parliament on January 26, 2018 in the midst of national and international protests.<sup>78</sup>

The “Polish Holocaust Laws,” aim to prosecuting anyone who uses the false term “Polish concentration camps” and accuses the Polish collective of complicity in the Holocaust. The laws initially included the most controversial Article 55a, including the stipulations concerning criminal prosecution, but also the exemption of scholarship and the arts from criminal prosecution.<sup>79</sup>

The provisions of Article 55a were repealed on July 27 2018, but the controversies over the laws continue, since under the new amendments, individuals, including scholars and artists, can be subject to the civil courts for undermining the reputation of the Polish nation.<sup>80</sup> The ongoing civil court case against the chief editors of *Dalej jest Noc*, Barbara Engelking and Jan Z. Grabowski, is an intellectually, legally and morally troubling example of how the Polish Holocaust Laws, in their revised form, could be used against professional historians who do not subscribe to the PiS’s historical policy.<sup>81</sup>

Such civil court cases are initiated and financially sponsored by a Warsaw-based right wing and conservative memory agent, (Anti-Defamation League of Polish Name) (*Reduta Dobrego Imienia-Polskiej Ligi przeciw Zniesławieniom*), a non-governmental organization, under the chairmanship of Maciej Świrski. In its manifesto, the League sees itself as an advisory group to the current Polish government. Its main mission is to protect “sacred” affirmative memories of the national past against internal traitors and external enemies, including foreign authors and newspapers, who have allegedly engaged in

slandering the good name of Poland”.<sup>82</sup>

Overall, the current PiS government, assisted by the League, the IPN and its offspring organisation, the Pilecki Institute founded in 2017, and other radical memory agents, exercises the repressive erasure of the field of critical history of Holocaust studies by applying legal measures and denying funding to academic institutions and individuals that conduct research into the dark national past. The prescriptive forgetting of Jedwabne and other dark aspects of Polish-Jewish relations before, during and after the Holocaust are presented as a necessary measure in the interests of the entire Polish collective – and are therefore publicly acknowledged as being an essential part of historical policy to serve the Polish nation.

### Circles of PiS’s Counter Revolution

The academic community of historians and other scholars and artists have been watching with concern, if not tribulation,<sup>83</sup> various past and present attempts and future plans on the part of the PiS to reshape the humanities and the production of historical knowledge in higher education and the history curriculum at schools,<sup>84</sup> national cultural institutions and various NGOs – agents of civil society.<sup>85</sup>

The PiS government does not hide the fact that it financially supports institutions of higher education that propagate a “radical ethno-nationalist Catholic ideology” such as the Higher School of Social Culture and Media in Toruń, an institute of journalism created by the radical Father Tadeusz Rydzyk. By mid- 2019, Rydzyk’s multiple “empire” was awarded 214 million złotych of state support from a wide range of government sources.<sup>86</sup>

In this way, the PiS invests in building a strong parallel community of experts – a “counter-intellectual elite” – that would faithfully endorse and implement its hardcore historical policy.<sup>87</sup> In 2017, as part of building a parallel “counter civil society” to the liberal civil society, the PiS launched the National Freedom Institute – Center for Civil Society Development (*Narodowy Instytut Wolności – Centrum Rozwoju Społeczeństwa Obywatelskiego*),<sup>88</sup> whose

main mission is to financially support such a parallel “counter civil society.” In August 2019, the National Freedom Institute distributed the first grants for around 86 million Polish złotych among 154 organizations. The recipients of substantial grants in the first round included two pro-PiS media foundations and a pro-PiS organization devoted to defending the good name of Poland.<sup>89</sup> Among other awarded organizations, 20 were directly linked to the ruling politicians, 14 were linked to PiS allies and 24 were affiliated with the Church and Catholic values.<sup>90</sup>

**T**he PiS government also does not hide the fact that it withdraws grants from institutions of higher education, such as the Warsaw-based Center for Holocaust Studies, that are engaged in critical history writing.<sup>91</sup> The denial of grants, the dismissal of directors of important cultural institutions and the appointment of loyal individuals to replace them, as well as not renewing employment contracts, such as was case of Dariusz Stola, the first Director of the POLIN Museum, have become key punitive methods in the PiS’s “zero-sum war” against the pluralistic liberal vision of the national past, its memory agents and its achievements in mnemonic practices.

The PiS’s dismissal in early April 2017 of Paweł Machcewicz as the first Director of the Museum of the Second World War and the subsequent full merger of the Museum with the Museum of Westerplatte and the War of September 1939 is another example of the use of harsh punitive methods against national memorialization institutions and professional historians who do not propagate the “Polono-centric” and ethno-nationalist vision of the Second World War.<sup>92</sup> In addition, the PiS appears to be launching another potentially successful strategy of disseminating its historical policy by creating parallel institutions to the institutions that it is unable to take over.

The launching of the *Muzeum Getta Warszawskiego* (the Warsaw Ghetto Museum) on February 28, 2018 can be viewed as a spectacular application of this latter strategy. At a press conference on March 7, 2018, Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński, introduced the new

museum as “a museum of brotherly love and solidarity between the two nations,” Poles and Jews.<sup>93</sup> On the same day, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews opened its temporary exhibition, *Stranger at Home (Obcy w domu)*, showing the devastating impact of anti-Semitism on Polish Jews in 1968 and beyond. Some commentators are in no doubt that the Warsaw Ghetto Museum has been conceived as a counter-memory institution to the POLIN Museum. Though the official opening of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum is scheduled for 2023, the institution has already launched five temporary exhibitions and educational programs for high school teachers.

## Conclusion

Overall, various developments in the last three decades show that both elites and non-elites in the country share an increasingly strong interest and emotional attachment to the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Poland. The Polish memorialization landscape is bulging in the number of memorial sites, a variety of commemorative practices on local, regional and national levels, and has many new special commemorative dates in the national calendar.

The number of visits to the hundreds of new museums created after 1989 reached 38 million in 2018.<sup>94</sup> However in Poland, in contrast to Germany, civil society has been increasingly marginalized in the memorialization practices under the rule of PiS government, which wants to maintain full control of memorialization governance. Thus, the memorialization landscape has become heavily fragmented and divisive.

**L**ike other countries of the post-communist region, the national past in contemporary Poland is still considered “precious gold” in the current culture wars over national identity and politics. Contemporary Poland has transformed itself into a “bloody battlefield” between various versions of its national past. This national past cannot be easily overcome as it is pivotal to the current process of defining national identity and the shape and condition of the Polish state.

In the post-1989 period, two major phases of memorialization of the national past have de-

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veloped in the country and, at present, we can talk about the existence of the “memory bank” and mnemonic practices that belong to the pluralistic liberal restorative phase that originated after 1989 and the “memory bank” of the anti-pluralistic, illiberal restorative phase that fully emerged with the ascendancy to power of the first PiS government in 2005. Since 2015, the anti-pluralistic, illiberal restorative phase has gained the upper hand over the former and, in fact, has committed all its efforts to the marginalization, if not, the full-scale eradication of the former from the public sphere – for good.

**T**here is no doubt that in the current climate of the “zero-sum war” over national memories, the management of memorial sites, museums, educational and research facilities has increasingly become the subject of heavy-handed memory politics. Unlike in Germany, the current PiS government agencies appear to be intervening on a mass scale in memory management in order to achieve their goals by applying a variety of punitive measures such as the withdrawal of funding, the dismissal of directors, the censorship of exhibitions– and by legal means. Since 2015, the PiS government has openly proclaimed a counter-revolution of memory practices that aim to permanently marginalize the liberal democratic elites, its civil society and its pluralistic, liberal democratic memorialization culture.

To accomplish the counter-revolution, the PiS government is engaged in the systematic building of a parallel “counter national pantheon of heroes”, a parallel “counter community of scholars/intellectual elites” and parallel “counter civil society”. At present, the PiS’s counter-revolution of the memorialization of the national past along the traditions of an exclusivist ethno-national, mono-religious and mono-cultural Poland, is not considered to be finalized. It is an ongoing project aiming at reshaping all aspects of national culture and history. The PiS’s counter revolution is also directed at reshaping the mass media, judiciary and educational systems. One of the key and unprecedented dangers of the PiS’s current memory politics is the radical shift to the right

and a gradual merger with the most radical version of the ethno-nationalist past advocated by extreme fascist parties and organizations with a pre-war xenophobic, anti-Semitic and racist heritage. This actually means opening a Pandora’s box of radical memories and radical memory practices that could not only significantly influence future memorialization governance and its practices, but it could also significantly influence the future condition of the Polish state and society.

**T**he PiS and its radical allies are particularly targeting the eradication of the Polish school of critical history writing on the difficult past in Polish-Jewish relations. At the same time, they are feeding on Holocaust memorialization practices for the purpose of acquiring new models and strategies for developing their own version of remembrance of the national past.

On the one hand, this process indicates the increasing rejection of the Western model of memorialization of the Holocaust as a fundamental event in European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>95</sup> and, on the other, a skillful exploitation of this Western model of commemoration, in terms of both its forms and its content. It reveals that the cultures of apology and repentance – the two pillars of European frames of the 1990s – of commemorating the Holocaust as a pivotal event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are rejected by the right-wing conservative ethno-nationalist post-communist elites. Thus, the future memorialization of the Holocaust based on the Western model of the 1990s might be substituted by a new home-based memorialization/ (anti)-memorialization of the Holocaust.<sup>96</sup>

That the new home-grown ethno-nationalist version of the (anti)-memorialization of the Holocaust is filled with new-old modified anti-Semitic narratives and anti-Jewish tropes. In many ways, it constitutes the counter-memorialization of the Western model of memorialization practices of the Holocaust of the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>97</sup> This is not only an alarming development in Poland, but also in other post-communist countries in which local radical ethno-nationalists have embarked on

similar strategies of reworking their national history of World War II and the Holocaust in order to emphasize their own victimhood and “collective innocence” with regard to the treatment of their respective Jewish and also other minorities.<sup>98</sup>

At this point, we do not know how the current PiS counter-revolution of memory governance will play out and when it will end. No doubt, the following troubling global developments such as the culture of post-truth and “alternative knowledge”, increasing social and psychological fear caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, a shift to the political right in the Western world, including the USA, and the rise of extremism on the left and right, might influence future memory politics and memorialization culture and its practices in Poland. For now, what we can be certain about is that heavy-handed memory politics as a tool of a total counter revolution will remain a major feature of PiS’s governed Poland. ●

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  - 42 See the reports on the respective polls of 2004 and 2009: "Duma i wstyd Polaków – sondaż," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, September 17, 2004, <http://serwis.gazeta.pl/kraj/2029020,34317,2289803.html> (accessed 22 September 2004). See Wojciech Szacki, "Poplątana pamięć o II wojnie," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 18, 2009, [http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,75248,6936373.html?sms\\_code](http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,75248,6936373.html?sms_code) (accessed August 22, 2009), and Wojciech Szacki, "Sondaż. Nasza дума i wstyd," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 19, 2009, [http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,75248,6940133.html?sms\\_code](http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,75248,6940133.html?sms_code) (accessed August 22, 2009).
  - 43 See Wojciech Szacki, "Poplątana pamięć o II wojnie," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 18, 2009, [http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,75248,6936373.html?sms\\_code](http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,75248,6936373.html?sms_code) (accessed August 22, 2009), and Wojciech Szacki, "Sondaż. Nasza дума i wstyd," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 19, 2009, [http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,75248,6940133.html?sms\\_code](http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,75248,6940133.html?sms_code) (accessed August 22, 2009).
  - 44 Not only history books but also documentary films reveal the difficulty of integrating the memory of the dark past in Polish-Jewish relations into the collective memory and historical consciousness. See, for example, Jagna Wright's and Aneta Naszynka's film flyer and their four-part documentary film, *The Other Truth: A film about the unknown side of Polish-Jewish relations* (UK/Poland, Lest We Forget Productions LTD, 2005). Despite presenting some interesting documentary footage and interviewing serious scholars of Polish-Jewish relations, the film is full of old narratives of Polish-Jewish relations repackaged in a new format. Some of the individuals interviewed as experts on Polish-Jewish relations, such as Ewa Kurek, offer statements that are spiced with anti-Jewish prejudice.
  - 45 On the dangers of the radicalization of *polityka historyczna* to the right and its transformation into an instrument of the implementation of the exclusivist ethno-nationalist vision of Poland, see Maciej Janowski, "Polityka historyczna: między edukacją historyczną a propagandą", in Nowinowski, Pomorski and Stobiecki eds. *Pamięć i polityka historyczna*, 235.
  - 46 On the rise and the development of the legend of the cursed soldiers, see Kornelia Kończal, "The Invention of the 'Cursed Soldiers' and Its Opponents: Post-war Partisan Struggle in Contemporary Poland", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 34, issue. 1, 2020, 67-95. Also see Kończal, "The Invention".
  - 47 Rafał Wnuk ed., *Atlas polskiego podziemia niepodległościowego 1944-1956*, (Warsaw: IPN, 2007)). On the new uncritical and ideologically-driven historical writings about the "cursed soldiers, see, for example, the critical works by Rafał Wnuk, "Wokół mitu 'żołnierzy wyklętych'" *Przegląd Polityczny*, no. 136, July 21, 2016, <http://przegladpolityczny.pl/2016/10/08/wokol-mitu-zolnierzy-wykletych-rafal-wnuk/> (No longer available online); and Robert Jurszo, *Żołnierzy wyklętych* wymyślono w 1993 r. OKO.press, March 1, 2017; <https://oko.press/zolnierzy-wykletych-wymyslono-1993-r-oko-press-przedstawia-historie-politycznego-mitu/> (accessed May 2, 2017)
  - 48 On this subject, see also Marta Kurkowska-Budzan, *Antykomunistyczne podziemie zbrojne na Białostoczyźnie. Analiza współczesnej symbolizacji przeszłości*, (Kraków: Tow. Wydawnicze "Historia Iagellonica", 2009).
  - 49 In early 2011, 406 of 417 members of the Polish parliament, including the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*, SLD) voted in favour of a law honoring the "heroes of the anti-communist underground who fought, armed or otherwise, for the independence of the Polish state, its right to self-determination, and the fulfillment of the democratic values of Polish society". Cited in Kończal, "The Invention". 74.
  - 50 Kończal, "The Invention". 74-75.
  - 51 Kończal, "The Invention". 82.
  - 52 For an official endorsement of the heroic and uncritical accounts of the "cursed soldiers" in current historical educational programs, see Bartłomiej Kuraś,

- Ministerstwo organizuje wakacje z “wyklętymi” dla dzieci rolników. Na wyraźne życzenie prezesa Kaczyńskiego, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 20, 2016, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,20105697,ministerstwo-organizuje-wakacje-z-wyklętymi-dla-dzieci-rolnikow.html#ixzz49VbZf1p6> (accessed June 8, 2017) See also information about the commemoration of the National Day of the Cursed Soldiers among Polish youth in London in March 2020, <https://gdansk.ipn.gov.pl/pl2/aktualnosci/90768,Narodowy-Dzien-Pamieci-Zolnierzy-Wyklętych-na-Przystanku-Historia-Londyn-1-marca.html> (accessed 10 October 2020).
- 53 For a short review of Morawiecki’s tribute to the Holy Cross Mountains Brigade when he attended the Munich Security Conference in Germany, see Boyan Stanislavski, Polish PM honours Gestapo collaborators, website *Barricade*, <https://en.barricada.org/morawiecki-gestapo/> (accessed October 11, 2020). For a critical reaction from Polish Chief Rabbi, Michael Schudrich to his invitation by the PiS government to participate in an official commemorative event dedicated to the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holy Cross Mountains Brigade in August 2019, see, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190807-polands-top-rabbi-slams-honours-accused-nazi-collaborators> (accessed October 12, 2020).
- 54 For coverage of the marches by the radical ethno-nationalistic organizations in Warsaw to celebrate Poland’s Day of Independence on November 11, see Matthew Day, “Nationalist protesters disrupt Poland Independence Day events,” CNN, November 12, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/12/europe/poland-warsaw-nationalist-march/index.html> (accessed September 8, 2019); and Megan Specia, “Nationalist march dominates Poland’s Independence Day,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/11/world/europe/poland-nationalist-march.html> (accessed September 8, 2019).
- 55 See the website of the *Cyfrowa Biblioteka Myśli Narodowej*, <https://cbmn.pl/aktualno%C5%9Bci.html> (accessed October 5, 2020).
- 56 See Dariusz Stola, “Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance: A Ministry of Memory?” in Aleksei Miller and Maria Lipman eds. *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, ed. (Budapest: CEU Press, 2012), 45–58. Also see Stola, “Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance”.
- 57 Kurkowska-Budzan, “Power, knowledge and faith discourse”, 171.
- 58 Stola, “Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance,” 50.
- 59 Kurkowska-Budzan, “Power, knowledge and faith discourse”, 172.
- 60 For the annual IPN reports, see <https://bip.ipn.gov.pl/bip/przedmiot-dzialania> (accessed October 5, 2020) and also on the IPN’s annual budget <https://bip.ipn.gov.pl/bip/kontrola/27,Kontrola.html> (accessed October 5, 2020).
- 61 I am indebted to Dariusz Stola, a former Director of the POLIN Museum (2014–2019) for providing me with details about the POLIN Museum’s budget.
- 62 On the IPN’s budget for 2020, see, “Na sejmowej komisji finansów o zwiększeniu budżetu dla IPN o ok. 80 mln zł”, *Dzieje.pl* <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/na-sejmowej-komisji-finansow-o-zwiekszeniu-budzetu-dla-ipn-o-ok-80-mln-zl> (accessed October 12, 2020).
- sejmowej-komisji-finansow-o-zwiekszeniu-budzetu-dla-ipn-o-ok-80-mln-zl (accessed October 12, 2020).
- 63 Stola, “Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance”, 55.
- 64 Stola, “Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance”, 54.
- 65 On the first decade of the IPN’s activities and agendas, see also the important collective volume by Andrzej Czyżewski et al. *Bez taryfy ulgowej. Dorobek naukowy i edukacyjny Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej, 2000–2010*, (Łódź, Biblioteka Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej, 2012)
- 66 Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, eds. *Wokół Jedwabnego*, vol.I – *Studia*, vol.II – *Dokumenty*, (Warsaw, IPN, 2002)
- 67 Kurkowska-Budzan, “Power, knowledge and faith discourse”, 184.
- 68 For his commitment to finding the objective truth and his civic responsibility, as well as for describing the Jews of Jedwabne as his compatriots, Kieres was described as the “Polish Quisling.” See, for example, Witold Starnawski, *Jak IPN chroni narodową pamięć*, *Tygodnik Głos*, January 26, 2002, <http://www.gloscom.pl/archiwum/2002/004/06publ/publ.htm> (accessed February 23, 2002). In an interview for *Dziennik Bałtycki*, June 15, 2001, Kieres said: “I treat ‘Polishness’ as a civic category and thus treat the Jews of Jedwabne as my compatriots.” Cited in *Polityka*, June 30, 2001: 88.
- 69 For an anti-Kieres report, see Maciej Walaszczyk, “Kieres w narożniku,” *Nasz Dziennik*, March 1, 2002, <http://www.naszdziennik.pl/stcodz/polska/20020301/po32.shtml> (accessed March 2002, no longer accessible). One of the first attacks against Kieres took place in June 2001. Andrzej Reymann, editor-in-chief of the bimonthly *Najjaśniejsza Rzeczpospolita*, asked Lech Kaczyński, the Prosecutor General of Poland, to begin an investigation into the conduct of Leon Kieres and Radosław Ignatiew; see Iwona Boratyń, “Prokurator tuszował?” *Słowo Ludu*, May 17, 2002: 2.
- 70 Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 2006); and idem, *Strach. Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moralnej zapaści* (Kraków, Wydawnictwo Znak, 2008).
- 71 Marek J. Chodakiewicz’s monograph *After the Holocaust* was published in a Polish translation as *Po zagładzie. Stosunki polsko-żydowskie 1944–1947* by the IPN in early 2008. On January 11, 2008 in Warsaw, the IPN organized the first official launch of Chodakiewicz’s *Po zagładzie*. In addition, the Polish Studies and European Studies Program at Columbia University also invited and sponsored Chodakiewicz’s lecture “Poland in America’s Crooked Mirror: The Case of *Fear*,” which took place on February 18, 2008.
- 72 Andrzej Duda, Wystąpienie na uroczystości otwarcia Muzeum Polaków Ratujących Żydów im. Rodziny Ulmów w Markowej, March 17, 2016, <http://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/art,33,wystapienie-na-uroczystosci-otwarcia-muzeum-polakow-ratujacych-zydow-im-rodziny-ulmow-w-markowej-.html> (June 7, 2017).
- 73 See, <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/art,931,narodowy-dzien-pamieci-polakow-ratujacych-zydow-pod-okupacja-niemiecka-pleng.html> (accessed October 13, 2020).

- 74 For a critical analysis of the changes in the IPN in early 2016, see historian Andrzej Friszke's article, "Nadchodzi IPN Szmaciaków," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 4, 2016, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,19861842,prof-friszke-nadchodzi-ipn-szmaciakow.html> (Accessed June 8, 2017); and Adam Leszczyński, "Nowy IPN – ministerstwo prawdy i policja historyczna," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, March 25, 2016, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75968,19820231,nowy-ipn-ministerstwo-prawdy-i-policja-historyczna.html> (accessed June 8, 2017).
- 75 Tomasz Domański, *Korekta obrazu? Refleksje źródłoznawcze wokół książki Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, (Warsaw, IPN, 2019). For a critical response to Domański by the editors-in-chief and the authors of separate chapters in *Dalej jest Noc*, see *Nieudana Korekta obrazu* <https://www.holocaustresearch.pl/index.php?mod=news&show=377&template=print> (accessed October 6, 2020). For the subsequent response of Domański *Korekty ciąg dalszy*, released on September 14, 2020 at a press conference at the Warsaw headquarters of the IPN, see <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/dla-mediow/komunikaty/109880,Korekty-ciag-dalszy-briefing-prasowy-IPN-na-temat-publicacji-dotyczacej-stosunku.html> (accessed October 26, 2020).
- 76 See, for example, the IPN website for information about events dedicated to the history of rescuers of Jews in the spring of 2019, <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/1789,The-Polish-National-Day-of-Remembrance-of-Poles-Rescuing-Jews-under-German-Occup.html>, (accessed October 5, 2020) and in 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja/narodowy-dzien-pamieci-polakow-ratujacych-zydow> (accessed October 5, 2020).
- 77 See, for example, the report of one of the conference's participants, Jacek Leociak, "Prof. Jacek Leociak o zajęciu w Paryżu: Czy mogą przekonać do czegośkolwiek bojówkarzy?" *OKO.press*, February 26, 2019, (accessed October 14, 2020) and one of the convenors of the conference Judith Lyon-Caen, *Les historiens face au révisionisme polonais*, April 5, 2019, [https://www.fabula.org/actualites/les-historiens-face-au-revisionisme-polonais-par-j-lyon-caen-laviedesideesfr\\_90425.php](https://www.fabula.org/actualites/les-historiens-face-au-revisionisme-polonais-par-j-lyon-caen-laviedesideesfr_90425.php) (accessed October 14, 2020).
- 78 The Polish Holocaust Laws" generated a wave of criticism in scholarly communities. See, for example, the statement by the Academic Council of the Historical Institute at the University of Warsaw, published in the weekly *Polityka* on February 28, 2018, 3.
- 79 Aleksandra Gliszczyńska and Wojciech Kozłowski: *Calling Murders by Their Names as Criminal Offence – a Risk of Statutory Negationism in Poland*, *VerfBlog*, 2018/2/01, <https://verfassungsblog.de/calling-murders-by-their-names-as-criminal-offence-a-risk-of-statutory-negationism-in-poland/> (accessed October 6, 2020).
- 80 *Ustawa z dnia 27 czerwca 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucie Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary* [Act of June 27, 2018 on changes of the act on the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes Against the Polish Nation and of the act on the responsibility of collective entities for acts prohibited under penalty], [orka.sejm.gov.pl/opinie8.nsf/nazwa/2663\\_u/\\$file/2663\\_u.pdf](http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/opinie8.nsf/nazwa/2663_u/$file/2663_u.pdf) (accessed August 25, 2018).
- 81 On the position of Jan Grabowski towards the Polish Holocaust Laws, see <https://archiwumosiatsynskiego.pl/alfabet-buntu/jan-grabowski/> (accessed October 5, 2020); see also Krzysztof Burnetko, "Proces prawdę ci powie," *Polityka*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1801510,1,proces-prawde-ci-powie.read> (accessed October 5, 2020).
- 82 For the League's activities, see its official website, <http://www.anti-defamation.pl/rdiplad/kim-jestesmy/> (accessed October 15, 2020).
- 83 An interview with art historian Maria Poprzeczka by Jakub Bodziony, "Kto nie był w Licheniu, to nie wie, w jakim kraju żyje," *Krytyka Liberalna*, no. 613, October 6, 2020, [https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2020/10/06/poprzeczka-bazylika-w-licheniu-jerzy-kalina-papiez/?fbclid=IwAR0RgISQtHJIbdV\\_C0qWMDnLOWrsPJ14cn\\_YgLEpCn8dUpne4iYtO3VoHrk](https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2020/10/06/poprzeczka-bazylika-w-licheniu-jerzy-kalina-papiez/?fbclid=IwAR0RgISQtHJIbdV_C0qWMDnLOWrsPJ14cn_YgLEpCn8dUpne4iYtO3VoHrk) (accessed 17 October 2020) and the protest of the PAN Committee of Legal Studies, of October 15, 2020, against the inclusion of weak and non-academic publications on the official academic list by the Minister of Higher Education.
- 84 During the PiS's Congress, "Poland, a Great Project" held on October 10, 2020, Vice Minister of Culture, Magdalena Gawin, announced new planned reforms of the humanities at the institutions of higher education, aiming at creating their own system of academic values and traditions and rejecting the academic humanities standards of the West. This is a clear example of how hardcore PiS memory politics might re-shape the humanities at the university level.
- 85 On the subject of current attacks on civil society and the attempt at replacing the elites, see Stanley Bill, "Counter-Elite Populism and Civil Society in Poland: PiS's Strategies of Elite Replacement," *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures*, September 16, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0888325420950800?fbclid=IwAR0i7kRmMEGmP-C6BdLvs-gxSvqXxbaOMXTucRWkDxNrtUgPzLLvmvf0qFA> (accessed October 11, 2020). Also see Bill, "Counter-Elite Populism".
- 86 Bianka Mikołajewska, "214.158.441 złotych z publicznych pieniędzy na 'dzieła' o Rydzyka," *OKO.press* (July 23, 2019), <https://oko.press/214-238-441-zl-na-dzieła-o-rydzyka/> (accessed October 10, 2020).
- 87 On building parallel scholarly elites, see also Kornelia Kończal, "Mnemonic Populism: The Polish Holocaust Law and its Afterlife", *European Review*, 2020, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340873458\\_Mnemonic\\_Populism\\_The\\_Polish\\_Holocaust\\_Law\\_and\\_its\\_Afterlife](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340873458_Mnemonic_Populism_The_Polish_Holocaust_Law_and_its_Afterlife) (accessed October 14, 2020).
- 88 Ignacy Dudkiewicz, "Narodowy Instytut Wolności. Czy jest się czego bać?," *ngo.pl* (September 25, 2017), <https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/narodowy-instytut-wolnoscici-czy-jest-sie-czego-bac/> (accessed October 10, 2020).
- 89 Reported in the Bill, "East European Politics". 12.
- 90 On a critical assessment of the distribution of the first pool of grants, see the Bill, "Counter-Elite Populism",



- (11–13 online access); Dominika Sitnicka, “Za pół miliona złotych “będziem Polakami”. Absurdy z listy grantów Narodowego Instytutu Wolności,” *OKO.press* (August 15, 2019), <https://oko.press/za-pol-miliona-zlotych-bedziem-polakami-absurdy-z-listy-grantow-narodowego-instytutu-wolnosci/> (accessed October 10, 2020) and Anna Dąbrowska, “Miliony dla fundacji i stowarzyszeń związanych z PiS,” *Polityka* (August 19, 2019), <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1919166,1,miliony-dla-fundacji-i-stowarzyszen-zwiazanych-z-pis.read> (accessed October 10, 2020).
- 91 The affirmation of “moral historical knowledge” as inscribed in historical policy has led to the PiS’s introduction of a new system of awards for scholarly publications in the humanities and social sciences that equates journals devoted to the promotion of historical policy with the recognized top peer-reviewed journals in the humanities and social sciences.
- 92 On the drastic intellectual changes to the permanent exhibition at the Museum of the Second World War after the takeover of the institution by the PiS, see Estera Fliieger, “Muzeum lepiej omijać szerokim łukiem”. Co-minister Gliński zrobił z pamięcią o II wojnie światowej,” *Oko.press*, April 2, 2020, <https://oko.press/co-min-glinski-zrobil-z-pamieciami-o-ii-wojnie-swiatowej/> (accessed October 10, 2020). However, on September 15, 2020, the first Director of the Museum, Paweł Machcewicz, and his team of professional historians Piotr Majewski, Janusz Marszałec and Rafał Wnuk won a court case against the current directors of the Museum in a civil court in Gdańsk. This means that the current Director needs to stop showing a militarist film, “Niewyciężeni”, in the 18<sup>th</sup> section of the permanent exhibition, which originally contained an anti-war message. See, the report, Estera Fliieger, “PILNE! Film IPN musi zostać usunięty. Jest wyrok w procesie o wystawę w Muzeum II Wojny Światowej”, *Oko.press* October 15, 2020, [https://oko.press/pilne-film-ipn-musi-zostac-usuniety-jest-wyrok-w-procesie-o-wystawe-w-muzeum-ii-wojny-swiatowej/?fbclid=IwAR19jEhVrvfhBtpb0QTAutPFncYMtp9o42e1Ve9k46-W\\_\\_2P6MYnifqO9zY](https://oko.press/pilne-film-ipn-musi-zostac-usuniety-jest-wyrok-w-procesie-o-wystawe-w-muzeum-ii-wojny-swiatowej/?fbclid=IwAR19jEhVrvfhBtpb0QTAutPFncYMtp9o42e1Ve9k46-W__2P6MYnifqO9zY) (accessed October 16, 2020).
- 93 See Adam Leszczyński and Ola Gieczys, “Gliński tworzy muzeum getta, ‘symbol braterstwa i solidarności polsko-żydowskiej’”. Ma być konkurencją dla POLINU, *Oko.press*, 11 marca 2018, <https://oko.press/atak-polin-niemozliwy-glinski-tworzy-wiec-muzeum-getta-polsko-zydowskiej-milosci-braterstwa/> (October 10, 2020).
- 94 See interview of Bartosz Bartosik, “Prof. Stola: Muzeum uczy samokrytycyzmu”, *Więź* June 2020, <http://wiesz.com.pl/2020/06/21/prof-stola-muzeum-uczy-samokrytycyzmu/> (accessed October 10, 2020).
- 95 On the Holocaust as a fundamental event in European political cultures, see, for example, Dan Dinner, “Restitution and memory: the Holocaust in European political cultures,” *New German Critique* vol. 90 (2003): 36–44; and Klas-Göran Karlsson, “The Holocaust as a problem of historical culture: theoretical and analytical challenges.” In Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander eds., *Echoes of the Holocaust: Historical Cultures in Contemporary Europe*. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003), 18.
- 96 According to historian Timothy Snyder, the current PiS vision of World War II is in “an implicit alliance with Russian memory politics.” See Timothy Snyder, “Poland vs. history,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 3, 2016, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/05/03/poland-vs-history-museum-gdansk/> (accessed September 15, 2019).
- 97 For a systematic study of the developments of the Western model of memorialization of the Holocaust in post-communist Europe between the 1980s and 2010, see John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic eds. *Bringing the Dark Past to Light in Postcommunist Europe*. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).
- 98 On the problem of whitewashing the Holocaust in post-communist Europe in the post-2015 period, Jelena Subotić, Yellow Star, Red Star: *Holocaust Remembrance After Communism* (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2019); Robert Rozett, “Distorting the Holocaust and whitewashing history: toward a typology,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 13(1), 2019, 23–36; and Michlic, “The return of the image of the Jew as Poland’s threatening other”.



# Contemporary History Discourses after Thirty Years of Memory Policy

by János M. Rainer

**T**he article discusses the current position of Hungarian historiography towards the role of the recent history of Hungarian identity and its relationship to domestic policy.

The democratic transition after 1989 contributed to a substantial change in historical scholarship through the dismissal of censorship, the opening of archives and the lifting of the ideological pressure on research. However, the change in the historical self-portrayal of Hungary after the fall of the communist regime was an element of the democratic transition. This article describes the process of the use of historical arguments in forming national attitudes and self-identity in several political circles in Hungary over the last three decades, with special attention being paid to the activities and ideas of Jozsef Antall and Victor Orban. The experiences of the 1956 revolution were

initially focused on as an anchoring point for national identity after the fall of communism. During the course of these years, the center of political attention shifted to the proposed anti-communist and anti-left-wing interpretation of Hungarian history from March 1944 to May 1990, and, as will be discussed later, it is aligned with the attitude of the ruling circles. The state's substantial initiatives in the field of the politics of memory in recent years are noteworthy, particularly in the early formation of the 1956 Institute (est. 1991), followed by the Institute of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (*XX. Század Intézet*, est. 1999), the House of Terror Museum (*Terror Háza Múzeum*, est. 2002), the Institute for Research on Communism (*Kommunizmuskutató Intézet*, est. 2011), the Institute for Political Transformation Research and Archive (*Rendszerváltás Történetét Kutató Intézet es Archivum*, RETÖRKI, est. 2013), the VERI-

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The change in the historical self-portrayal of Hungary after the fall of the communist regime was an element of the democratic transition.



The House of Terror Museum, Budapest, was established in 2002, and has become an attractive destination for people with national and conservative views.

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TAS Research Institute for History (*VERITAS Történetkutató Intézet*, est. 2013), the National Remembrance Committee (*Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága*, NEB, est. 2013) and the Institute of National Heritage (*Nemzeti Örökség Intézete*, est. 2013).

### Contemporary History Discourses in Hungary after 1989

The three decades since the beginning of democratic change in Hungary are a short time in the history of historiography. It is extremely difficult to draw up a report of these years that would cover all the issues of historiography – even about a relatively small country like Hungary.

The Hungarian historiography of this period was presented most comprehensively in mid-2012 by two young historians: Balázs Trencsényi and Péter Apor.<sup>1</sup> According to these historians, fundamental changes have taken place in this field, out of which, interestingly, the dissemination of theories and methods of social history were the most important. Hungary has also experienced an apparent generational change (but not revolutionary), as well as some methodological innovations of Western historiography. Nevertheless, this “guild”

of historians remained adamant in its strong objectivist attitude (which could even be called a *consensus*). Trencsényi and Apor considered not only academic but also public discourse. They noted that parallel to the process of de-ideologization of the former, the latter was being *re-ideologized*. In their opinion, *historians* participating in public discourse are, to a large extent, researchers who are poorly integrated into the “guild” or have been excluded from it, remaining on the periphery of the field and unanimously opting for a nationalist perspective. In their publication, the authors also asked the following fundamental question:

**It remains to be seen –and most probably will be the topic of the essay somebody will write in 2015 about the Hungarian historiography of the first decade of the third Millennium –whether this apparent plurality will have a *paideistic* value. That would entail the socialization of the old and new participants into a communicative culture where one has to accept the existence of radically divergent approaches and ideological directions and, what is more, learn to translate**

**them into one's language in order to utilize some of their findings. Alternatively, plurality might well lead to the formation of mutually exclusive sub-cultures, based on specific internal norms of selection and vehement emotions towards the "insiders" who seem to possess the truth, and towards the "uninitiated," who are at best "uninterested" or right-away "inimical." In this case, it is a further question whether it will be possible at all to retain the plurality of sub-cultures in the long run. It may happen at some point that some political elite in power will tilt the balance to such an extent that it will become possible to re-impose a certain ideological homogenization.**<sup>2</sup>

Trencsényi and Apor still then believed that Hungarian historiography:

**[...] will be able to reformulate itself in a way that valorizes multiplicity not only in terms of the usual post-Herderian (or post-modern) legitimation, according to which every national culture adds something to the completion of human culture, but in the other direction as well, realizing that a culture gets richer and more interesting, and opens more windows to the external world, by the multiplicity of the pasts, sub-cultures, and alternative intellectual canons it manages to incorporate.**<sup>3</sup>

**T**he following partial report is precisely an attempt to answer the question of whether this has actually happened. This will be achieved by presenting the general characteristics of the current situation – in which I analyze the politics of memory, taking into account its general assumptions, discourse and institutional dimension.

Before 1989, the elite of Hungarian historiography (namely, the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, several university departments and independent

renowned researchers at various institutions) was part of the cream of European science. This group lived on a small island of freedom, relatively less restricted in freedom of decision, information exchange and opinion forming. In such conditions, significant works were created, including the entire creative output of the authors; schools were formed, and personal and business contacts were established across borders.<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that this elite – taking into account its personal experience of scientific democracy – generally opted for liberal and democratic values. After 1989, the situation changed, and opportunities opened up for almost anyone who was able to take part in an unrestrained international and national debate. However, research on recent history was then in a particular situation. Like other Soviet bloc countries, there was *hardly any* historiography of the most recent scholarly history of Hungary before the fall of communism. Historians could not freely express their opinions or disseminate the results of their research (very few decided to publish in the underground circulation or in the West because, naturally, in this way they could write freely.) As a matter of fact, the entire field of science was established after 1989. Thus, in comparison with the previous situation, progress was evident.

1989 also appeared to be a fortunate year for many other reasons. Firstly, the Soviet-type system not only controlled and limited scientific and humanities research but paradoxically also gave it the status of a higher authority. Also, in the relatively liberal countries in this respect – Hungary and Poland – only research that was committed and “correct” from an ideological point of view was called “academic”. This perception was one of the levers of the communist modernization project. Now that they have been equipped with this kind of authority, recent history researchers have become among the main participants in democratic transformations. From 1988 to 1989, they could explain, without hindrance, the importance of the recent past for the emerging democracy.

Secondly, something else that happened in Hungary in 1989 was the “Archival Revolution”. The system's information monopoly ceased to

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exist and various archives became available. In the case of some research teams, the process was particularly challenging (and still is, as in the case of archives on the political police, foreign affairs, etc.). However, the fact that it was a breakthrough is undeniable. Having said that, the Act on Personal Data Protection of 1992 limited access to files. Thus, only “researchers” who had “a statement of support from an institution established to conduct academic research” gained rights. In this way, democratic legislation established – not in a very democratic way – a virtual hierarchy of professional researchers.

**A**fter 1989, historians of modern history (as well as researchers of other epochs) faced several challenges. One of these challenges concerned the rehabilitation and release of communicative memory<sup>5</sup> and multilateral interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Until the end of the Soviet system, mythological and cult stories existed about the national past. These stories had been inherited and passed on, but were not really widely disseminated; dissemination was happening, but only to a small extent; see György on this subject.<sup>7</sup> This traditional *collective* narrative concentrated on politics and nation – exploited, betrayed and innocent. The particular experiences of each participant or witness of events have finally come to the fore. After such a long silence, if there was no confrontation between the different experiences, it worked like lightning. Access to the memories of Western emigration was extremely limited and, in Hungary, only designated people from the group of authors responsible for presenting the official interpretation could comment on them. It was similar to publications in the underground circulation – although memoirs were placed there, they did not reflect the pluralism of collective memory. An example was the independent magazine *Beszélő*. One can read about the theoretical aspects of this situation in a Hungarian and international context in Kovács.<sup>8</sup> The second challenge was to undermine the authority of science, which was taken over from its predecessors and apparently strengthened during the period of political transformation. Who else,

other than historians, supported the cosmopolitan *communist vision of the past*? The third challenge was the need for methodological renewal. Epistemological doubts and skepticism also affected the scientific micro-community, who worked for the new historical legitimacy of democratic transformations. The challenges added up. “Research” in vain indicated, for example, that the trend which came to the fore was actually a memory shaped by the new situation and filtered through the experience of thirty years of Kadarism. The conflict had become inevitable.

The biggest challenge was the new politics of memory. In the last phase of the Soviet-type system, this policy had increasingly less influence on historiography. In fact, it was limited to the supervision of a few taboo issues. This was particularly the case in 1956 when the critical moment was not October 23, or even November 4, but actually December 1956, when the Kádár regime was set up. The official interpretation of 1956, canonical and carefully guarded, had stopped being willingly conceptualized already a few years after the revolution. Memorials, created within the framework of the former memory policy, were not numerous or perceived by everyone as *empty*. In 1989, the politics of memory began to strive for new aims, and the history of Hungary began to be explained in a more pluralistic way. The representatives of the political sphere reported a need for history – each of them for their own ends. Sooner or later, each of them began to claim exclusivity for their particular narrative. In Hungary, however, the use of history, the intensity of the phenomenon, and its dynamics have taken on a specific form – on the use of history.<sup>9</sup>

**T**he political elite is always keen to use historical arguments and this is also the case in Hungary. Among the forces that took part in the political changes, it was the liberal opposition to a Soviet-type system (the representatives of this trend defined themselves in the publications of the time as the “democratic opposition”) that primarily referred to the democratic chapters of recent Hungarian history. These chapters included modernization and

the anti-nationalist radicalism from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the democratic opposition of the Horthy era and, in particular, the democratic and left-wing ideological trends of the post-war period (particularly the thoughts of István Bibó, whose “discovery” is a merit of the democratic opposition) and 1956. The popular nationalist opposition trend originated precisely in the opposition to Horthy’s rule and, for a long time, it appeared that it would adopt the democratic traditions of the periods after 1945 and 1956. It also appeared that it would contribute to the development of an everyday discourse necessary for undertaking collective actions and achieving common goals. The symbolic space of 1989 was dominated by history, including the memory of the revolution and uprising of 1956.

However, the shared history soon came to an end. In the new democracy, the participants of public life took a different view of the need for historical legitimacy. They built their identity unevenly based on a common, historicizing language – and even used different stories in its construction. When the first law on the historical significance of the events of 1956 was drafted in the new democratically elected parliament, the seemingly common politics of memory turned out to be fractured. The winners of the election, the leaders of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), overlooked the name of Imre Nagy in the text of the resolution. In doing so, they made it clear that they rejected the leftist interpretations of the revolution and its symbolic leader (who was a communist). The differences became even more pronounced during the disputes over the coat of arms of the Republic of Hungary and national holidays. Instead of the so-called “Kossuth Coat of Arms” from 1956, they opted for a coat of arms with a crown that was in force until 1944, and August 20 was nominated for the status of a public holiday, equal to both March 15 and October 23. This meant that the focus shifted from the commemoration of the late-modern democratic and independence movements to an emphasis on the thousand-year-old historical continuity of the Hungarian state, within which the issue of democratic emancipation could best be

emphasized. The new Prime Minister, József Antall, was a historian by education, so it can be assumed that this turn of events was the result of a conscious decision.

**A**ntall made it possible – without any exceptional successes – to take up the issue of the vetting of members of parliament and officials, as well as reparations for the victims of communism, but was not very active in other areas of the politics of memory. Despite various attempts, he did not change the institutional shape of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA). Instead, he respected the autonomy of universities, the effect of which was that university staff did not change for some time. The archives of the Communist Party (1948–1989) were nationalized, but the remnants of the former party archives and Party History Institute were transformed into a research institute of recent history, only moderately linked to the Hungarian Socialist Party. The only newly established institution that was dedicated to research into contemporary Hungarian history was the 1956 Institute (1991). The establishment of the 1956 Institute proved the unique role that the memory of the revolution played during the period of political changes. The second new institution entirely related to the name of George Soros, who also supported the 1956 Institute. The Open Society Archives were established in 1995 within the framework of the Central European University, which has since become a significant research institution and archive of contemporary history, using modern methods in its work.

In the first years after the fall of communism, the strongest opposition to national conservatives was the liberal side of the political scene. The liberals attempted to develop an alternative vision of the past in which a clear emphasis was placed on the opposition and critical activities against the Soviet system (which the conservative side tried to present as unimportant at the time). At that time, the socialists were passive in this respect for obvious reasons – many of their leaders came from the second or third row of the elite of Kádár’s time. After winning the 1994 elections, the socialists made several

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gestures (the party leader and Prime Minister Gyula Horn ostentatiously placed a wreath on the grave of Imre Nagy) but left the politics of memory to their coalition partners, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). From then on, the national conservatives began to emphasize their anti-communism, which until then was just one of the elements of their eclectic politics of memory. When the Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ), formerly a liberal-alternative group – which at the time was changing its point of view to a national-conservative one – won the elections in 1998, its leader, Viktor Orbán, partially drew on Antall’s achievements. The thousand-year-old Hungarian statehood had once again become the center of the politics of memory, rhetoric and symbolism. From 2000 to 2001, a real ceremony was conducted in which the crown of St. Stephen was moved from the National Museum to Parliament and placed in the center of the most representative and impressive hall under the dome of the building.

**A**ntall was also associated with the view that the era of communism was a “dead end” in the history of Hungary. According to this thesis, the events of 1944–1945 interrupted the (legal) continuity of Hungarian statehood. The only exception to the whole post-war period was 1956 – a mythical event that lasted

only a moment and remained ineffective. In the meantime, Orbán inscribed the year 1956 very strongly in the narrative of the politics of memory on the subject of recent history. According to it, from 1945–1990, Hungarian society experienced a series of injustices that gradually, and with no exceptions, touched the entire community. The repressions had a double character: on the one hand, they were created by foreigners (Soviets) and on the other hand by the Hungarian left.

In order to develop and present this narrative, new institutions were created. The Institute of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was established in 1999 to deal with the period after the Second World War, and the Institute of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in 2001 to study the new Hungarian democracy. At the same time, in 1998, state support for previously established institutions dedicated to recent history (such as the 1956 Institute and the Institute of Political History, which were supported by both the MDF and socialist governments), was withdrawn. Finally, in 2002, the House of Terror was established which, in the new narrative, served as the central memorial site. Its permanent exhibition established a direct continuity between the Hungarian Nazis and the communists. This opinion was not only supported by the accidental fact that the secret communist police seized the abandoned

headquarters of the Hungarian Nazi staff in 1945. According to the creators of the House of Terror (the most important of which was Mária Schmidt, political advisor to Viktor Orbán, Director of the Institutes of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and the House of Terror), the main criterion for continuity was violence. However, according to the exposition of the House of Terror, the violence used by the communist regime was more widespread and overwhelming than, for example, the participation of the Hungarian state in the extermination of the Jews. Naturalism in the style of Madame Tussauds (torture chambers recreated in basements) skillfully and on a large scale, combined with interactive multimedia forms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, together created a very suggestive form. The exhibition triggered strong emotions. The problem was its simplistic perspective and proportions. For this reason, the House of Terror has provoked a fiery debate and contributed to an even greater politicization of the discourse on recent history.

**T**he government of the socialist-liberal coalition, which returned to power in 2002, did not limit the activities of the House of Terror. The exhibition has not changed, and the museum has become an attractive destination for people with national and conservative views. It has also become one of Budapest's attractions. The socialists still had no answer; only after his second election victory in 2006 did Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány present his own initiative in the politics of memory, although it was strictly addressed to his own political camp. He admitted that the Socialist Party had to choose between the legacies of Imre Nagy and János Kádár. He himself opted for Nagy and the leftist heritage of 1956. The Conservatives accepted this with mistrust, considering it empty rhetoric or even fraud, just as they rejected all other moves of the Head of Government. However, Gyurcsány's political environment did not accept it with much enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, the discourse on recent history (along with the main dividing lines) also covered the period of political transformation. The growing extreme right-wing developed

two old conservative theses on the subject, both from the early 1990s. The first was critical of the transformation, mainly due to the lack of a radical exchange of elites. According to the second, the consequences had to be delivered against those who were responsible for the "sins" of the previous system. The radical right wing claimed that there had been no change of regime at all because "old communists" held all the decision-making positions. Thus, not only the perpetrators responsible for the old system but also the authors of the transformation must be brought to justice.

**I**n 2010, once again, the victorious right-wing, national-conservative politics of memory could draw on the experience of the past 20 years. In fact, it was supplemented by one element, peculiarly "modernizing" the thesis from the interwar period, which stated that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, every left-wing party was always anti-national in its aims, sometimes directly serving foreign powers. This appeared to be a continuation of one of the fundamental areas of Horthy's discourse, according to which the Treaty of Trianon was the responsibility of Hungarian liberals, radicals, leftists, Jews and communists. The Declaration of National Cooperation issued in 2010 called the period from 1990–2010 "decades of confusion after the transformation of the political system." The preamble to the constitution adopted in 2011, partially contradicting the previous declaration, stated that "We proclaim that the self-determination of our State, lost on March 19, 1944, was restored on May 2, 1990, with the formation of our first freely elected representative body." This step backwards only shows that in the euphoria of the great victory of 2010, the politics of memory used very extreme ideas, such as the concept of the "revolution" of 2010 (an expression used by Viktor Orbán in his speech after the announcement of the 2010 election results). The national rhetoric remained unchanged, emphasizing the injustice suffered, denying and postponing responsibility. The entire 20<sup>th</sup> century is inscribed in the uniform history of national suffering. The history of Hungary is devoid of continuity, but its dead end is not just



The House of Terror has provoked a fiery debate and contributed to an even greater politicization of the discourse on recent history.



Monument to the victims of the German occupation, Szabadság square, Budapest. Live exhibition of the demonstrators.

PHOTO: SZILAS / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

a Soviet-type system in all its forms. The narrative has been extended to include the negation of the value of modernization (of the Western type). The number of socio-political *traumas* that had already dominated the discourse about the past may be increased by those from the period of political transformation. Among them, the subject of the extermination of Hungarian Jews, including the responsibility of the Hungarian administration and society for the deaths of more than half a million Hungarian citizens and the disenfranchisement of even more of them is still not present.<sup>10</sup>

**A**fter 2010 in Hungary, the state invested heavily in consolidating this vision of the past. A number of new institutions have been established: the Institute for Political Transformation Research (*Rendszerváltás Történetét Kutató Intézet*), the VERITAS Research Institute for History (*VERITAS Történetkutató Intézet*), Institute for Research on Communism (*Kommunizmuskutató Intézet*), the National Remembrance Committee (*Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága*), the Institute of National Heritage (*Nemzeti Örökség Intézet*), in which at least three or four times as many people are engaged in research into the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as were engaged at the end of the previous dec-

ade. The research conducted there is generously subsidized – in the Hungarian budget for 2015, approximately HUF 3 billion was allocated to these institutions. In 2016 the amount was even higher as the government allocated 13.5 billion forints to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution and the 1956 uprising. These funds are administered by a committee headed by Mária Schmidt, the leading representative of the politics of memory of the FIDESZ party. It is planned that more than one half of this sum will be donated to central ceremonies and other state celebrations). The heads of these institutions do not hide the fact that they have set themselves a militant goal – to get rid of the “left-wing interpretation of history,” which, according to them, previously dominated. Part of their strategy is the introduction of a new canon into centralized state education. It is only a matter of time as a framework curriculum is already in place. Also, an entire series of uniform and compulsory textbooks is being prepared. Attempts were made to create and renew existing places of remembrance (in real and virtual space), the culmination of which was to be the Monument of the German Occupation, erected on Liberty Square in Budapest in 2015. Unexpected social resistance partially foiled this intention, because the monument actually

became an essential place of protest against nationalist historical politics.

From the above description, we can clearly see how one-sided this history is. The Hungarian right-wing, from its folk origins through Antall's conservative experiment to the right-wing radicalism of Orbán and his companions, has always *pursued* the politics of memory. Many times (even today) one can get the impression that in relation to the humanities and culture, the right wing is basically only interested in recent history. However, the silence of the Hungarian left on issues related to the politics of memory remains almost unchanged. The efforts of the liberals to disseminate a realistic picture of their own nation proved to be inadequate and ineffective. The alternative left-wing vision of the past is primarily defensive. And even if this is not always the case, at the heart of it is often an abstract understanding of progress and modernization.

To some extent, this also applies to the period of the Soviet-type system. However, it does not bring any extraordinary successes. The current visions of the recent history of the individual political camps are incompatible. The “left-wing interpretation of history” faces the same dilemmas for the future as all non-political (or non-nationalist-ethnicist) narratives about history, just like every kind of representation of the past, such as conservative, avant-garde and all those in between that are analytical and comprehensible, faces the same dilemmas, or perhaps those in particular.

In the mid-2000s, Balázs Trencsényi and Péter Apor, in the text cited in the introduction, expressed doubts as to whether a pluralistic Hungarian historiography would develop a discourse between the camps of different methodological and ideological approaches. They also did not rule out a scenario in which particular trends would be transformed into subcultures, closed to each other and not undertaking a substantive dialogue. As they warned, in such a case “it could be that at some point some political elite in power will tilt the balance to such an extent that it will become possible to re-impose a certain ideological homogenization”.<sup>11</sup> More

than ten years later, it can be said that modern Hungarian historians are guided by a fundamentally different ethos in their work. There is still little dialogue between the methodological subcultures. Today, political procurement contractors are primarily active on the national and conservative side, and they perform this role with extraordinary commitment. Although there are some conversations, at the present time there is virtually no hope that debates on historiography will be conducted in a reasonable way on the basis of common democratic or professional values. Balázs Ablonczy saw it in a similar way:

**Historians and researchers of society generally note with resignation the lack of precise notions, the confusion of orders, important and unimportant aspects, the interference of politicians in the sphere of collective memory; they address new and fiery appeals to the nation/society or to taxpayers in which they call for a pluralistic view of history. Unfortunately, that will never work. Because it cannot. (...) Public opinion still prefers simple explanations; there is no need for despair about it. Sentences starting with ‘let politicians not interfere in this’ will only make sense if the slogan ‘Trianon’ no longer evokes emotions among voters. Until this happens, politicians will talk about it. It will improve if we stop the suicidal tendencies and instead of ‘Trianon or..’ we say ‘Trianon, so...’. If we understand and acknowledge the suffering of others and do not treat our own history as a game.<sup>12</sup>**

The regime in power since 2010 is clearly striving for ideological homogenization and this goal is, of course, shared by the camp of national-conservative historians. A pessimistic scenario predicted by Trencsényi and Apor has now become a reality.

A *positive politics of memory* could be an opportunity for the future. But do we even *need* such an approach? What would the relationship



between historiography and this influential form of communicative memory look like? The question is difficult, not only regarding the current situation in Hungary. A “positive” politics of memory means accepting critical and comprehensible descriptions of the past, encouraging such a perspective and cultivating a *tradition based on democratic values*. From such a standpoint, the answer to the first question may be affirmative. However, historiography – with its constant changeability, creation of new stories and dynamics that undermine the truthfulness, approach and methods of previous narratives – should stay away from *any* politics of memory. For this, it would be enough to acquire knowledge, understanding and guarantees of free debate, if any. A historian does not need the politics of memory. Of course, regardless of what happens, it still exists and will continue to exist.

**A**t the beginning of 2015, the organizers of a discussion asked the participants, historians, whether historiography has the tools to enable a nation to develop its own realistic self-image. Is there anything we can do about the actions of politicians who attempt to mythologize history and re-evaluate it? The answer to both questions is rather negative. Of course, proposals can be made about specific topics. For example, indicating the extent to which research on solidarity and social traditions, workers’ and peasants’ movements, social democracy, direct democracy of 1956, as well as democratic opposition, has disappeared from the agenda of Hungarian historiography. For example, in the European Union Framework Programme Horizon 2020, one of the main priorities of the specific program in the field of social sciences known as “Reflective Societies” is called “Cultural opposition in the former socialist countries” since 2014. So even if this topic is not particularly popular in individual countries, it has provoked some interest in the international academic world. However, the situation of historiography in Hungary will only change when the entire country frees itself from the impasse. This depends on the will of the Hungarian people and their determination. ●

Funding disclosure: The author’s research was supported by grant EFOP-3.6.1-16-2016-00001 (“Complex improvement of research capacities and services at Eszterhazy Karoly University”).

The article is a reworked version of the paper “Discourses of Contemporary History in Hungary after 1989. A Fragmented Report”. *East Central Europe*: 44 (2017). 216–248.

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# Justice, Truth, and Transitional Justice

by Lavinia Stan

**B**y now, post-communist Romania has had three decades to reckon with the legacies of its repressive pasts and the results are rather modest. By the time Nicolae Ceausescu was ousted from power, Romania had to come to terms with three recent pasts marred by gross human rights violations. The legacies of all of these pasts were likely to affect the new democracy, their rights abuses had never been adequately addressed before December 1989, and these three pasts differed in the nature and scope of their rights violations.

The most immediate past was the brief but violent December 1989 Revolution, during which 1,100 people died and 3,300 were wounded by police and armed forces.<sup>1</sup> The communist regime of 1945–1989 was the second past that claimed the attention of the new leaders, since none of the crimes the regime perpetrated had been redressed and the surviving victims still called for recognition and justice.<sup>2</sup> Third, the pro-Nazi rule of Marshall Ion Antonescu and the Iron Guard (1940–1944) constituted yet another gruesome past characterized by a distinct set of state-led crimes that affected another set of victims who, in turn, demanded justice.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, let me first summarize Roma-

nian transitional justice efforts as I see them, and then raise some points about its efficacy.

## Reckoning in Post-Communist Romania

Numerous judicial and non-judicial programs have been adopted during the last three decades in an effort to reckon with the legacies of these three repressive pasts. During the 1990s, Romanian courts prosecuted the army officers who ordered troops to shoot at the protesters who in December 1989 peacefully gathered in public squares to revolt against Ceausescu's dictatorship. By contrast, only a handful of the communist-era prison guards and Communist Party officials responsible for human rights violations have been prosecuted, and none of those associated with earlier Nazi crimes.<sup>4</sup>

The country set up two history commissions tasked with investigating the crimes of the pro-Nazi regime and of the communist authorities. The International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, widely known as the Wiesel Commission after its president, Elie Wiesel, was created by President Ion Iliescu in October 2003 and delivered its report the following year. The Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, commonly known as the Tismaneanu

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The National theater in Piata Univesitatii, Bucharest, and a monument in remembrance of the events of December 1989 and June 1990. It reads "For Liberty and Democracy, Zone Free from neocomunism".  
PHOTO: ALESSIO DAMATO



Commission, was set up in 2006 by President Traian Basescu. Chaired by political science professor Vladimir Tismaneanu, the Commission submitted its report later that same year. On the basis of that report, President Basescu officially condemned the communist regime during a joint session of the two chambers of Parliament.<sup>5</sup> Former communist-era political prisoners have also been rehabilitated, provided that they were not associated with or involved in Nazi crimes. Some of the property, land and assets confiscated by the Nazi and communist regimes have been returned to individuals, religious groups or ethnic communities. Rewards and compensation packages have been granted to victims of all three repressive regimes as lump sums or in the form of free transportation, cemetery plots, radio and television subscriptions, access to health facilities and sanatoria.<sup>6</sup>

The most visible were the repeated efforts to change the “city-text” and “memoryscape”,<sup>7</sup> together with the memorialization of former victims. Statues, paintings and bas-reliefs of Ceausescu, his wife and other communist leaders and symbols were quickly removed from the public space during or immediately after the 1989 Revolution. For a time, some of the statues were left abandoned in a desolate park on the

outskirts of Bucharest, a sad reminder of the recognition and praise Ceausescu, Gheorghiu-Dej, Lenin, Stalin and other communists had received until 1989. The communist slogans that adorned almost every factory, industrial plant and agricultural cooperative were erased, and the names of streets, parks and public buildings that evoked communist values and luminaries were replaced with names suggestive of more democratic values or even neutral names (of flowers and trees, in some localities). In what turned out to be a fierce competition among legislators to please their local constituents, Parliament bestowed the title of “martyr-town” (*oras-martir*) on a number of localities where protesters were met by army and police forces during December 1989 and even on sleepy towns where residents watched the revolution unfold on their television screens.<sup>8</sup> History museums quickly removed communist artifacts, and in some cases even exhibits depicting the pro-Nazi Antonescu regime, and a handful of new museums dedicated to victims of communism were opened in new locations. However, pro-fascist and pro-communist groups also insisted on commemorating the likes of Ceausescu or Antonescu in defiance of national and international criticism and despite the fact that new legislation prohibited Nazi and communist symbols. Even the majority Orthodox Church engaged in commemorations of former priests and faithful who were persecuted by the communists but who had also been supporters of Nazi policies, leaders and propaganda.<sup>9</sup>

The least known have been some symbolic initiatives meant to educate the public about past human rights abuses. The citizens’ opinion tribunal organized by some activists in Cluj-Napoca in September 2006 to condemn the crimes of the communist dictatorship has gathered almost no attention domestically and internationally, leading to no visible effects, although it has been one of only two such tribunals organized in post-communist Europe.<sup>10</sup> Similar to other attempts by private individuals to force the speedy and complete public identification of former communist torturers, the

disclosure of the identity of former Securitate secret agents through the so-called “Armageddon” emails in 2002 was unable to convince the Romanian political elite to embrace a more thorough access to the secret archives or a more radical vetting program.<sup>11</sup> Enjoying a better reception among at least some teachers, parents and children, a new textbook detailing the crimes of the communist regime was written in 2008 by researchers associated with the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania, a new institution created in 2005 and subordinated to the Romanian government.<sup>12</sup> During the 2010s, historian Marius Oprea and his group carried out forensic investigations in an effort to locate and identify the remains of some victims of communist abuse. And a number of oral history projects have been launched by civil society organizations like Memoria and historians associated with various local universities to record testimonials of victims of all three pasts mentioned at the beginning of this article.

**T**he most controversial was the lustration program, which was denounced as being too lenient by the anti-communists and too punitive by the leftist sympathizers. Rejected even by the legislator who single-mindedly pushed it through Parliament, the law which allowed Romanians to access the files compiled on them by the communist-era Securitate also permitted the public disclosure of past involvement with the secret police of individuals occupying (or seeking nomination and election for) a wide range of public offices funded by the government.<sup>13</sup> Verifications affected not only the president, legislators, magistrates and heads of public utilities, but also Orthodox priests, since their salaries were partly covered by grants from the government. But the wide scope of verifications was not matched by significant punishment for past collaboration.

Indeed, instead of losing their positions of power and influence, these individuals were just asked to sign declarations stating whether they collaborated with the Securitate as a political police force that infringed on the rights of others. Those who admitted to their past

collaboration could continue to hold public office regardless of the number or nature of their crimes. Those who falsely declared no involvement with the Securitate had their names listed in the official gazette for Romanians to see; but most members of the public took little notice of those lists and made their electoral choice based more on economic or ideological considerations than the candidates’ communist-era behavior.

## A Preliminary Assessment

All in all, Romania’s post-1989 transitional justice record has remained modest both in scope and in depth. A closer look suggests that almost all of the initiatives adopted in that country have been poorly or incompletely implemented and have generally missed their mark. Some initiatives have been rejected in favor of weaker alternatives with less bite. For example, neither of the two commissions created in Romania was a truth commission that collected testimonials from victims (and possibly victimizers) in public sessions like the South African or the Latin American truth commissions; instead both resembled the history commission model adopted in other post-communist countries. While some local advocates have argued that the length of the communist dictatorship or the remoteness in time of the Nazi crimes precluded the creation of truth commissions, neither of these arguments is sufficiently compelling: After all, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission was able to address adequately and successfully past crimes that were committed over a much longer period stretching back many more decades.

In addition, a number of former victims have been overlooked not because they were fewer than the victims who did benefit from reckoning programs. Take, for example, the property restitution process which generally overlooked ethnic minorities in favor of the Romanian ethnic majority, and the pre-communist industrialists, bankers, landowners and art collectors in favor of the working class empowered by the communist authorities. Equally important, lustration was diluted to the level of a public identification of public officials who were once

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Belarus  
Ukraine  
Czech Rep.  
Poland  
Hungary  
Romania  
Bulgaria  
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Ticu Dumitrescu  
stubbornly  
championed a  
draft law that  
gave ordinary  
Romanians  
access to the  
Securitate  
archives.

associated with the Securitate, an identification that remains poorly known and understood by the voters and seldom informs their electoral choices.

**D**ifferent categories of victims have been played against each other by various post-communist governments eager to justify their reluctance to engage in transitional justice or their preference for specific reckoning measures. Calls against the pre-communist “exploiters” who owned nicely located homes, land or assets were predominant during the early 1990s, being fueled primarily by parties representing former Communist Party members such as the Social Democrats and nationalist formations like the Greater Romania Party. Openly or tacitly, almost all post-communist parties have downplayed the demands of ethnic minorities, especially those of the Jewish minority, drastically reduced by decades of out-migration, and of the Hungarians, seen as a sort of a fifth column that could possibly be used by Budapest to claim back Transylvania as part of Hungary. Similarly, the many privileges granted to the “revolutionaries” who participated in the December 1989 anti-communist protests were only later and reluctantly expanded to the victims of communism and fascism, although they were more numerous and their suffering more significant and more prolonged. The focus on the victims of the earlier Stalinist regime of Gheorghiu-Dej to the detriment of those of the milder and more recent regime of Ceausescu was rooted in the more gruesome nature of the human rights abuses they suffered as much as in the reluctance of the early 1990s governments to reward victims of a regime with which some of their members had been closely associated.

The Romanian case also shows the importance of civil society initiatives in furthering the reckoning project, even if imperfectly and partially, when state actors (cabinets, courts and governmental agencies or their subordinated institutes) are perceived as slow, hesitant or downward hostile to transitional justice. The first efforts to apply pressure on the government to adopt a lustration program that would have marginalized all former Communist Party

officials and Securitate secret agents were represented by the Timisoara Proclamation, which was proposed during the December 1989 protests by a small group of anti-communist residents of the town where the Romanian Revolution started. Organizations representing former communist-era political prisoners and former owners whose property had been expropriated by the communist authorities were instrumental in keeping the rehabilitation, compensation and restitution programs in the public eye and on the government agenda. Not only groups but also individuals, sometimes acting in isolation and with little support from others, have succeeded in pushing transitional justice forward. Throughout the 1990s, Senator Ticu Dumitrescu stubbornly championed a draft law that gave ordinary Romanians access to the Securitate archives. Once the Securitate archives were opened, the anonymous author of the Armageddon emails named some former Securitate secret agents in an effort to enlarge and speed up investigations into the human rights abuses of the communist state security. As chairs of the history commissions, Wiesel and Tismaneanu lent their credibility to those bodies and the results of their investigations. Political entrepreneurs can also block reckoning, as was the case of Dan Voiculescu, a controversial politician who used his influence to thwart public identifications of communist-era secret agents.

Romania’s transitional justice record further suggests that Grodsky<sup>14</sup> was right in stating that reckoning is just one of the many public goods delivered by post-communist governments and as such it competes with all the other public goods expected by the electorate – good infrastructure, investment in education and health care, astute foreign policy initiatives, and the like. The former communists who dominated the 1990–1996 governments preferred to protect the rights of the tenants whom the communist authorities had allowed to rent nationalized dwellings rather than recognize the property rights of the initial owners. As such, property restitution was considered less important and urgent than keeping a roof over the heads of the more numerous tenants, whose sudden eviction

as a result of restitution would have obliged the government to invest in social housing. The anticommunist governments of the Democratic Convention of 1996-2000 deprioritized reckoning in favor of pursuing an aggressive policy meant to bring Romania among the members of NATO and the Council of Europe, seen as the definitive acceptance of the country as part of Europe. Grodsky<sup>15</sup> was also right when suggesting that governments will pursue transitional justice only to the extent that it boosts their legitimacy and credibility. The Wiesel Commission was created by President Iliescu more out of a desire to stop international criticism than to rectify and clarify the past, suggesting that the transitional justice body was set up to further foreign policy more than reckoning goals.

**T**he country also demonstrates that Horne<sup>16</sup> was right in claiming that some transitional justice initiatives like lustration can be pursued even outside of the “window of opportunity” initially identified by scholars like Welsh.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, during the 1990s a number of scholars believed that reckoning could be pursued only during the first years following the regime change; once that “window” closed, interest in transitional justice would fade away (since new generations would be less inclined to punish the perpetrators and celebrate the victims of the communist regime) and reckoning initiatives would lose their effectiveness (since, for example, an unreformed political elite dominated by former regime perpetrators would undermine democratic values).

However, the very fact that the Wiesel Commission was constituted decades after the fascist regime of Antonescu showed that the “window of opportunity” assumption was too restrictive. Indeed, it was two decades after the end of World War II that the German government and people showed genuine interest in reckoning with the many crimes of the Third Reich. In post-communist Romania as well, debates about reckoning’s usefulness, feasibility and success have characterized not only the 1990s but also the 2000s and, in addition, initiatives such as compensation, memorialization and diminishing the pensions of the

former communist perpetrators were proposed, legislated and implemented decades after the 1989 regime change.

## Looking Forward

Perhaps the question that remains unanswered to date relates to how much truth and justice was delivered by the many transitional justice programs and initiatives the country has pursued during the first three decades of post-communism. The scarcity of court trials and the even fewer convictions handed down to former perpetrators, the indifference with which government officials attend annual commemorations, if at all, and the meagre compensation packages granted to communist-era political prisoners have been unable to give former victims the closure and sense of justice they needed so badly. Time and time again, representatives of victims’ associations have pointed to this justice deficit that makes them dissatisfied with subsequent post-communist governments. In addition, Romania’s failure to adopt a radical accusation-based lustration program that would have excluded former Communist Party officials and Securitate secret agents from post-communist politics and from the new economic and cultural elites has made former victims feel that the undeserved disadvantage at which they were placed before 1989 perpetuated itself in democratic times. Again, their general sense has been one of injustice for themselves and impunity for the former perpetrators.

The former victims’ dissatisfaction becomes even more evident when Romania’s reluctance to reckon with past human rights violations is compared to the more radical and sustained transitional justice pursued in Central and Eastern Europe. Lustration in the Czech Republic and Germany, for example, identified larger categories of former communist perpetrators and provided for their removal from post-communist politics.<sup>18</sup> This type of lustration gave a sense of justice to more former political prisoners than in Romania, where former perpetrators were generally not removed from the government. In the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, a comprehensive restitution of properties abusively confiscated and nation-



alized by the Nazi and communist regimes benefited larger numbers of initial owners than in Romania, where numerous owners of well-located historical homes were sidelined by well-connected politicians, who managed to acquire these homes through legal loopholes. The House of Terror in Budapest has given symbolic recognition to former victims, while Romanian victims of communism still wait for a Bucharest museum that would recognize their plight.

Are Romanians today more familiar with the crimes of the 1989 Revolution and the fascist and communist regimes than they were during late communism? By now, a new generation with no personal memory of the 1989 Revolution, communism or fascism has come to maturity. A tiny minority of it has studied history with the help of the textbook mentioned earlier, has visited the Sighet Memorial and thus learned of communist-era political prisoners and their plight, and has heard about at least some of the public identifications of former Securitate secret agents. Many more of these young people, however, know about communism from their parents and grandparents, through reminiscences that are often colored by these relatives' nostalgia for communist-era job security or much-touted equality, even below the poverty line, and post-communist loss of status or income. The past is, therefore, a foreign country for a significant segment of the younger generation who hears little about communist-era human rights abuses and a lot about its economic stability. ●

Note: I want to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for generously supporting my research on transitional justice as well as Luc Turcescu, Nels Svensson, Sabina Stan, Walter Schmidt, Aurelian Craiutu and Fernando Silva Santos for their support.

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# A Chronicle of an Anachronism: The Struggle for Adequate Education about the Communist Past

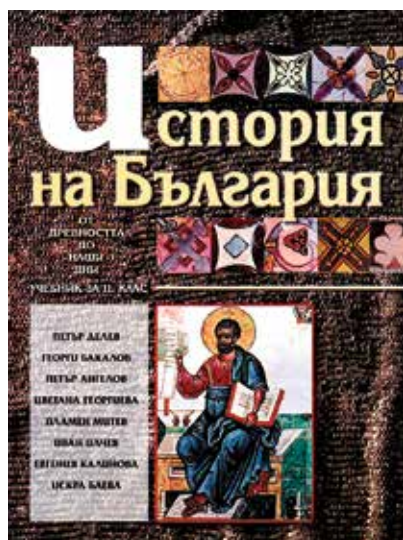
by Evelina Kelbecheva

**B**ulgaria is the only country in the former Eastern bloc where there is no official policy of remembrance and commemoration of the Communist regime and its victims, which means that not even one museum has been created to deal with the traumatic past or to enlighten new generations about this period in history. Even history textbooks have still not been radically revised. Today, the country is ranked number one in the European Union regarding the level of “socialist nostalgia”. Last, but not least, there was no transitional justice in Bulgaria as a whole, meaning that Bulgaria has never dealt with the crimes committed during the Communist regime. Not even one of

the Communist leaders responsible for mass executions and the organization of concentration camps was ever sentenced in Bulgaria.

**T**he above picture of overall silence and oblivion in relation to the communist period is further mirrored by various sociological surveys conducted over the years. A survey conducted in 2014<sup>1</sup> revealed the generational gap; 94% of the young generation in Bulgaria knew nothing about the Communist era, against 31% amongst the population old enough to have at least faint memories of their own from this period. The 2014 survey also revealed that 44% of Bulgarian citizens regarded socialism in positive terms, and only 14% in negative terms. The

Covers of textbooks on Bulgarian history, used in the education on different levels. Note: not necessary the ones referred to in this text.



2014 survey can also be compared to previous findings from a survey in 1992<sup>3</sup> showing the rate at which this oblivion has grown. In 1992, 76% of the population had a negative attitude to the last Communist dictator Todor Zhivkov, whereas in the survey in 2014, only 45% had a negative attitude.

The latest figures, from a survey conducted in 2019 about the level of awareness and assessment of the Communist regime, reveal a clear tendency towards a leftward shift among young people whose de-politicization stood at 40% in 2014 and 14% in 2018. The latter is assessed as *functional political illiteracy* of the young generation in Bulgaria between 16 and 31 years of age.<sup>3</sup>

In the conclusions the authors suggest that the survey indicates sentiment in favor of more sociality, yet:

**At the same time, for young people, the search for a social solution remains in the realm of the informal environment, in dialogue with relatives and friends, and not in political institutions. Political leaders and parties do not possess the necessary authority. Young people have distanced themselves further from politics. Deinstitutionalization is a fact of life. Motivation to participate is low. The mechanisms of the political system in Bulgaria are not recognized**

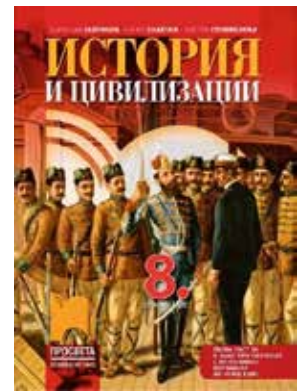
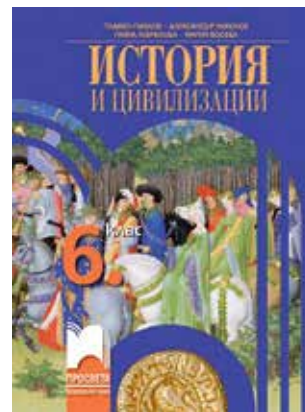
**by young Bulgarians as a way of presenting and defending their interests. A large number of Bulgarian young people, in their values, attitudes and behavior, are on the left of the political spectrum without suspecting it, and probably would not accept such an assessment. The troubled situation in Bulgaria has triggered a reaction to sociality, but not political self-reflection.**<sup>4</sup>

The general public cannot be blamed for their ignorance or nescience as both are the result of clever manipulation policies well-crafted by propagandists and official historians associated with the Socialist Party. They are simply trying to *post-factum* legitimize the Communist regime and its crimes. The chief functionaries that rule the country are in fact often still the same persons as during the Communist regime. There are strong forces behind the efforts to let the past be forgotten.

Soon after the Fall of Communism an *archival revolution* began and the new historiography on Communism was produced. Oblivion, substitution and, ultimately, historical falsification of the nature and consequences of the Communist regime in Bulgaria dominated public discourse until very recently. There is still a huge gap between history that is academically produced and history as public (non)knowledge.

Thus educational reform, through which the





totalitarian Communist past could be studied by younger generations (who did not live through it and have only vague ideas about communism), became the ultimate segment of decommunization in Bulgaria.<sup>5</sup> By implementing such a reform in education, the democratic state could counter fake nostalgia for Communism while emphasizing the true meaning of basic human values.

It is an important and crucial step to counter the manipulation and falsification of history and the efforts to exonerate everything done by the dictatorship of the Communist Party in Bulgaria.

**H**ere is a brief chronology of the process to introduce an educational reform over the last 20 years. This is a process in which I have been taken a very active part both as a researcher and an activist; therefore I give a chronological overview of the steps taken, before I summarize lessons learned and place them in a broader context.

### **Chronology of the Struggle for Educational Reform**

#### **May 2000**

The 38<sup>th</sup> National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria passes a law declaring the Communist regime in the country to be criminal. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) votes against this. All the crimes of the regime related to the econ-

omy, various types of political terror, and violence are listed, including the continuous policy for the assimilation of the Muslim communities in Bulgaria. Unfortunately, this law is in fact only a declaration, as it does not provide for any sanctions. Despite this law, the adherents of the Communists/Socialists constantly oppose initiatives related to the creation of new policies of “memory”, the erection of monuments and memorials, or the creation of museums, and block a number of attempts to introduce transitional justice for the perpetrators of crimes during the Communist regime. The BSP is most consistent in its policy of preventing a wide public debate – a debate on the totalitarian, inhumane nature of the ideology and political practice of the Bulgarian Communist Party, whose direct successor it is.

#### **July 2003**

The European People’s Party, led by René van der Linden, supports the proposal by Bulgarian European parliamentarian Lachezar Toshev to adopt a resolution: “The Need for International Condemnation of the Crimes of Totalitarian Communism.”

#### **December 2005**

At a meeting of the Committee on Political Affairs at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in Paris, the resolution The resolution was put to the assembly.

”  
Therefore,  
they must be  
considered the  
greatest evil  
to strike in the  
20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### December 2005

A meeting of 73 communist parties from around the world takes place in Athens, declaring their position against the report condemning the crimes of communism and including it on the PACE agenda.

#### January 2006

The fifth PACE session, chaired by René van der Linden, is held in Strasbourg. Goran Lindblad's report presents the crimes of totalitarian communist regimes (100 million killed, 20 million thrown into concentration camps, over 10 million victims of forced starvation, etc.)

Following a fierce debate, mostly between Russia and Greece, the report is adopted by a vote of 99 deputies for, 42 against, and 12 abstentions. It is called “The Need for International Condemnation of the Crimes of the Totalitarian Communist Regimes” – Resolution 1471/2006. It condemns the crimes of totalitarian communist regimes and encourages historians around the world to continue their research on them. Paragraph 5 of the resolution reads: “... The perpetrators of these crimes have not been brought to justice by the international community, as was the case with the horrific crimes of Nazism.” And paragraph 6 states: “Society's response to the crimes committed by totalitarian Communist regimes is very weak. Communist parties are legal and active in some countries; in some cases they have not even distanced themselves from the crimes committed by totalitarian Communist regimes”.

#### June 2008

A conference titled “European Conscience and Communism” is held in Prague, Czech Republic. It is emphasized that the crimes of communism have not yet received a sufficiently clear assessment and condemnation from a legal, moral, political and historical point of view. The conference, attended by politicians and representatives of various state institutions involved in the study of communist crimes, adopts a special declaration signed by the Czech President (1993–2003) Vaclav Havel and Joachim Gauck (the first Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service in the GDR, and subsequently President of

Germany). The document, entitled *Declaration on European Conscience and Communism*, calls for a pan-European understanding that both Nazi and communist totalitarian regimes, each judged on its own terrible “merits”, are destructive in their policy of systematically applying extreme forms of terror and trampling on all civil and human freedoms. Therefore, they must be considered the greatest evil to strike in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also calls for school curricula to be replaced by new ones in which the true facts of communism are to be represented.

#### April 2009

The European Parliament supports the *Prague Declaration* and adopts the resolution “European Conscience and Totalitarianism”, which “strongly and unequivocally condemns all crimes against humanity and mass violations of human rights by all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes” and calls for an assessment of the crimes of communist totalitarian regimes.

#### November 2009

By decision of the 41<sup>st</sup> Bulgarian National Assembly, the majority of MPs support the two European resolutions. BSP deputies vote against them.

#### October 2011

The educational initiative *Platform for European Memory and Conscience* is created by the Visegrad Four countries during the Polish presidency of the EU. It is supported by a number of European governments and non-governmental organizations and aims to arouse interest in the crimes of the communist regimes, and to fight intolerance and extremism.

#### January 2012

The study “Topoi of Historical Memory” is published in Bulgaria.<sup>6</sup> This field research is a joint initiative from researchers of the New Bulgarian University and the American University in Bulgaria. The aim is to investigate those places, events, and protagonists which have a formative role for the identity of modern Bulgarian citizens – and in a comparative perspective with Balkan and European history. The study was re-





From Left to right: Hristo Hristov, Executive Director of Truth and Memory Foundation, Georgy Mihailov, Member of the Foundation, Kornelia Marinova, Maire of Lovech, (where an infamous communist concentration camp was located), acclaimed actor and writer Russi Chanev, and Professor Evelina Kelbecheva during a presentation of the Foundation in October, 2019.

PHOTO: NASSIA KRALEVSKA-OWENS

leased and caused much discussion in Bulgaria. In this study I, as the initiator and a contributing author, noted the fact that Bulgarians have no memory of key places of repression under the Communist regime, such as the Belene and Lovech concentration camps. I wrote a warning that “careful manipulation of the past continues to be a priority for certain circles who need to maintain their now-defunct ideology with huge historical falsifications”. Such falsification is in itself any thesis that “normalizes”, that is, exonerates, everything done by the dictatorship of the Communist Party in Bulgaria.”

#### September 2013

The conference “Education for the Communist Regime and European Democratic Values of Young People in Bulgaria Today” is held in Sofia. It is an initiative of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Center for European Studies in Brussels at the EPP and the Hannah Arendt Centre Foundation. An extensive national representative survey by Bulgaria’s state polling agency NCIOM is presented; the findings show huge gaps in information and knowledge about the communist regime in Bulgaria among young people between the ages of 15 and 35.

The conclusion is that in the years of transition from a totalitarian Communist regime to democracy, state policy in Bulgaria does not aim to reveal the truth about the dictatorship in the period 1944-1989, but to conceal it from young people at school. Thus, Bulgaria’s young people know nothing about the political terror, the concentration camps, and, for example, the

infamous murder of dissident writer Georgi Markov by the State Security in London in 1978.

#### February 2014

At this point I felt a need to take action and mobilize for change. As professor of history at the American University in Bulgaria, I initiated a *Petition for the need to change the school curricula*, which insists on introducing the study of totalitarian regimes in comparative terms in education, as well as specifically on Bulgarian communism. The initiative is announced at an event at the American University in Bulgaria with the participation of relatives of the anti-communist resistance fighters (*Goryany*) from South-Western Bulgaria. The petition soon gathers more than 2,000 signatures in support. It is signed by Presidents Zhelyu Zhelev, Petar Stoyanov and Rosen Plevneliev, as well as many public figures and representatives of the academic community.

#### November 2014

Under the auspices of President Rosen Plevneliev, a nation-wide initiative is organized to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the democratic changes in Bulgaria. A public opinion poll conducted by the sociological agency Alpha Research is presented during the conference “The Transition: Myths and Memory, 25 Years Later”. The study shows that a total of 94% of the youngest generation (16-30 years) know almost nothing about the period of Communism 1944-1989. 40% of them cannot state whether the end of Communism is marked

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The study clearly shows that universities and high schools do not provide students with the necessary knowledge about the Communist regime.

by the collapse of the Berlin Wall, or ... the Great Wall of China (!). The study clearly shows that universities and high schools do not provide students with the necessary knowledge about the Communist regime.

#### May 2015

President Rosen Plevneliev publicly criticizes the inaction of the ruling party (then the rightwing coalition between GERB and the Reformist Bloc) for not including the history of the communist regime in history textbooks, and rather trying to obscure its essence.

#### September 2015

The 43<sup>rd</sup> National Assembly, during the second government of Boyko Borissov, does not accept the proposals of the Reformist Bloc MP Boris Stanimirov to amend the Public Education Act. The specific amendment reads: “Principles of democracy and the rule of law, human rights and freedoms include awareness of the crimes of totalitarian regimes in Europe, including the Communist regime in Bulgaria within the meaning of the Law on Declaring the Communist Regime Criminal (2000)”. The reason for the failure to pass this text is the position of the GERB deputies, most of whom abstain.

#### December 2015

At the initiative of MPs from GERB, led by Metody Andreev, a second political petition is launched on Internet, calling for a more serious study of 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian regimes in Bulgarian schools. It collects the signatures of over 103 deputies – but none from the Socialist Party. The document is addressed to the Minister of Education and Science, Professor Todor Tanev: “The reason for our request is the fact that Bulgaria remains the only country in the former socialist camp in which the recent past is not taught to adolescents. The formation of civil values among the young generations... is in our hands.”

There is no reaction from the Minister.

#### January 2016

President Rosen Plevneliev and all his secretaries in the Presidency sign this second political

petition to study the Communist regime at school.

#### March 2016

Representatives of civil society and politicians, including myself, Evelina Kelbecheva and MP Metody Andreev, meet with the Deputy Prime Minister and new Minister of Education and Science Meglena Kuneva. We submit to her the petitions about the need to study the communist regime at school. Kuneva declares that: “We are ready to discuss all specific proposals of the initiators of the petitions about the need to study totalitarian regimes at school”, but in practice does absolutely nothing.

#### March 2016

MEP Andrey Kovachev (GERB/EPP) organizes a discussion in the European Parliament in Brussels under the title “Knowledge of the Past – Memory for the Future”, dedicated entirely to the problem of not studying communism at school. The initiative involves me, Evelina Kelbecheva, sociologist Lyubomir Pozharliev, author of the study “Communism in History Textbooks”, MP Metody Andreev (GERB), etc. Minister Kuneva is also personally invited to participate, but she sends a written response, apologizing for not being able to attend the discussion. I presented the outlines of steps needed to be taken from now on in order to study the communist regime in school in the most adequate way.

#### May 2016

The *Truth and Memory Foundation*<sup>7</sup> brings to the attention of Minister Kuneva a list of the main facts and assessments of the totalitarian rule of the Bulgarian Communist Party, without which history textbooks cannot be relevant to current Bulgarian and international historiography: “The main task of teaching our recent history in middle school is to create a critical attitude towards the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria (1944–1989), as well to its metastases in the next period. Young people in Bulgaria need to build their identity, referring both to their national history and common European values. We call for a radical revision of *state educational*

standards for the study of history, which will lead to the creation of a young generation with sufficient knowledge and understanding of the dynamically changing world”.

The Ministry of Education and Science remains silent.

#### **June 2016**

The Truth and Memory Foundation organizes the conference “Knowledge and Values – (non) Study of Totalitarian Regimes in the Bulgarian School” in the House of Europe in Sofia. The initiative is the first of its kind and brings together prominent politicians, academics, educational experts, as well as fiction and documentary movie directors. The Minister of Education and Science, Meglena Kuneva, is invited, but she ignores the conference, and does not even send a representative from the Ministry.

The conference ends with the following conclusion: “Due to the lack of clear state policy and political will, the fact is that education is not a priority of the various cabinets during the transitional period (1989–2016). The broken relation between the academic community and the educational system, the manipulative concealment of facts and events for the period 1944-1989, as well as the outdated textbooks, are among the main reasons for inadequate public knowledge of the totalitarian communist regime in Bulgaria – unlike in all other countries in the former Eastern bloc (with the exception of Russia) that survived Soviet-style totalitarianism.”

#### **July 2016**

The Truth and Memory Foundation submits the final resolution of its conference to the Ministry of Education and Science. The non-governmental organization invites Minister Kuneva to organize an open expert discussion on the creation of the new state educational standards and new curricula for secondary education in history.

There is no answer from the Ministry.

#### **February 2017**

At a pre-election meeting with the *Union of the Oppressed by Communism*, called *Pamet*

(“Memory”) in Arbanassi, GERB leader Boyko Borissov pledges that if his party won the parliamentary elections and formed a government, he would insist that the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) be their portfolio – in order for the necessary legislative reform to be carried out and the truth about the Communist regime to be finally adequately studied in Bulgaria. He declares education is a priority for his party.

#### **September 2017**

Lilyana Drumeva, Chief Adviser to the Minister of Education and Science, and president of the Union of the Repressed by the Communism, “Pamet”, now decides to invite me, Evelina Kelbecheva, and Lachezar Stoyanov (from the New Bulgarian University) to a public discussion of the new program with representatives of the academic community from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS). The meeting that took place at the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), concludes that the current program is well designed, and no serious changes are required. We, Kelbecheva and Stoyanov, strongly express the opposite opinion, demanding a revision of the period of totalitarian Communism and the introduction of new concepts and inclusion of missing facts. We offer to present our prepared proposals for a radical change of the history curriculum.

#### **October 2017**

Now we, Kelbecheva and Stoyanov, submit these proposals, but the second expert meeting at the MES on the issue is constantly postponed. During this period, a game of cat and mouse begins. At the administrative level, the Ministry is reluctant to accept the proposals made by us, the two historians.

#### **November 2017**

On November 9, 2017, the Executive Director of the Truth and Memory Foundation, journalist Hristo Hristov, submits to the Council of Ministers a statement to the Prime Minister on the issue of the lack of adequate study of the totalitarian Communist period in Bulgaria.

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curricula.

ia. Borissov’s pre-election promise to carry out this reform if GERB wins the election is recalled.

On November 10, 2017, a conference titled “100 Years since the Bolshevik Coup in Russia and its Influence in Bulgaria” is held in Lovech. The initiative is attended by the deputy chairman of the ruling GERB party and chairman of the party’s parliamentary group, Tsvetan Tsvetanov. I again bring up the problem of inadequate study of the Communist regime. The pre-election promise of Boyko Borissov and the unwillingness in the MES to carry out the necessary reform is recalled. Tsvetanov initiates a meeting between the minister Kasimir Valchev and me. As a result the minister orders that the program in history be returned for updating.

On November 21, 2017, I give an interview to the website *Faktor.bg*, in which I warn of the danger that the necessary reform will not be carried out: “We expect the Ministry of Education and Science to do its job and to really revise the history curricula. It is mandatory that future textbooks include the proposals made by our team. We insist on radical changes.”

A new round of discussions on the issue begins at the MES.

A few days after this interview, in which the curtain is lifted on the intensified talks at the MES, five non-parliamentary parties (DSB, Yes, Bulgaria, the Greens, DEOS and the Agrarian Union) announce that they had sent a letter to Minister Valchev, asking him about the problem of inadequate study of the Communist regime. This happens four years after the first petition raised this issue in 2014. Most of the politicians who sign the document are part of the Reformist bloc. In the previous government the Bloc had two ministers of education (Prof. Todor Tanev and Meglena Kuneva), to whom they never addressed such a request.

#### **December 2017**

Kelbecheva and Stoyanov continue active work on the development of the new curriculum. A series of heated discussions take place at the MES, some of which are attended by the Minister of Education, Krassimir Valchev. He says he

would approve the program only after receiving endorsement from a wide range of historians and politicians.

#### **January 2018**

The final discussion of the new curriculum in “History and Civilizations” with the participation of historians, MPs, politicians, experts from the MES, Sofia University, and BAS, is focused on the period 1944–1989. 90% of the proposals made by Kelbecheva and Stoyanov are accepted.

One particularly crucial part during the final editing of the new history program was the discussion on the inclusion of the term Soviet occupation of Bulgaria (September 1944) and the two attempts to merge Bulgaria to the USSR made in 1963 and once again in 1973.

It is very indicative that under the pressure from professors at the Department of History at Sofia University, the topics of the Soviet occupation of Bulgaria 1944–1947 and the attempt to turn Bulgaria into the 16<sup>th</sup> republic of the USSR are thrown away from the revised history program.

On January 15, 2018, the Ministry of Education and Science announces on its website the adoption of the new programs. The most significant revision is introduced to the history curriculum for the 10<sup>th</sup> final grade for high schools, especially the study of the period of the communist regime.

On January 19, 2018, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which has been “sleeping” throughout the whole process, makes a declaration in the National Assembly, demanding the cancellation of the newly adopted history program. There is also a request for the resignation of Minister Valchev, who was forced to answer questions from the left-wing opposition during parliamentary control. He refuses to return to the old history program.

#### **June 2019**

The Truth and Memory Foundation sends an open letter to Minister Valchev, insisting that the already approved textbooks on History and Civilizations for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade be stopped, because most of them do not correspond to the spirit of the already adopted new program. The

foundation initiates a petition, gathering more than 4,700 signatures, insisting: "... We strongly disagree with the attempts to conceal key facts and events from Bulgarian history in the period 1944–1989 and the period of transition to democracy after 1989. There is a manipulative, misleading or tendentious presentation in the new textbooks. We insist that they be fundamentally revised and reworked."

Well-known historians, politicians, and journalists join the Truth and Memory Foundation's call.

On the other hand, the BSP and academic circles close to the socialists organize a counter-petition supported by about 800 people (although it is disseminated by the Socialist party regional structures). This petition presents the same paranoid reaction as the one from January 2018, when the new history program was adopted and a declaration against it was presented in Parliament.

Under an order by the Ministry, the editors-in-chief of the *Bulvest 2000*, *Anubis*, *Domino* and *Riva* publishing houses force the authors to change their texts. The greatest resistance comes from the authors of *Bulvest 2000* and *Anubis*. At the end of August, Minister Valchev approves the new textbooks, in which the most serious shortcomings, mistakes and manipulations are eliminated.

### August 2019

What happened in Bulgaria is commented on by the Russian Government on their website *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* in an article by Alexander Samozhnev, entitled "History Textbooks in Bulgaria were Rewritten in Line with Euro-Atlantic Ideology".<sup>8</sup> The article from August 15, 2019 appeared immediately after the news on August 14 that the Minister of Education and Science, Krassimir Valchev, had approved the textbooks of all five publishing houses, after finally serious corrections were made in the texts about the Communist regime (1944-1989) and the transition period toward democracy (1989-2019). The article in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, however, produced false information about the changes in the sections dedicated to the Communist regime in the new Bulgarian history textbooks.

The author of the publication, Alexander Samozhnev, stated that "the Ministry of Education of Bulgaria has ordered the history textbooks for the upper grades to be rewritten." This is a false news, because on June 25 Minister Valchev announced that he would not approve the textbooks and asked the publishing houses to make numerous corrections.

"By order of the authorities, the Communist regime in the period from 1944 to 1989 was declared 'criminal'", writes the official press body of the government of the Russian Federation, whose article was distributed in Bulgaria by FOCUS News Agency.

This statement is also false, as the Russian article fails to inform the reader that the corrected and amended textbooks contain information that was previously missing – including the fact that the totalitarian regime of the Bulgarian Communist Party was declared criminal by an act passed in the Bulgarian National Assembly in 2000.

Further, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* claims that a commission for new textbooks existed, that came up with the initiative to revise the textbooks and that: "The reason was allegedly the statements of teachers who disagree with the assessments of the activities of the Bulgarian Communist Party, sent to the commission/.../ In this connection, information has been added about the repressive policy of the communists, about political prisoners and the economic crises caused by the large foreign debt", the Russian edition reads.

Here, too, it misrepresents the facts since Bulgarian teachers informed the *Truth and Memory Foundation* about some of the most striking manipulations in the new textbooks. The Russian publication found this fact inconvenient and failed to publish it.

However, the Russian publication refers to a little-known anonymous Bulgarian site *Ricochet*, which has advertised itself since 2018 as a "a project of independent journalists seeking the truth in the manipulated media space." *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* cites an article from this site from June 24, 2019, entitled "Whom are you deceiving, gentlemen?": "It seems that the ruling GERB party is led by stone-age primitive



Germany  
Lithuania  
Belarus  
Ukraine  
Czech Rep.  
Poland  
Hungary  
Romania  
Bulgaria  
Turkey

”  
Not one of the textbooks clarifies the ideology of communism and the implicit political terror embedded in it.

anti-communism and that Education Minister Krassimir Valchev praised the ‘civil position’ of the activists from the American University.”<sup>9</sup>

*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* republished most of the above-mentioned article on its new site, which states that “Teachers will howl with resentment at the new curriculum. But they will hardly dare to object because they will be immediately labeled ‘red renegades’. This is the situation in Bulgaria with freedom of conscience – and textbooks, of which half of the country’s history has been thrown away”, concludes the article in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, which copied the text from the Bulgarian site in question, published almost two months earlier.

### The Present Problematic Situation

There are still highly problematic texts in the textbooks, revised in the summer of 2019, with arbitrarily selected facts, and therefore, with highly manipulative conclusions.

Here is one of the most striking examples relating to the largest political terrorist act in Europe that took place in *Bulgaria in 1925. The bombing of the Cathedral Church in Sofia, where 150 people were killed* was organized and sponsored by the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow. How is this fact presented in the textbook of Bulvest 2000 publishing house?

**The Communist Party turned to organizing a major terrorist attack. It took place on April 16, 1925, when the attack on Sofia’s Sveta Nedelya Cathedral took place. The government responded to the terror with terror and in a short time succeeded in physically liquidating the Communist Party elite, the left-wing Agrarian party, and the anarchists, as well as many leftist intellectuals. This eliminated the danger from the left.**

In a small box next to the text of the lesson, data are given on the victims of the suppression of the July and September riots of 1923, giving only figures of those who fell on one side – between 1,500 and 2,000 people. It is

unknown why the thousand victims from the army and the state police were not mentioned. The fact that in 1924 the government gave a full amnesty to all participants in the riots is not mentioned at all... One sentence mentioned the victims of the bombing in 1925, which numbered 150 people, including women and children, without mentioning the more than 500 injured. Thus, the emphasis is entirely on “white terror”, without seeing the historical motivation - the terror was caused not by Tsankov’s government, but first by the June Paysan revolt, and then by the Communist Party under the orders of the Comintern. But the biggest distortion of the picture is the almost complete fog that has been cast on the activities of the Comintern to undermine Europe and in particular the decision to raise an uprising in Bulgaria to be called “the first anti-fascist uprising in the world.” Not to mention the missing fact that terrorists in Bulgaria were generously paid by Moscow throughout the entire interwar period.

**T**he narrative in the *Domino* publishing house’s textbook is no less problematic. There is an account of the repression of the banned Bulgarian Communist Party in 1924, but there is no mention of the State amnesty on the one hand, and on the other, the escalation of terrorist activity ordered by Moscow. As for the previous events of 1923, no textbook mentions that the communist leaders Georgi Dimitrov and Vasil Kolarov, sent by the Comintern to Bulgaria, did not “transfer” to Yugoslavia, but fled there on the second day after the riot was announced. At least their “Open Letter” to the Bulgarian workers and peasants was omitted – a cynical document written in Vienna, where the headquarters of the Comintern for Europe were located.

Anubis Publishing House reports that the “red terror” was answered with “white terror”, but the role of Moscow and the policy of destroying the state and military political elite in order to clear the way for the imposition of a Soviet republic in Bulgaria is concealed.

The texts in three of the new textbooks for the period of the communist regime in Bulgaria

and the so-called “transition” after 1989 also caused a real scandal.

There was a drastic lack of facts, of correlations between the events, and of historical assessments of the significance and consequences of the ruling parties’ policies. The role of the former Communist State security agents and repressive authorities were only mentioned, and the history of the communist concentration camps was reduced to a few figures and completely insignificant memories. The three state bankruptcies (so-called ‘debt crises’) caused by the failed economic policy of the Communist Party are not present in the texts. Only one textbook mentions that Bulgarian Communist party and state leader Zhivkov twice proposed in 1963 and again in 1973 to the Soviet authorities that Bulgaria merge in one way or another with the USSR!

**N**ot one of the textbooks clarifies the ideology of communism and the implicit political terror embedded in it. There is no data about the political terror in Bulgaria in order to compare it to other countries in the Eastern bloc. The fact is that in absolute and relative numbers, it was greatest in Bulgaria. The process of total ideological control, carried out through propaganda, education, and art, is not traced. The forced change of the socio-cultural foundation of the Bulgarian nation is not explained. There is not a single photo of the long line of the new propaganda symbols and especially of the monuments to the Soviet soldiers who “liberated” (not occupied!) Bulgaria from the non-existent (here) “monarcho-fascism” there.

But it seems that the most dangerous *longue duree* effect of this school propaganda is that the current state of Bulgarian society is no longer associated with its genesis, that is, the communist dictatorship; that the political terror and beheading of the Bulgarian political and cultural elite is not assessed as one of the most tragic genocides in Bulgarian history; that the economic and banking crises of 1991 and 1997 were not seen as part of a series of bankruptcies during the Communist regime; that it is not shown how half a century of social engineer-

ing has led to a lack of initiative, responsibility and freedom of choice; that the mass exodus from Bulgaria was also the result of Bulgaria’s post-communist rule, not of “democracy.”

**S**o where does that leave us? It turns out that 30 years after the fall of Communism in Bulgaria, the public “memory” of it is not only suppressed but also unarticulated. The reasons are numerous, but it is above all due to the extremely skillful substitution of the narrative about communism by particular communist and post-communist elites. Last but not least, non-communist circles were slow to come up with a coherent strategy for studying the recent past and the wide public dissemination of this knowledge in Bulgaria.

The ultimate result is that Bulgarians today have no clear reflection of the economic, social, cultural or psychological consequences of communism.

The fundamental question, however, is: what is the main reason for the refusal of the Bulgarian public as a whole to focus on the understanding and evaluation of communism both as an ideology and as a practice? Are these the skillfully directed media policies that have slowly, gradually and invariably abandoned the topic of communism in Bulgaria? Is this the “original sin” – the still not radically revised history textbooks? Is this the aging, fatigue, and frustration of the generation that went through this period? Is this the misunderstood “Bulgarian tolerance”, which will again bury the opportunity for historical and social assessment of our recent history? The pro-communist propaganda is successful because of the huge circulation of their historiography. And this historiography does not remain confined to the academic “ivory tower”; it daily maintains the myths of the “soz” in popular knowledge. This propaganda has created such a falsified historical “memory” that the efforts to correct it, unfortunately, have proved futile (In addition, the State Security officials preserved the monopoly on archival information until 2008).

For thirty years, we have remained an almost isolated island in the midst of the real historiographical battles and social catharsis that have

stirred Europe and changed forever the way a nation knows, understands and values its past.

## Conclusion

The battle to implement the discussed educational reform does not end with the adoption of new curricula or the revision of textbooks. It must continue with retraining teaching staff and vigorous activities involving extracurricular forms of education offered by experts in the field. Unfortunately, the Bulgarian Communist Party's successor – the Bulgarian Socialist Party – is again emerging as a fierce opponent of this form of decommunization in education by trying to obstruct the reform in every possible way and to maintain the old propaganda clichés about the communist regime between 1944 and 1989.

Unlike in Bulgaria, in all other former Soviet bloc countries the political debate on the communist past has come to an end, educational reform has been completed and the peers of Bulgarian students in Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary, Germany, and all the Baltic States have long had the opportunity to not only study this period but have a clear idea and assessment of the nature and consequences of the communist regimes forcibly imposed by the USSR on more than 100 million people across Eastern Europe following the Second World War.

Adequate teaching of the communist period and the subsequent period of transition in Bulgarian history is one of the most important tools for shaping young people's civic awareness and their understanding of universal human values. ●

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# Commemoration or Complicity: The [Im]possibility of Memorializing the Victims in a State of Denial

by Talin Suciyan

**M**emorializing acts of genocide, pogroms, assassinations of leading figures, racist lynchings and attacks are the most difficult issues that societies and states have to address, as the institution of the modern state lies at the core of these crimes. Contextualizing these crimes within the framework of human rights would perhaps make them visible. However, in essence, they are about collectivities and institutions. The structural and institutional superiority of the

one side (the perpetrator), and the inferiority and weakness of the other (the victim), is not necessarily related to the individuals involved. The power relationship is dictated by the superior side and its institutions.

In this article I will examine the role of two organizations in the context of Armenian genocide commemoration practices in Turkey, namely the Human Rights Associations' (IHD) Committee Against Racism and Discrimination (founded 1994) and Say Stop to Racism and Na-

IHD commemoration event in front of the Train Station in Kadıköy/Haydarpaşa, in Istanbul. This is the place, where Armenian intellectuals after April 24 were taken to Çankırı/Ayaş. PHOTO: AUTHOR



tionalism (DurDe), which was established after the assassination of Hrant Dink in January 2007, mobilizing various activists and grassroots networks. I will argue that despite the emergence of social and grassroots networks commemorating Armenian genocide, a clear vision of the state’s responsibility to recognize the Armenian genocide, to apologize and to take necessary steps for reparations have once again been marginalized and criminalized. I will refer to the commemorative acts, press releases and statements of IHD and DurDe analyzing the reasons for the marginalization of the former and the popularity of the latter. To this end, this paper will discuss the background and meaning of commemoration and memory politics in the absence of recognition and the pervasive denial of the crimes committed. Turkey is the only state in Europe which has structurally, politically, economically, culturally and socially institutionalized the denial of the annihilation of the indigenous populations of the region who, at the same time, had lived for centuries under Ottoman rule, constituting a considerable part of its Christian populations.

I will demonstrate the path which led to public commemoration practices that memorialize the mass violence, pogroms and/or genocide in Turkey. I will introduce the main actors behind these initiatives and analyze the connections between them, as well as their relationship to the state and its policies.

**T**he victims of genocide, massacres, exiles, pogroms and the murders of leading public figures had not been publicly commemorated in Turkey until the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> Instead, commemoration practices and policies were almost exclusively handled by the state in order to heroize the perpetrators of the above-mentioned crimes.

These strategies of memory politics can be seen in the naming of streets throughout Turkey after Talat and his fellow leaders of the Committee and Union Progress Party, who were responsible for conceiving and executing the genocide.

Furthermore, almost all national holidays and national festivities<sup>2</sup> are directly connected to the annihilation or exile of Christian



populations from their historic lands. Hence, as a country in denial, Turkey has vehemently denied all crimes committed by the state, even those of the Ottoman State. It should be stressed that it is the post-1923 elites, intellectuals, public opinion makers and civil society agents who have been mostly complicit in this denial, helping the state to normalize the crime and give impunity to the perpetrators. Thus, as I suggested elsewhere, Turkey has a post-genocide habitus of denial, in which everyday life and daily practices were all embedded in the denial of genocide, and crimes continued to be committed based on the reservoir of experiences gathered between 1915 and 1922.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, any commemorative event or practice also includes an interpellation to denial in one way or another.

### **First Commemorative Exhibit: Pogrom of September 6–7, 1955**

I had the good fortune to participate in one of the first public commemorative events to be organized by the Human Rights Association's (IHD) Istanbul Branch in 1996.<sup>4</sup> It commemorated the Pogrom of September 6–7, 1955 with an exhibit containing visual material from the pogrom in Istanbul accompanied by informative texts. It marked the event's 41<sup>st</sup> anniversary and was the first public commemoration to condemn the Pogrom on September 6–7, 1955, a state-orchestrated attack took place in which shops, houses, cemeteries, churches, synagogues and schools belonging to Christians and Jews were vandalized and plundered. Fahri Çoker, who was head of the Military Court of Cassation and who had collected a considerable amount of visual material and documentation of the destruction during his tenure as a judge, gave the number of attacked stores and shops as 4214.<sup>5</sup> According to the American Consular Archives (NARA), in Istanbul alone, 36 schools and over 60 churches were vandalized and plundered.<sup>6</sup> While these organized attacks are known to have occurred in Istanbul, İzmir and Ankara, their repercussions in other cities in which Christians and Jews continued to live during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century remain unknown. The attacks completely destroyed some

districts, shops, houses of Christians, and death toll, number of rape cases and exhumations of the dead were never officially declared. Nor did the state apologize for this crime, pay reparations or make restitution to the victims.

**T**he mid-1990s witnessed a series of intellectual activities and the flourishing of new publishing houses and publications which, in turn, gathered certain groups of people around issues that had remained untouched until this time. In 1993, the Aras Publishing House was established in Istanbul, predominantly publishing the works of Armenian authors in both Armenian and Turkish. The AGOS Weekly began publication in April 1996. The same year, Yelda Özcan, a leading feminist and anti-racist in Turkey, published her books through the Belge Publishing House, *Istanbul'da Diyarbakır'da Azalırken*<sup>7</sup> (Getting Minoritized in Istanbul and Diyarbakır) and *Çoğunluk Aydınlarında Irkçılık*<sup>8</sup> (Racism Among the Intellectuals of the Majority Population). She was a member of the HRA Istanbul Branch's Commission to Watch Minority Rights, founded in 1994. Her books were – and still are – mind openers for the readership in Turkish.

*Belge* published<sup>9</sup> a number of important books in Turkish for the first time, including Yves Ternon's *Les Arméniens Historie d'un genocide* in 1993, Vahakn Dadrian's *Genocide As a Problem of National and International Law: The World War I Armenian Case and Its Contemporary Legal Ramifications*, Franz Werfel's most famous literary work on the Armenian genocide, *The 40 Days of Musa Dagh* in 1997, as well as the memoir of an Islamcized Pontus Greek, *Tamama*, in 1996. In March 1995, *Birikim*, one of the monthly magazines closely connected to the intellectual circles mentioned here, published a special issue entitled "Ethnic Identities and Minorities."<sup>10</sup> In 2004, one of the organizers of the 1996 commemorative exhibit, a long-time editor-in-chief of the *Toplumsal Tarih* monthly, founded his own publishing house, Birzamanlar Publishing, which publishes works mainly about the Ottoman Empire and Turkey's non-Muslim intellectual and cultural heritage.

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[Yelda Özcan's] books were – and still are – mind openers for the readership in Turkish.

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Not every nation state is founded upon genocide and not every traumatic experience means genocide.”

While it can be seen that the activists’ publishing scrutinized human rights issues, with an emphasis on racism, discrimination and minorities in the history of the Republic, in contrast, the knowledge production of scholars from Turkey and about Turkey followed a more conventional and conservative path.

The critical historiography of the 1990s and 2000s attempted to look at certain events and peaks in state violence, but these attempts went no deeper than seeing them as part of an unpleasant chronology devoid of context, a chronology that particularly neglected the continuities between the Ottoman past and today’s Turkey in terms of the state’s criminal culpability and the complicity of the majority population. Instead, a romanticized fantasy of Turkey’s multi-ethnic and diverse past was emphasized. All the “new” historiography had to offer was a basic list of ‘events’, starting with the Armenian genocide, continuing with the enactment of a long list of discriminatory laws, organized attacks, massacres and pogroms carried out against non-Muslims and non-Turks, as well as military coups.<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, this “new chronology” had neither scope for self-critique nor questioning the meaning of genocide as a founding act, creating structural and institutional differences that divided the whole society into perpetrators and victims. On the contrary, this time, the very well-known rupture thesis, arguing that there was a colossal rupture from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey based on the changes undertaken in the 1920s such as clothing, the adoption of the Western alphabet, time and calendar was reframed as disconnecting people from their own histories.<sup>12</sup> Further, arguing that the foundation of a nation state is a “traumatic experience,”<sup>13</sup> without explaining why, serves to normalize and relativize the experiences of the victims of the genocide. This assumption may or may not be true, but not every nation-state is founded upon genocide and not every traumatic experience equates to genocide.

Through this relativization, the best of both worlds is enjoyed: Genocide as Turkey’s foun-

dational act has been deliberately denied and a discourse of almost universal and equal victimhood for everyone is created. Further, the deep roots of the Turkish modernization project to which the annihilation of its own populations and the confiscation of their property were both central, is avoided and marginalized, and generations benefiting from this crime are turned into victims. Parallel to the equally victimized society and state,<sup>14</sup> reiteration of the meaning of diversity<sup>15</sup> in an imagined and yet never-existing harmonious age produces a patronizing, appropriating discourse of the past. Devoid of context and consequences, the new style of historiography, with its century-old content, can claim to be a very critical historiography, as it dares to *mention* the criminal past of the state.

Hence, it can be argued that this line of argumentation – a “traumatic experience” for all in an equally victimized society, without perpetrators and without victims, and therefore without consequences – can be considered to be an intervention of the genocide recognition process in Turkey, which was started in the 1990s by a handful of activists and publishers gathered around the IHD.

The discourse of feeling/commemorating the pain of the victim, in which no perpetrator was named, no recognition was prioritized, no responsibility was assigned and no compensation was claimed has to be read within this scholarly context. The newly established non-profit-organization DurDe (*Say Stop to Racism and Nationalism*) embraced and reproduced these claims, which were primarily rooted in the intellectual trajectory of Turkey’s academic circles in 2000s. The lack of self-critique, disregarding the genocidal roots of Turkey’s modernization project, the structural and irreversible consequences of the crime of genocide, imagining that various oppressions and victimizations equaling one and other, all remained unquestioned.

### First Genocide Commemoration by the Human Rights Association

The Human Rights Association’s Istanbul Branch (IHD) started commemorating the

Armenian genocide through press conferences, the first of which was held in 2005 on its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary, April 24, 2005, with press releases. Prior to public events, the IHD's annual press release on the genocide used to be read at a press conference by the leading human rights advocate, lawyer Eren Keskin and only a handful of newspapers would publish it as a news item. Its first press release called for respect for the pain of the Armenians:<sup>16</sup>

**“On the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of April 24, 1915 we, as the human rights defenders in Turkey, deeply share the grief of both the Armenian citizens of Turkey and the children and grandchildren of those Armenians who were driven from their homeland and who witnessed the murder of their beloved ones. We say to them ‘your grief is ours.’ We too will not forget what has happened in order not to let it happen again.”<sup>17</sup>**

A year later, on April 24, 2006, the IHD emphasized the continuity of the crimes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and connected the human rights struggle in Turkey with the mourning of Armenian losses resulting from the genocide.

**“Today we, as the human rights defenders, would like to address all Armenians in Turkey and elsewhere in the world and tell them ‘we want to share the pain in your hearts and bow down before the memory of your lost ones. They are also our losses. Our struggle for human rights in Turkey is at the same time our mourning for our common losses and a homage paid to the genocide victims.’”<sup>18</sup>**

In both press releases, genocide was contextualized within Turkey's continuing history of collective violence, and argued that without facing this history and calling what had happened by its proper name, no intervention would be possible into the vicious circle of human rights abuses in Turkey. Secondly, both press releases

argued that the “losses and pain” of Armenians were shared by the organizers.

**D**uring these years, there was no public debate among scholars or intellectuals about what a commemoration would mean or how it could be carried out in a country in which both the state and society have been deeply committed to denial for almost a century, a commitment which has continued to take lives.<sup>19</sup> In the same vein, while a group of Turkish and Kurdish activists were commemorating the “losses and the pain of the Armenians”, the question of agency was hardly ever discussed. Simple questions were completely ignored. Such questions included: “Who is entitled to commemorate whom?” and “In the absence of any official recognition by the perpetrator state, are the representatives of the perpetrator generation's descendants entitled to commemorate the victims?”

DurDe came into being as a response to Hrant Dink's assassination and was supported by the organizers of the *I Apologize* campaign, which will be discussed in this paper.

In 2007, the murder of Hrant Dink radically changed the situation. It was particularly after the foundation of the AGOS Weekly that Hrant Dink became one of the most popular faces on Turkish television. It should be noted that at that time, Turkish viewers were used to watching open-ended talk shows that would go on for hours, often not finishing until the early hours of the morning. Turkey's recent history, including its discrimination against Christians and Jews, were publicly and almost regularly discussed on television. After Dink's murder in January 2007, public events commemorating the Armenian genocide started to be organized, initially (again) by the IHD, with a panel discussion at Bilgi University.<sup>20</sup> In December 2008, the *I Apologize* campaign was launched.

**“My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings**

”  
In 2007, the murder of Hrant Dink radically changed the situation.

**and pain of my Armenian brothers. I apologize to them.”<sup>21</sup>**

30,000 people put their names under this text. Organized by four people,<sup>22</sup> the *I Apologize* campaign was supported by a substantial group of journalists, activists and academics. The large number of signatories suggests it was successful in engaging people who had previously never taken a stance on the issue.

**T**wo detailed and critical analyses showing the context, background, shortcomings and conceptual inadequacies of the *I Apologize* campaign, as well as its repercussions both inside and outside Turkey, including a textual analysis, was written by Marc Mamigonian<sup>23</sup> and Ayda Erbal.<sup>24</sup> The center of their critique included the following salient points: the use of one of the many Armenian terms for the genocide, *Medz Yeghern* (which translates as *Great Catastrophe*), while avoiding the use of Armenian genocide, as the former lacked agency;<sup>25</sup> the possibility or impossibility of apologizing for crimes committed by others,<sup>26</sup> as, in this particular case, intellectuals and individuals signed the text for an unnamed crime whose perpetrator was not mentioned in the text; the continuing demonization of the Armenian diaspora by the organizers of the apology campaign;<sup>27</sup> aspects of the organization of the campaign, its top-down character; the reproduction of power asymmetry between Armenian public opinion makers, activists and academics and the organizers of the campaign throughout the entire process<sup>28</sup> and, most importantly, the organizers’ desire to facilitate the work of the state.<sup>29</sup>

In retrospect, it may be appropriate to consider the murder of Hrant Dink by state-orchestrated forces and the *I Apologize* campaign that followed at the end of 2008 as a turning point in the crystallization of the divisions in commemorative activities.

Dink’s assassination was ultimately the result of his visibility as an outspoken Armenian. His statements on the Armenian genocide and his publication of the news item on the Armenian origins of Mustafa Kemal’s adopted daughter Hatun Sebıliciyan, known as Sabiha Gökçen,

and the fact that he was threatened by three National Security Agents (MIT) at the governors’ office of Istanbul as a result of the item’s publication, were all decisive factors that led to his assassination.<sup>30</sup>

**W**hile members of the Human Rights Association’s Committee against Racism and Discrimination reflected on the critiques by Mamigonian and Erbal and contributed to the debate,<sup>31</sup> these pieces were ignored by the organizers of the *I Apologize* campaign.

Their deafness to such critiques became visible once more in a March 2015 conference organized by the IFEA (Institut Français d’Etudes Anatoliennes) in Istanbul on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide. Three of the organizers of the *I Apologize* campaign were on one panel in which they emphasized the difficulties and persecution they had endured as organizers of the *I Apologize* campaign.

They also stated that many of the signatories had retracted their signatures after a while as they had felt threatened by the potential danger or even the possibility of losing their positions once their names had been discovered on the list, which was particularly “dangerous” for civil servants who had signed the text.<sup>32</sup> Implicit in the campaign organizers’ presentations was their consensus that as their actions had taken place under dreadful conditions of state denial, the realization of the campaign had to be regarded as an extraordinary achievement.

From 2010, a new chapter began as both the IHD and the groups organized around DurDe held commemorative events in public. The IHD chose places of memory: the prison in Sultanahmet in which the Armenian intellectuals had been held before their exile and death in 1915; or Haydarpaşa train station, from where the intellectuals had been transported to Çankırı Prison.<sup>33</sup> DurDe prioritized visibility and centrality in its commemorative events, which were held in Istanbul’s Taksim Square.

After the IHD’s considerably smaller event, it joined the much larger event in Taksim Square which was attended by around 3,000 people and where the visibility, police control and tension





Commemorative event of DurDe in the entrance of Istiklal Avenue.

PHOTO: AUTHOR

were much higher. Gathering under the central statue of the founders of the Republic in Taksim Square to commemorate the Armenian genocide was one of the most oxymoronic experiences. Egemen Özbek, who also participated in these events, wrote a doctoral dissertation on the commemorations in Turkey (2016) in which he rightly discusses at length the meaning of commemorating the Armenian genocide under the most central and nationalist monument in Turkey.<sup>34</sup>

In 2010, DurDe used a similar statement to the statement used by the IHD in 2005: “This is our pain, this mourning is for all of us.” While the IHD changed its emphasis from “loss and pain” to recognition of the genocide, naming the crime and bringing the memory of the places associated with the crime back into the public mind, the larger groups organized around DurDe continued along the line of “pain” and “mourning” for “all of us.” Following the murder of Sevag Balıkcı in 2011, the argument of a “common pain” was even more problematic as it was obvious there were no “common” targets.

Each year on April 24, a small group of Armenians would visit the Armenian ceme-

tery, mourning and praying for their dead. In 2012, the IHD added Sevag Balıkcı’s grave to the Şişli Armenian Cemetery at the places of commemoration for that day.<sup>35</sup> First, with the murder of Hrant Dink and later with the murder of Sevag Balıkcı, new victims were added, and the commemorative events on April 24, have become a full day program starting from in the early morning and continuing until the late evening.

The events in 2015 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide started before April 24.<sup>36</sup> The first event was a concert “In Memoriam: April 24” which involved Armenian musicians and artists from around the world. Although the texts and poems recited and referred to during the concert were related to the genocide, the content and structure of the concert itself had no specific characteristics of a commemoration. A concert organized in Istanbul on the occasion of April 24<sup>th</sup> was seemingly transformed into a commemorative event merely by the involvement of both Armenian and non-Armenian artists. Two days later on April 24, activities started early with visits to the houses of the



Armenian ethnomusicologist Gomidas and writer Rupen Sevag in Istanbul. The event was organized by a group of Armenians with the ultimate goal of placing “stolpersteins” in front of these houses, however the plan was never permitted to materialize. This was followed by the Armenian commemorative event at the Armenian cemetery. The IHD gathered in front of the Ibrahim Paşa Palace where the Armenian intellectuals had been kept on the night of April 24, 1915 and were later taken to the Haydarpaşa train station on the Asian side of the city. The group walked from the palace to the shore, crossed over to the Asian side of the city and continued the commemorative event in front of the station. This meant that the participants walked through the most crowded parts of the city, attracting the attention of passersby. The IHD’s message for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was directed at the state, asking it to stop denying and recognize the Armenian genocide, as well as issue an apology and offer compensation.<sup>37</sup> The next stop was the grave of Sevag Balıkcı, after which they were unable to continue on to Taksim Square like in some previous years as it had been closed to demonstrators due to the 2013 Gezi Protests. Thus, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide, organized by DurDe, was held further down in the first quarter of the İstiklal pedestrian street. Members of the Armenian diaspora, predominantly from the United States, participated in the commemoration and one of them read the opening speech.<sup>38</sup> One of the 100-year-old problems resurfaced yet again at this point, namely, the issue of representation. What is the meaning of a Diasporan Armenian making the opening speech at a commemorative event in Istanbul on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of genocide in the absence of recognition? Who did she represent? Or better put, can anybody represent the Armenian diaspora – or Armenians in general? These questions remain unanswered, as they were for the last 100 years. While the first speech related to the speaker’s family history, the second speech was delivered by one of the spokespersons representing the organizers.<sup>39</sup> This spokesperson made an appeal to acknowledge history and asked for an apology. However,

left unsaid was by what method are we to face this history, who specifically should be doing it, and what the consequences of doing so would be. Thus, the way, content and agent all remained anonymous. *Nor Zartonk*, an Armenian grassroots organization, joined the group from the other end of the street, carrying posters of the Armenian intellectuals killed in 1915, as well as posters showing the recently murdered Armenians: Sevag Balıkcı (2011) and Maritsa Küçük, an elderly woman attacked and killed in the Samatya district of Istanbul (2012).

**S**elf-denial and invisibility are the preconditions of Armenian existence in Turkey. The commemorative events over the last decade, particularly the larger events organized by DurDe, insisted upon not addressing the perpetrator, the responsibility of the perpetrator generation’s and, more importantly, failed to address the state as the organizer and executor of the crime. The exact same points that were criticized in the case of the *I apologize* campaign, whose organizers were among the supporters of DurDe, can be applied to the messages given at this commemorative event. The discourse of a “common pain” and vague concepts of “facing the history”, “apology”, with no specific content or plan, placed the victims at the center of the commemoration while, on every level, the perpetrators remained untouched and anonymous. The principle of impunity for the perpetrators prevails to this day and makes Armenian the target of racist attacks, regardless of which country they live in.

After 2016, visibility for these commemorative events was no longer welcome. The Taksim Square commemorations were moved to the end of the 1.4 km long İstiklal Street and, in 2019, people were no longer allowed to gather on this street at all but had to move to the Şişhane district, which has a much smaller pedestrian area. In the summer of 2016, one of the two leading figures of DurDe, attached himself to the government forces and resigned from the organization. He continues his career in one of the think tanks funded by the ruling party. In 2018, DurDe, as in previous years, contacted the police to notify them about its commemorative

event and was given permission to hold the event on the condition that it did not use the word “genocide.” As always, the IHD used this word, asked for recognition of the crime, apology and reparations. Four of its members were taken into custody. In 2019, the police heavily intervened in the IHD’s commemorative event in Sultanahmet, in front of the building used as prison. The organizers were forced to move to the IHD’s office.

**F**ollowing the coup attempt in July 2016, two of the four organizers of the *I apologize* campaign left Turkey, like many others who were actively involved either as participants or organizers. The judicial process which started right after Hrant Dink’s murder has fallen far short of establishing a sense of justice over the last 13 years.

Analyzing the commemoration practices and discourses reveals a wider and even more complicated pattern in Turkey, namely the denial of her foundational act. Under the autocratic regime since 2016, the need for justice, recognition of the crimes committed, and condemnation of criminal impunity became much more relevant to larger segments of its society. Disconnecting this reality from the state’s genocidal foundation conceals the systemic nature of the problem, and more dangerously reduces the ongoing situation to a regime problem stemming from the ruling party. This in turn fuels the denialist machinery in every aspect of life. ●

## References

- 1 This does not mean that the affected groups would not commemorate their victims, but they would do so in small circles.
- 2 For example, April 23, the day before April 24, is National Sovereignty and Children’s Day, May 19 is Youth and Sport Day, as well as the commemoration day of the Pontus Genocide, and August 30, the Day of Victory, marks the beginning of the exile of the remaining Armenians and Greeks after the genocide.
- 3 For further information, see Talin Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey: Post-genocide Society, Politics and History*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).
- 4 I would like to thank Ayşe Günaysu from the IHD Committee Against Racism and Discrimination for providing me with details of this first commemorative event in Istanbul. Some of the committee members

- included: Yelda Özcan, Ayşe Günaysu, Neşe Ozan and Osman Köker.
- 5 Dilek Güven, *6-7 Eylül Olayları*. (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2005): 181.
  - 6 *Ibid.*, 178–9.
  - 7 Yelda, *İstanbul’da Diyarbakır’da Azalırken*. (Istanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1996).
  - 8 Yelda, *Çoğunluk Aydınlarında Irkçılık*. (Istanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1998).
  - 9 20 years after the founding of the Belge Publishing House, in 1998, its co-founder Ayşenur Zarakolu received the International Freedom to Publish Award given by the International Publisher’s Association (IPA) at the Frankfurt Book Fair.
  - 10 Birikim, Özel Sayı: *Etnik Kimlikler ve Azınlıklar*, March–April 1995, no., 71–72.
  - 11 For example, see Leyla Neyzi, “Oral history and memory studies in Turkey,” in *Turkey’s Engagement with Modernity: Conflict and Change in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Celia Kerlaske, Kerem Öktem, Philip Robins eds., (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 446. She also includes the earthquake of Marmara in 1999 in her list of events.
  - 12 There are numerous books with similar claims. On politics of public memory, see Esra Özyürek, eds. *The Politics of Public Memory in Turkey*. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007): 3–6.
  - 13 *Ibid.*, 11.
  - 14 In this discourse, the Ottoman Empire and its subsequent state, Turkey, were the victims of Western imperialist powers. It was claimed that the actions of the Empire and Turkey were the result of this victimization, almost as a self-defense reflex.
  - 15 See, for example, Ebru: *Cultural Diversity in Turkey* ed. by Atilla Durak, Ayşegül Altınay, Akif Kurtuluş. (Istanbul: Metis Pub., 2007). “Ebru (...) is a volume of photographs of various portraits of people living in different parts of Turkey by photographer, Atilla Durak, who traveled through Turkey to visualize the country’s cultural diversity. Around 300 photographs are accompanied by short texts. The project was funded by New York based non-governmental organization Moon and Stars Project, the Open Society Foundations, the German Heinrich Böll Foundation, as well as BEKO, TV channel NTV, etc. The Turkish Ministry of Culture in 2008 sponsored the book’s participation at the international Book Fair in Frankfurt, Germany. For further information, see the unpublished Magister thesis written by Yeliz Soytemel, *Cultural Diversity Discourse in Turkey: From Backward to Exotic – A Comparative Approach to Imaginations of Populations*, September 30, 2013, (Munich: LMU): 5–6. For a published critique of the same book and the exhibits, see Hrach Bayadyan, “Waving the myth of a Europeanizing Turkey”, June 6 and 11, 2011, <https://hetq.am/en/article/2070>, <https://hetq.am/en/article/1887>
  - 16 IHD, Press Release, April 24, 2005.
  - 17 *Ibid.*
  - 18 IHD, Press Release, April 24, 2006.
  - 19 Continued losses include Sevag Balıkcı, who was killed at the military barracks on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011, during his obligatory military service; a Chaldean couple Şimuni



After 2016, visibility for these commemorative events was no longer welcome.

- and Hürmüz Diril, who have been missing since December 2019; Şimuni Diril found dead in March 2020 and her husband Hürmüz is still missing.
- 20 The first public event was a panel discussion at Bilgi University with the participation of Ara Sarafian from the Gomidas Institute (London), Ragıp Zarakolu from Belge Publishing, writer Erdoğan Aydın and lawyer Eren Keskin from the IHD's Istanbul Branch. For further information, see <http://m.bianet.org/bianet/azinliklar/106544-1915-le-hesaplamadan-demokratik-cogulcu-bir-yasam-zor> accessed September 8, 2020.
  - 21 The website of the campaign is no longer available. For more see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L\\_Apologize\\_campaign](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L_Apologize_campaign)
  - 22 Ali Bayramoğlu (journalist, columnist) Cengiz Aktar (political scientist, journalist, writer), Ahmet İnsel (economist, writer, one of the founders of the İletişim Publishing House) and Baskın Oran (political scientist, columnist). All of them are well known in Turkey and abroad from their opinion pieces, columns and numerous scholarly and non-scholarly publications.
  - 23 Marc Mamigonian, "Commentary on the Turkish Apology Campaign," in *The Armenian Weekly*, April 2009. <https://armenianweekly.com/2009/04/21/commentary-on-the-turkish-apology-campaign/>
  - 24 Ayda Erbal, "Mea Culpas, Negotiations, Apologias" in *Reconciliation, Civil Society and The Politics of Memory: Transnational Initiatives in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Birgit Schwelling eds. (Bielefeld:Transkript, 2015): 51-96.
  - 25 Mamigonian, "Commentary on the Turkish Apology Campaign."
  - 26 Ibid.
  - 27 Ayşe Günaysu "Letters from Istanbul: About the Apology Campaign," *Armenian Weekly*, January 10, 2009, 11 in Mamigonian "Commentary on the Turkish." Mamigonian refers to Ayşe Günaysu's following comments: "We now hear some of the initiators of the campaign trying to use the apology as a means to fight the use of the word genocide and hamper the work of those who seek the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. They portray those seeking recognition as the twin sisters and brothers of the Turkish fascists, and they present the 'diaspora' as the enemy of any reconciliation...[B]y their discourse, they contribute to the demonization of those who do use the word genocide."
  - 28 Erbal, "Mea Culpas, Negotiations, Apologias," 101.
  - 29 Mamigonian, "Commentary on the Turkish Apology." Mamigonian used the translation of Baskın Oran's statement referred to in Günaysu's article. One of the four organizers of the campaign, academic and AGOS columnist, Oran, stated the following: "The Prime Minister should be praying for our campaign. Parliaments around the world were automatically passing resolutions. These are going to stop now. The diaspora has softened. The international media has started to no longer use the word genocide" (December 19, 2008). For further information, see Günaysu "Letters from Istanbul," 11.
  - 30 For further information, see Yetvart Danzikyan, "Hrant Niçin Öldürüldü", in *Birikim*, no. 214. <https://www.birikimdergisi.com/dergiler/birikim/1/sayi-214-subat-2007/2397/hrant-dink-nicin-olduruldu/3393>
  - 31 See Ayşe Günaysu's contributions in the *Armenian Weekly* and *Özgür Gündem* on commemorations, public discussions on Armenian genocide, the *I Apologize* campaign and human rights abuses in Turkey.
  - 32 A special volume was planned to be published after the one-day conference, but to my knowledge it never came to fruition.
  - 33 IHD Commemoration of the Armenian genocide at Haydarpaşa train station on April 24, 2010.
  - 34 I would like to thank Egemen Özbek for sharing his unpublished doctoral dissertation with me: *Commemorating Armenian Genocide: The Politics of Memory and National Identity*, (Ottawa: Carlton University): 433-45. I also participated in both events mentioned.
  - 35 IHD Press Release, 2012.
  - 36 For a detailed account and analysis of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations, see, Talin Suciyan, "Toplumsal Anma Pratikleri Şekillenirken-2," in *Azadlık*, <https://azadalik.com/2015/06/21/toplumsal-anma-pratikleri-sekillenirken-bolum-ii-istanbul-24-nisan-2015/> accessed September 10, 2020.
  - 37 IHD press release.
  - 38 The speech was held by Prof. Heghnar Watenpaugh of UC Davis.
  - 39 The speech was held by lawyer and activist Nurcan Kaya.

## Summary

# Remembrance as a Weapon for Political Manipulation

by David Gaunt and Tora Lane

**M**any contributions to this report on memory cultures in the Baltic and East European region reveal disturbing tendencies to control and politicize, at times even weaponizing how the past is to be remembered. Some articles show the great extent to which authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning governments actively intervene in how crucial parts of their country's history is to be written, taught, researched, remembered, commemorated or neglected and ignored. Other articles document the failure of governments to deal with restitution for past injustices, how they forbid access to important state archives, hinder the teaching of the history of contemporary events, withdraw funding for or close independent research institutions. While these manipulative tendencies are not new, the degree to which present-day East European politicians involve themselves in the memory of the past is a growing academic and civic concern as they contribute to undermining trust in scientific and humanities research and further polarizing society. In addition, the violent protests over election fraud in the Belarusian 2020 election show the collapse of dialogue between the government and civil society that, as Andrej Kotljarchuk reveals, through the use of seemingly innocent symbols such as flags, visualize deeply antipathetic politicized forms of remembrance of the history of that country's national symbols now playing out in the streets.

### The Multi Catastrophic Past

The countries of Eastern Europe have experienced a series of horrific periods during the 20<sup>th</sup> century which most West European countries were spared. Harsh

politicized debates rage in the East over which period or regime was more catastrophic, more unjust, more anti-national than the any others. In the Baltic states and Eastern borderlands of present-day Poland and western Ukraine there was the following succession occurred: first, a heavy-handed occupation 1939-41 by the Soviet Union with accompanying confiscation of property and wealth, arrests, destruction or deportation of elites. This was followed in 1941-45 by occupation by Nazi Germany accompanied by the near total extermination of the Jewish and Roma minorities, seducing the population to collude with the killings.

The third disaster was the destruction and population dislocation that was the consequence of the World War II battles between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany that were fought along the eastern front. Fourth, the long period of totalitarian communist rule under Soviet tutelage followed, with repression of human rights, persecution of dissidents and economic mismanagement. Finally, after the fall of the Soviet Empire in 1989-91 came a short period of tense scary excitement at the prospect of becoming like the "West" but quickly disintegrated into depressing social and economic shock-therapy with ensuing industrial collapse that some countries still suffer from, when coupled to bank failures, bankruptcies, inflation, devaluation, recession, ingrown patterns of corruption and misused tax revenue. In some countries, politicians rooted in the fallen communist regime were able to establish new parties and hold on to power, employing similar but milder methods of domination and cronyism while upholding the appearance of democracy. According to

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Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev, in the final analysis Eastern Europeans have become distrustful of democratic institutions and lost belief in both the market and the state, questioned the truthfulness of media and the legitimacy of authority.<sup>1</sup>

**A** cultural climate of confusion emerged in which there was reason to doubt state sponsored versions of history. But instead of putting a lid on the discourse on the past, it created a surfeit of rival historical memories competing for dominance in the public sphere. Solitary frozen or suppressed memories, that were worshiped only as local truths or developed by political émigrés, directly challenged Soviet-era history teaching. A case in point is the Canadian-Ukrainian diaspora's commemoration in the 1980s of the 1932-33 famine, now known as *Holodomor* as well as its glorification of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists. Soviet historiography focuses solely on their collaboration with the Nazi occupation. The competition between memory warriors was never balanced and those who ruled could use the power and influence of government to let their version dominate in the form of various newly-created institutions for "national memory". At the same time the monopoly on recounting the past slipped out of the hands of professional historians and became a plaything of varieties of public discourse, media communications, entertainment, and politics, all of them clamouring for attention.

This shift is well illustrated in the article on Poland included here by Joanna Beata Michlic. She identifies two post-Cold War phases in official treatment of the national past. The first phase that extended from 1989 to about 2010 she characterizes as "pluralistic" in which previously repressed "frozen memory" was invited into public discourse, sometimes for the very first time outside the circles of family and friends. This found the support of scholarly research into "the most purged, neglected and shameful memories of the national past, namely, the memories of the dark past concerning the attitudes [to] and treatment of Polish Jews and other ethnic and religious minorities such as the Lemkos by the majority." However, this pluralistic phase of retrieving repressed memory was followed by its complete opposite. Since 2010, and particularly since the right-wing PiS party took power in 2015 a rejection of pluralism has occurred.

Michlic sees this as part of a "radical counter revolution" and official memory of the past is now driven by "narrow, ethno-nationalist visions of mono-cultural and mono-religious Poland and its values, symbols and traditions, manifested in a variety of forms ranging from the mild to extreme." The exclusion model of remembrance has not been able to wholly root out the pluralistic model of memorialization, resulting in overlapping "wars over history" including "bloody battlefields". For instance, there is on-going conflict between the PiS party and the European Solidarity Museum in Gdansk over how to represent the importance of the Round Table Agreement negotiations in 1989 between, among others, the lead-

ers of labour union *Solidarność* with the communist government, that led to semi-free elections. The museum presents this as a heroic break-through even though the deal was not ideal, while PiS sees it as an abandonment of "Poland's conservative national values" and is particularly critical to the role of Lech Wałęsa, the first freely-elected president 1990-1995. The government has been also critical of the representation of Polish-Jewish relations by the

very successful POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw and refused, in the face of compact protests, to reinstate its founding director, Professor of History, Dariusz Stoła.

**A** very similar picture of the transition away from pluralistic to monolithic national conservative memory is drawn by János M. Rainer for Hungary. Here the watershed came in 2010 in the form of the electoral victory of the nationalist FIDESZ political party (the Hungarian Civic Alliance) led by Viktor Orbán. Although liberal from the start, this party changed radically to claim that all liberal or left-wing parties were inherently anti-national and served the interests of foreign powers. It began a coordinated campaign to rid Hungary of the "left-wing interpretation of history." In the Hungarian perspective, according to Rainer, the issue of how to remember the past was a matter of ideological importance only for "right-wing radical" politics, whereas the liberals and left-wing governments encouraged professional historical research and preserved academic freedom in the universities. But as trained historians de-ideologized, the public discourse on history re-ideologized. A series of inter-locking nationalistic

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counter-institutions was established in 2013 to aggressively propagate the new brand of memory. They are: the Institute for Political Transformation Research and Archive, the Veritas Research Institute for History, the National Remembrance Committee, and the Institute for National Heritage. One prong in this attack was re-interpreting the consequences of the bloody 1956 uprising which FIDESZ preferred to see as a national insult created by communist politicians and shaped through Soviet foreign intervention, rather than the heroic revolt previously commemorated by the Hungarian left. As is well-known after years of harassment, beginning in 2017, the Central European University was forced to leave Hungary in 2019 and its founder, the philanthropist George Soros has been demonized in countless anti-semitic political rants.

**A** different trajectory emerges in Yuliya Yurchuk's article on Ukraine but it has the same ending with governmental management and control over the remembrance of contemporary history. Ukrainian memory unfolds as a reaction to Soviet historiography and Russian aggression. In newly independent Ukraine and Lithuania, forms of remembrance that countered the Soviet narrative had been formed by a diaspora of politically-active refugees and a collective of non-government organizations, intellectuals, groups of former political prisoners, local activists and amateur historians. They emphasized the centrality of the *Holodomor* famine and accused the Soviet leadership of intentional genocide, and they glorified World War II armed resistance of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

At the time that it made its political breakthrough, the new Ukrainian narrative of anti-Soviet victimhood and resistance had very little support in historical research, but nevertheless all presidents since independence have promoted the memory of the *Holodomor* famine as a politically orchestrated disaster targeting particularly Ukraine.

The anti-Soviet and anti-Russian memory trend spiralled after 2014 after Russia occupied Crimea and launched a hybrid war in the Donbas region. From that moment on having the correct interpretation of history became a matter of national security. A package of "De-communization laws" passed the legislature. Among the laws was a prohibition on criticizing those warriors who fought for the "independence of Ukraine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century", which was particularly relevant for the nationalistic resistance groups. Professional historians of

the Ukraine Institute of History supported the war effort by, among other things, forming the Likbez Historical Front. In 2016-18 this group published a series of volumes named "History Without Censorship". Yurchuk concludes "history becomes a weapon in the on-going war in Ukraine."

In contrast, the shift in the thrust of memory in Belarus took place after 1994 with the first election of Aliaksandr Lukashenka as president. Immediately after Belarus became independent in 1991 there was an important revival of the memory of its medieval greatness in the form of the sprawling Grand Duchy of Lithuania with its continual wars against Muscovy and its role in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which was famous for its religious tolerance and multi-ethnic social structure. However, with Lukashenka in power came a re-orientation towards rapprochement with Russia. This involved creating a positive image of the Soviet past which emphasized the centrality of the "Great Patriotic War" and portrayed all forms of nationalist freedom fighters as Nazi collaborators. The pro-Soviet trend, however, has been toned down even before Russia invaded and annexed Crimea. The government of Belarus has been stable until 2020 as an authoritarian police-state and, according to Aliaksei Lastouski, it practices an "exaggerated level of state control over the politics of memory". Also, in 2014 Russia enacted a Law to prevent the "rehabilitation of Nazism" (called the Yarovaya Act after its promoter) but which in reality criminalized any criticism of Soviet military activities during World War II.

Other recent cases of the direct intervention of East European politicians and governments in historical research or in public memorialization are recorded in the Network of Concerned Historians Annual Report of 2020. These include the efforts of Albanian parliamentarians to prevent the Institute for the Crimes of Communism, created in 2010, from investigating possible war crimes committed by communist guerrilla fighters during World War II.

A slightly similar situation evolved in Kosovo resulting in the Prime Minister dismissing his adviser historian Shkelzen Gashi who had maintained that some soldiers in the Kosovo Liberation Army had committed war crimes in the 1998-99 war. Parliamentarians introduced a law for the "Protection of the Kosovo Liberation Army War Values" that would prohibit any future criticism. In Belarus, before the present conflict between the people and the government, there were clashes over commemorating the *Dzien Voli* (Freedom Day) in March which is seen by the

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opposition as the foundation of the first independent Belarusian State in 1918. Efforts to commemorate on March 25, 2018 were broken up by heavy-handed police.

### Cultures of Victimization

Increasingly, appeals are made to governments and parliaments to recognize the historical traumas of groups, usually repressed or subjected minorities. The most well-known campaigns to gain official recognition of historical injustices concern genocide, slavery, colonization, and racial discrimination.

Urgent and well-documented claims for recognition of the genocide of millions of Christians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I have been made by the Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks. The Republic of Turkey, that Empire's successor state, has denied this and countered by claiming that far greater numbers of Turks were killed during the same war. Activists pressure parliaments in other countries to defy Turkey and make statements recognizing the events specifically as "genocide". They put effort into mobilizing like-minded supporters and become dependent on the support of third parties, who are often not very informed about the events in question. Such political recognitions of Ottoman genocide have been made in a handful of countries, among them Sweden, and on the lower level in a range of federal and municipal agencies, always under the threat of Turkish retaliation. As Talin Suciyan's contribution shows, making compromises by using alternative formulations that avoid the term "genocide" prove unacceptable to the families of the victims and their organizations. Something similar can be seen in the case of Roma and Sinti (formerly called Gypsies) who demand that as victims of Nazi Germany repression and partial extermination, they be included under the term "Holocaust". This caused immediate and hitherto unresolved conflict with Jewish representatives who see the annihilation of Europe's Jews as completely unique, arguing that to include the Roma would dilute the power of the term.

Calls for third-party political instances to recognize the past victimization of a group is a relatively new phenomenon. Sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning speak of a "culture of victimization" that they found in university environments, but which has bearing on other forms of discourse on past traumas. They see transitions of moral responses from that of an "honour" culture in

which a person who is wronged by another is expected to retaliate directly as in a feud, shoot-out or verbal challenge, into a culture of "dignity" in which wronged persons takes the position of ignoring the hurt, standing morally higher than the perpetrator. This transition finally results in a culture of "victimhood" in which victims do not or cannot retaliate or ignore but instead appeal to higher authority for redress.<sup>2</sup> It is possible to see this shift in the representation of the Holocaust in Israel. As

Per Anders Rudling observes victimhood played little role in early memory, instead the heroic Jewish resistance of the Warsaw ghetto was central. Later and after the trial of Eichmann representation re-focused on victimhood in the extermination camps. One aspect of the argument within this final stage is emphasizing a position of innocence vis-vis the thoroughly evil perpetrators, which involves raising the status of victim into a moral virtue.

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“Increasingly, appeals are made to governments and parliaments to recognize the historical traumas.”

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Victimhood understood as virtue makes genocide into the worst imaginable of crimes, thus raising the stakes of the campaigns for political recognition as well as the vehemence of the denial. And the question is to what extent the powerful narrative of victimization has come to frame the relation to memory amongst certain groups. Florence Fröhlig in her essay explores how "forced memorialization", which does not recognize past suffering, can cause trauma, also for generations after, and yet how this shared victimhood serves as the denominator of their identity. Yet, when groups reclaim the right to speak out their memory, one can note a troubling tendency to make memory into a narrative for a group identity, characterized by "a competition for victimhood" that leads to "new abuses of memory".

In what would seem to be an application of Campbell and Manning's theory, Ukraine historical memory uses a mixture of the religion-inspired language of victimhood and the politics-inspired language of dignity. About one hundred persons died in the protests against the decision of Viktor Yanukovich to abandon an agreement with the European Union. The protests in Kyiv now go under the alternate terms Euromaidan, after the Maidan Nezalezhnosti square where much of the action took place, or more symbolically as the "Revolution of Dignity". Those who were killed are commemorated as martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the nation and memorial monuments ded-

icated to them bear the phrase: “Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred”.

As Muriel Blaive underlines in “Codeword ‘Criminal’: Moral Remembrance in National Memory Politics”, the discourse of victimization can also become a masked form of politicization with the purpose of “appropriating victimhood for political capital and discrediting the left.” Institutions financed on the national level of the Czech state and the supra-national level of the European Union investigating into communist crimes have lobbied to promote a historical narrative of “moral remembrance”. Many countries build up a national identity out of a geopolitical destiny to sacrifice themselves for the sake of European Civilization and Christianity. Poland and Serbia take pride in medieval monumental battles to stave off the advance of the Ottoman Empire further into Europe. Romanians also remember their country’s centuries-long defence against Tatar invaders coming from the East.

## Extreme Nationalism

In comparing the South Caucasian countries Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, Thomas de Waal, finds that they are similar in developing extreme forms of ethnic nationalism. The Soviet system had encouraged intellectual nationalism since the 1960s as a way for regimes to counter the growing popular antipathy to the reality of communism as an ideology in practice. However, in the violent period just before and after the fall of the Soviet Union extreme and toxic nationalisms developed in all three countries. The explanation is that as communism with its discourse of cosmopolitanism collapsed a serious vacuum emerged and the sole available idea-based alternative able to fill the void was strong mythologized nationalism.

Each of the South Caucasian countries experienced traumatic events with scores of civilian victims as the Soviet Union fell apart. War broke out between Armenian and Azerbaijan with Azeri soldiers killing Armenians fleeing from the town of Sumgait in February 1988 and Armenians killed Azeris escaping from the town of Khojali in February 1992. The Georgians had their own catastrophe when Soviet police killed protesters in Tbilisi in April 1989. In de Waal’s view it was natural to commemorate these events, however the way they were remembered perpetuated hatred between the countries, finally leading to renewed warfare between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020. Official memorialization of these mass killings of persons who are often deemed sacred martyrs “re-enacts the trauma or perpetuates conflict

rather than seeks to overcome it.” This situation resembles that described by sociologists in the theory of cultural trauma – in which persons not directly involved in traumatic events are enculturated by their leaders into integrating the original trauma in their own identity. For this to happen a single unified narrative of catastrophe must be crystalized, and then taught in multiple ways to those inside the group and over generations.<sup>3</sup> The production of cultural trauma has been particularly noticeable in the cases of Armenian and Assyrian remembrance of the genocide to which their ancestors were victims during World War I in the Ottoman Empire. Attacks on the Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh in 2020 sparked quick reactions equating Azerbaijan’s Turkish-supported invasion as continuation of the Ottoman genocide with the intention of annihilating the Armenians as a nation.

Many East European states excel in dramatically re-enacting their bloody victimization and the heroic sacrifices of their inhabitants, but some countries do completely the opposite and neglect mention of the injustices of the past. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, until 2019, school children did not learn about the history of the Yugoslav wars. In Bulgaria the history of the communist regimes is not part of the curriculum, reports Evelina Kelbecheva. Lukashenka’s government in Belarus prohibits the commemoration of the founding of the first Belarusian state in 1918. In Romania transitional justice has stalled, describes Lavinia Stan. In Lithuania, writes Violeta Davoliūtė, transitional justice had a focus on the crimes of the Soviet-regime and little attention was given to the murder of over ninety percent of Lithuania’s Jewish population during the Holocaust. And in many countries the dossiers in the archives of the secret police are still kept from public investigation.

**H**istory is not the only component of national security, but the treatment of the past can involve feelings of insecurity in relation to others. In one of the first essays in this report, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa considers the question whether it is possible to uncover a regional politics of memory in the Central and Eastern European region. The content of this report answers this question by showing that there are many common features in the way the governments in this region control and manage the way the past can be remembered, with various forms of censorship, prohibitions, legal hinders, disrespect for scientific history, and confrontations with the past as remembered by neighboring countries. This pattern has

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been with us for a long time, however there was a watershed after 2010. Extreme nationalist politics kidnapped remembrance to support the position of governments. It is possible to link this widespread phenomenon to the well-known fragility of nationalism in the Eastern European realm. In many countries, nationalism is a vague sentiment among the people that they, or most of them, belong to a collective and belong to a definite territory. They can take the name of the geographical area where they live or the language variant most of them speak. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Belarusians answered the question of their nationality with we are the “people from here”. However, a national identity has several components. One is the collective group-feeling of mutual togetherness, but the other is the legitimation coming from neighboring “others” through recognizing their long-standing right to a certain territory. In several cases, described in this report, such external respect for nationalism of the neighbor is missing, leading to war and annexation, and in peaceful times to mutual suspicion and anxiety over possible future aggression.

### The Desire and Consummation of Images of the Past

If there was a belief in the redemptive power of memory and the emancipatory role that cultural heritage could have, today, all over Europe, and in many other parts of the world, the fields of cultural memory and cultural heritage have taken a politicized, if not nationalist turn. The past has generally become a resource to be used for a renewal of national and other political myths, and it is explored as such by different actors, and not in the least by right-wing politicians all over Europe. And although the course in Eastern Europe, as this region report shows, is distinct, because the politicization of the past is so multi-layered and ripe with contested memory narratives, there, as elsewhere the past seems to be torn between a simple demonization and a nostalgic glorification of it in the general movement of what Zygmunt Bauman<sup>4</sup> calls *retrotopia*, to define the presence of a neoliberal utopian desire and consummation of images of the past. In her article on “communist visuality without communism”, Irina Sandomirskaja shows how the past of communism has entered an ahistorical phantasm and “reactionary flight from history” in accordance with the neoliberal logic of retrotopia. And she goes on to ask if we not also in Communism as a cultural asset can find resources in the history of communist visuality to oppose the use of the past for consumerist pleasures or political purposes.

An instance is the Russian-Ukrainian film director Sergei Loznitsa’s use of left-over footage to create new films that help us “un-forget the inconvenient heritage of communist visuality”, as Sandomirskaja writes. Thus, the article suggests that we cannot establish a new truth about the past, but that we need to retrieve the suppressed truth from its own erased pages, wounds and contestations, inquiring into this history as it were from its own blanks.

**A**s this state of the region report has shown beyond doubts, the past of political history has become the object of political struggles over the past. In a strange reversal, it would seem that the significance attested by the communist regimes to the narratives of the past have resurged in the new contemporary nationalist narratives for the Baltic and East European countries. The history of national struggle has become a means of explaining the necessity of the demise of communism. But it’s not only in countries where there are memories or histories of national resistance towards Soviet interventions that history is used as a means of explaining a triumphant or victimized historical narrative; but we can also see in Russian memory politics see how the communist past is used in a national discourse. This indicates the fact that history as well as politics have become confused in the appropriations of the past in ways that point to the confusion of political discourses and strategies both then and now. And one distinguishing feature among political parties in some countries in the former Soviet bloc is the relation to the past. Of course, one way out is to retrieve historical truth in its truth as political history, but we also need to scrutinize our need for retrotopia and contrast it with the need and lack of real visions of change that do not feed into empty discourses of empowerment, but can indeed “quicken our activity”, as Nietzsche with Goethe demanded of all instructions, past, present and future.<sup>5</sup> ●

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## Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past

**T**he *CBEES State of the Region Report 2020* reveals disturbing tendencies to control and politicize the past in several countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Also, the report documents the great extent to which authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning governments actively intervene in how crucial parts of their country's history are to be written, taught, researched, remembered, and commemorated – or neglected and ignored. Furthermore, the report discusses the failure of some governments to deal with restitution for past injustices, and the way some politicians forbid access to important state archives, hinder the teaching of the history of contemporary events, or withdraw funding to or even close down independent research institutions altogether.

**T**he report is the first in a series of annual reports, reporting and reflecting on the social and political developments in the Baltic Sea Region and Central and Eastern Europe, each year from a new and topical perspective. The report is written by researchers and area experts, from within as well as outside of CBEES (Centre for Baltic and East European Studies), Södertörn University, Stockholm. The overall purpose with this initiative is to offer a publication that will be of great interest to fellow researchers, policy makers, stakeholders, and the general public.