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Commemorating the Holocaust and Communism: The Politics of Hungarian Public Memory

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*Commemorating the Holocaust and Communism:
The Politics of Hungarian Memory*

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Politics

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Lewiston, Maine

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Abstract

Nations and nationalists make use of historical narratives in their quests to build unity and achieve other political goals. Those who control memories of the past are often able to affect changes in the future. Hungary is no exception; it is also a particularly historically conscious society with a dark and discontinuous recent past, which is currently being tackled by an increasingly controversial political leadership. This thesis explores this dynamic between power and history by examining public memories of the Holocaust and communism, as represented in the public sphere by museums. It focuses on the narratives told by those with power, and seeks to identify the functions of these stories. What motivates groups to tell which stories and what purpose do these public memories serve? This thesis analyzes the texts and symbolism used, the narratives told, and other characteristics of historical museums. It examines the unique representations of the Holocaust and communism and identifies when memories of the two events converge. These public memories, whether advanced by official or other powerful voices, often present narratives of a continuous Hungarian nation, interrupted by foreign-imposed oppression and victimization.

List of Abbreviations

Fidesz: Originally Alliance of Young Democrats, now Hungarian Civic Union (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*). Founded in 1988 as a youthful, liberal anti-communist party. In the mid-90s, Fidesz shifted to become more conservative, and is now a right nationalist party.

Jobbik: Movement for a Better Hungary (*Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom*). Officially founded in 2003, Jobbik is a Christian nationalist far-right party.

MDF: Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Magyar Demokrata Fórum*). Founded in 1987 and dissolved in 2011. MDF held power in the early 90s, and was a Christian nationalist center-right party.

MDP: Hungarian Working People's Party (*Magyar Dolgozók Pártja*). MDP was the ruling Stalinist party of communist Hungary from 1949 to 1956.

MSzMP: Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (*Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*). MSzMP was the ruling communist party from 1956 to 1989.

MSzP: Hungarian Socialist Party (*Magyar Szocialista Párt*). Founded in 1989, MSzP is a partial successor of MSzMP. MSzP is a center-left, social democratic party.

SzDSz: Originally Alliance of Free Democrats, now Hungarian Liberal Party (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége*). Founded in 1988 as a liberal anti-communist party, SzDSz won in the 1994 elections, but failed to gain any Parliamentary seats in 2010.

Chapter One: A Theoretical Examination of the Politics of Memory

During my semester abroad in Budapest, I sometimes had a difficult time remembering that such a vibrant and beautiful city, nestled in the center of a picturesque country, had a relatively recent past filled with tragedy. Apparently I was not the only one with this problem. One day, while reviewing my contemporary East-Central European history notes for an exam, I noticed something very strange. At the end of one week, my notes ended with “The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939,” but they began the following class with “The Sovietization of East-Central Europe (1945-48).” My professor, a very kind and intelligent man, had skipped World War II and the Holocaust (rather large events in any twentieth century European history class, I thought) entirely. In this same class, as well as several others, I noticed another puzzling tendency. Professors repeatedly discussed the significance of ‘the nation’ in domestic and international affairs, even suggesting that the Balkan conflicts were a result of ‘ancient ethnic hatreds.’ The idea of the all-important nation, coupled with this theory of primordialism, was in direct contrast to what I had learned in past politics classes. These completely new perspectives were not limited to my time in the classroom; this pattern of ‘forgetting’ and the emphasis on nationalism continued throughout my experience in Hungary. My professors and peers alike generally seemed eager to ignore World War II and skip straight to the horrors of communism, emphasizing all the time the glory and unity, often seeped in tragedy, of the Hungarian nation. I simply didn’t know how to make sense of this language that I barely understood and these stark differences in worldview.

History has always been of special importance to the Hungarian people. One sunny day, my Hungarian language professor took our entire class down to Hero’s Square, and gave us a (quite detailed) explanation of the lives and achievements of all the great statesmen represented

by the sculptures. I remember being impressed by her knowledge of, and pride in these men who lived many hundreds of years ago—I think it was difficult for us Americans to understand. Recently, however, memories of the past have played a particularly important role in Hungarian politics. Members of the far-right Jobbik party have provoked controversy by wearing uniforms into Parliament that many claim are reminiscent of those worn by the Arrow Cross (Nazi-like party) during World War II. Heated debates have risen about what to do with the files of the communist-era Secret Police; should the government release them, or shred them? Most monumental, however, were the issues that followed the passage of a new constitution in April of 2011. Of the many criticisms that arose, one of the largest was the argument that the constitution's claim of the loss of sovereignty on March 19, 1944, effectively denied any responsibility for the Holocaust. These very recent controversies, among many others that will be detailed over the course of this thesis, make Hungary a particularly compelling case for a study on the politics of memory.

My interest and confusion about the nature of Hungarian narratives encouraged me to explore this topic further upon returning to Bates. This study is a continuation of that spark of curiosity. It examines the nature and content of Hungarian public memory, and how it both represents and shapes national identity. Hungary, along with the rest of East-Central Europe, faces a difficult and discontinuous recent past. As my history professor in Budapest reminded us constantly, the region never had a chance to progress with the rest of Europe, due to a complicated mix of factors. There is a sense among these nations that bad luck has rendered them unable to live up to their potential. Public memories of this unsatisfactory past contribute to feelings of national identity, as groups sometimes find comfort in unification based on their ill-fated histories.

In the twentieth century, East-Central Europe found itself right in the middle of two of the great tragedies of the current era: World War II and Soviet communism. Deciding what to remember about these times, and especially how to portray those memories in the public sphere, proved to be a controversial and much-debated issue. People with different views of both the function of memory and the nature of national identity created quite dissimilar narratives about the very same pasts. The problems of incorporating certain narratives into public memory and identity, the choices that different groups face, and the public memories that the powerful decide upon are the main issues that this thesis will address. In particular, I will examine how three different historical museums in Budapest address issues of national historical responsibility and identity.

Before I explore the politics of public memory in Budapest, it is first necessary to outline a theoretical framework. This chapter will thus provide an overview of the relevant already-existing scholarship on the politics of memory and the representations of these memories in museums. The first section will define key terms relevant to the study of political memory. The next section will identify the work that memory can do, focusing particularly on its function as a narrative that can create or strengthen national identity. I will outline several of the most important strategies of this ‘memory work.’ The next section will focus on the contestation of public memory, as people with different political goals and ideas of national identity inevitably disagree about narratives of the past. The final section will examine some of the literature on museums, explaining why the memories presented in these institutions can be so powerful in shaping both conceptions of the past and views of national identity.

Collective and Public Memories

Everyone relies upon memories in daily life. Memories of the past—good and bad, old and new—are important in understanding our own identities and how we came to be the way that we are. The memories that one generally thinks of—the birth of a sibling, the first day of school, or an important anniversary—are traditional, individual memories. They are individual because that person experienced them himself, and remembers them in his own unique way. Memories help to shape and reaffirm a person’s identity to varying degrees. ‘Collective memories,’ however, a term developed by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the early 1900s, are a little bit different. While individual memory contains first-hand recollections of one’s own personal life, collective memory consists of stories and interpretations of history that are relevant to a larger group, like a nation. With collective memory, each individual “...is able to act merely as a group member, helping to evoke and maintain impersonal remembrances of interest to the group.”¹ These memories are impersonal because it is not necessary for each and every person to experience the important event personally in order to ‘remember’ it. Halbwachs notes that there are many events that he feels he remembers even though he did not experience them; “These events occupy a place in the memory of the nation, but I myself did not witness them.”² Sharing collective memories can be an important part of constructing a group identity. For instance, many Americans share a collective memory of the terrorist attacks of September 11. Even though only a fraction of the population personally witnessed or experienced the attacks, most Americans generally agree on the memory and the significance attached to the event.

¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980). 50.

² Halbwachs, 51.

There are few instances, though, where an entire group is able to agree upon important events in the past, let alone the meanings ascribed to them. Very few, if any, memories are truly ‘collective.’ There may be dominant narratives surrounding the memories of most historical events, but there are generally at least a few group members who disagree about the content and meaning of those memories. They may argue that things did not really happen that way, or that the significance assigned to the event is unmerited. The problem of collective memory is especially apparent when people who actually *experienced* the event are involved. Someone who lost a loved one on September 11 will likely have a very different memory of the event than that of the general public. That person will also likely ascribe a quite different meaning to that terrible event. It is for this reason that James Young prefers the term ‘collected memory’ rather than ‘collective memory,’ since many individuals have their own unique views of their own experienced past.³

This study, though interested in the voices of the minority, will not attempt to ‘collect’ the memories of every Hungarian. My focus is primarily on the predominant, government-funded narratives of the past. Because of the drawbacks inherent in the term ‘collective memory’ and the nature of this study, I will instead refer to ‘public memory.’ Public memories are not necessarily the memories that an entire nation shares, but instead represent the narratives exhibited in the public realm. They may be shared by large segments of the population—that is, after all, the goal that their propagators hope to achieve—but they are rarely universally accepted. They are the predominant memories, put forward by those with power, that are displayed in the public sphere. As Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson define it, “Public memory is the interpretation of collective memory that emerges from and reflects existing power

³ James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

structures, and is best understood as a process rather than a static outcome.”⁴ Public memories are not accidental or natural, but are instead actively constructed. Powerful elites purposefully put forward the narratives that best fit their views of the past and their political goals. Naturally, these memories can be contested by opposing voices, and are often in flux. Different groups may put forth very different versions of the same narrative, yet they generally use public memories for similar purposes.

The Work that Public Memories Do

Public memories do not simply happen. People must actively choose to remember; Gil Eyal writes, “to paraphrase Nietzsche we could say that memory was not first devised for remembering...”⁵ People must have a reason to remember in order to do so, and the same is especially true when applied to memories presented in the public sphere. Publicly remembering is often a political act. Powerful people in society actively construct the versions of history that they think will best help them to achieve their political goals. As Hannah Arendt wrote, “Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story.”⁶ Public memories do not exist until people consciously tell stories of the past and assign certain meanings to events in history. In this vein, Pierre Nora introduces the idea of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, which are (generally physical) places that carry symbolic meaning in a certain memory culture. Cemeteries, memorial sites, and archives can all serve as *lieux de mémoire*. Arguing that public memories are actively constructed is not to say that these places are historically insignificant, or that memorable events

⁴ Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, “Monumental Politics: Regime Type and Public Memory in Post-Communist States,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 27:3 (Summer 2011): 269-288. 271.

⁵ Gil Eyal, “Identity and Trauma: Two Forms of the Will to Memory,” *History and Memory*, 16:1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 5-36.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). 192.

did not take place there. The memories ascribed to these places, though, and the significance and meaning assigned to those memories, are in some sense shaped and constructed by factors that are not totally objective. Nora writes, “*Lieux de mémoire* [sites of memory] originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally.”⁷ Powerful elites deliberately take part in such public remembering for political reasons, because they realize the incredible functionality of national narratives. These narratives do not simply exist; they serve specific purposes for certain people. But besides simply remembering, what political work do these public memories do?

Public memories are often used as a means to establish and strengthen feelings of national identity. Memories of the nation’s past play an integral role in shaping people’s conceptions of themselves and their co-nationals. Remembering the past of a country—its successes and failures, glories and tragedies—is important in developing a true sense of what it means to be a member of that group. Nations celebrate anniversaries of important battles, hold parades on their independence day, and elevate national heroes. As Duncan Bell notes, scholars agree on “...the need for nationalists to be able to tell a particular type of story about the nation and its importance, a story that resonates emotively with people, that glorifies the nation, that is easily transmitted and absorbed.”⁸ Quite simply, people feel pride in their national pasts; they believe their history is what makes their nation unique.

A strong national identity helps to legitimate and unify a nation-state. A unified sense of national identity is integral to Benedict Anderson’s conception of the nation as an imagined

⁷ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24. 12.

⁸ Duncan S.A. Bell, “Mythscape: memory, mythology, and national identity,” *British Journal of Sociology*, 54:1 (March 2003): 63-81. 67.

community. He writes, “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”⁹ Most co-nationals will never meet one another, yet if they believe that they share aspects of their identity, they will feel a sense of commonality. If the state’s legitimacy is based on the idea of national self-determination, or that it serves as a homeland for a particular national group, then senses of identity must be unified. If no national identity exists, or if views about it are sharply divided among the population, then the state’s supposed right to rule may begin to weaken.

Although leaders often emphasize the shared language, culture, or ethnicity of their co-nationals, it is necessary to share a common understanding of history in order to create a truly unified nation-state. A nation needs a common sense of the past in order to indicate that members also share a common future. Shared public memories of the past help members believe that even though they may have little in common with many of their co-nationals, they are connected in some way. Two co-members may live miles away from one another, and lead completely different lives, but if they share a common memory of the past of their nation, they are not total strangers after all. A common narrative is what makes an imagined community possible. The relationship between memory of the past and national identity is circular, with one constantly affecting the other, yet more contemporary memories generally serve to legitimate or strengthen preexisting conceptions of national identity. For instance, an American national identity may be based on the ideals of liberty and equality (which arise from some of the first narratives of our national past), and so we seek to find narratives of the contemporary past that

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006). 6.

display these same values. People feel unified by a common past, and additional shared public memories unify them further.

Elites have an interest in promoting conceptions of such a shared past because they generally wish to unify the nation and prevent dissent. The trouble with national history, though, is that the past is inevitably discontinuous and contradictory. Elites, therefore, create certain public memories in their attempts to overcome these historical contradictions and create a sense of a shared past. Discontinuous, contradictory pasts open up the possibility for disagreement and dissent. People can choose to interpret the past in different ways, or attach meanings and significance to events that are not in line with 'official' attitudes. A national history riddled with contradictions is much more open to contestation than a continuous narrative of the past. If the narrative of national history is linear, smooth, and conforms to general ideas about national identity, most people will have little reason to question it, and will likely be more doubtful of opponents who seek to alter the status quo. Discontinuous memories of the past, on the other hand, can serve to divide a population into fighting groups, each convinced of the veracity of *their* version of history. Contestation can arise even when memories are carefully crafted into continuous, usable pasts, but contradictory narratives make it much more likely that such disagreements will occur.

A narrative of the past, however continuous it may be, is ultimately not very useful unless it aligns with the political goals of the memory creators. People with different political ambitions will have different conceptions of an ideal usable past. Nationalist conservatives will likely create narratives that emphasize moments of historical national unity and the glory of the nation. Those who hope to promote multiculturalism, on the other hand, may look for and create very different memories of tolerant, accepting times in national history. Regardless of their political

ideology, however, these powerful elites generally aspire to build national unity and widespread acceptance for their versions of history. It may be acceptable for a usable past to contain a small amount of discontinuity; it can create a sense of positive progression and the desire to do better than one's forefathers. At the same time, though, a usable past cannot be *too* contradictory, or it may lead to dissent and disunity.

When these inevitable discontinuities arise, elites generally choose to shape public memories that support established conceptions of national identity. They carefully craft narratives that both smooth over discontinuities and establish a usable past that fits in with their own political aspirations. They use the past as their 'symbolic tool box,' carefully picking out the pieces of the past that best serve their political goals and conceptions of national identity and history. The stories that powerful people tell are generally not *untrue*, but they are particular and purposeful versions of history that serve certain goals. There are certain strategies that these elites use in memory making, regardless of the content of the narrative that they are trying to establish. Such strategies include the creation of boundaries, stories of victimization, scapegoating, and founding myths. These techniques can serve to smooth out the discontinuities of the past, emphasize the unity of the nation, and create an appropriate usable past.

Creating Boundaries

Public memories of the past can paper over discontinuities by creating boundaries. Each of the different techniques that will be outlined can also be means of creating boundaries, as they exclude those who are not 'true' members of the nation. Creating boundaries can serve to unify the nation at the expense of the excluded, by creating a sense of community among those who *are* included. It can also create a sense of historical tradition and continuity; if the 'other' was historically excluded from the nation, what reason do nationals have to begin including them

now? Excluding members of a certain group can also be a means of completely ignoring contradictions in the national history. Elites might insist, for instance, that the history of those on the ‘outside’ is not an important piece of the national narrative. That group’s tragedy may have been truly terrible, and *they* should remember it, but it does not necessarily have anything to do with *our* national past. Along the same lines, national public memories that do ignore the histories of certain groups imply that members of that group are *not* members of the nation.

Founding Myths

A founding myth is the (often glorious) story of how a nation was formed or came to be. Schoolchildren across the world know the stories of their own nations’ foundation, whether it was through a noble war of independence or at the hands of a heroic and godlike king. The universal goodness of the ‘birth’ of one’s nation is something that virtually every member of a group can agree upon and use as a means of connection. Members of a national group generally respect and admire their founding fathers and other symbols of their nation’s foundation, political and other differences aside. Barry Schwartz notes that even during times of instability and controversy, appeals to the common origin of the nation can stir up forgotten feelings of unity and community.¹⁰ Public memories of national beginnings can unite co-nationals with feelings of pride and patriotism, as the time of foundation was truly the beginning of something great. Although founding myths do often refer to times hundreds or even thousands of years ago, they can include more current and ideological foundations as well. A nation, for instance, could celebrate the time when nationals first conquered or inhabited the land that was to become their

¹⁰ Barry Schwartz, “The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory,” *Social Forces*, 61:2 (December 1982): 374-402.

nation-state. They might also celebrate an event like a revolution or the election of the first democratic government as an additional founding myth marking their ‘birth’ as a modern state.

Founding myths can serve to define the very community itself, identifying the values and ideology that are most important to the nation. In the United States, for instance, we celebrate the founding myth of the Puritans’ voyage to the New World in the Mayflower. We even teach children about the first Thanksgiving meal, shared by the Puritans and the Native Americans—a story which is completely false. We tell these stories, though, because they exemplify the values of religious freedom, intercultural cooperation and friendship that Americans hold dear. These ideals, among others, form the very basis of American identity. We do not, on the other hand, generally exhibit public memories about the merchants and criminals that existed among the first settlers of the New World. Our idealized American community is built around these abstract ideas exemplified by the Puritans, not the criminals, so we simply smooth out the discontinuity and conveniently leave the non-Puritans out of the national narrative. Similarly, we do not generally tell children that this first Thanksgiving never really happened until they are old enough to understand that our national history can still be glorious, even with a few small contradictions. Regardless of the content, founding myths serve to define and unify the nation by telling the story of the very first national accomplishment—its foundation.

Victimization

Employing the rhetoric of national victimization is quite different from the founding myth, yet both strategies aim to solidify national identity. Victimization rhetoric is often especially useful in smoothing over embarrassing or discontinuous elements of the nation’s history, such as battles lost or atrocities committed by co-nationals. Those employing this technique may insist that outsiders (or insiders who are not truly members of the nation) attacked

or co-opted the nation, causing members to act in ways that are not in line with national identity. The nation would have won the war, or it would have saved its own citizens instead of treating them cruelly, if it had not been for the interference of somebody else. The blame must lie elsewhere, outside of the nation, whether it is a foreign army, a minority within the borders, or a traitor to the nation. Blame could even rest with non-humans, like the weather or other environmental factors. Regardless, those with power insist that the nation was victimized by outside forces, and thus cannot take responsibility for those episodes in the past that are contrary to national identity.

Public memories that contain narratives of victimization, like any other public memories, can be based on varying degrees of truth. In many cases, the victimization is true, or at least partly based on truth. Public memories of victimization, however, can have profound effects on national identity.¹¹ The nation may begin to interpret other pieces of its history in a similar victimized fashion, and perhaps even make policy decisions regarding the ‘enemy’ with this sense of inferiority in mind. If a nation emphasizes its past victimization too much, it may refuse to take responsibility for those events that *were* within its control, and for which it should be held accountable. The rhetoric of victimhood can create feelings of helplessness and indignation, shaping an identity based on the idea that others are to blame for the nation’s problems and dark moments.

Scapegoating

The final strategy is scapegoating, or singling out a group or individual for unmerited blame for some negative action. The line between victimization and scapegoating is often very

¹¹ Elana Ivanova, “Changes in Collective Memory: The Schematic Narrative Template of Victimhood in Kharkiv Museums,” *The Journal of Museum Education*, 28:1 (Winter 2003): 17-22. 21.

thin, if it exists at all. There are two basic forms of scapegoating. With the first version, we blame some ‘other’ for the evils that have fallen upon us; Hitler, for instance, scapegoated the Jews for the economic problems Germany faced after World War I. Having a concrete (already discriminated against) group to blame was much more appealing to many German citizens than searching for the real causes. Alternatively, we may blame some ‘other’ for an evil deed that we, or members of our group, actually committed. As Bonnie Honig notes, in this form we seek to conceal our implication in some deed, thereby absolving ourselves from responsibility at the expense of blaming some innocent ‘other.’¹² Instead of erasing some discontinuous element in our past, we instead ascribe it to some ‘other,’ and wipe our hands clean. W. James Booth writes, along the same lines, “Regime forms that break with that continuity also thereby cease to be ‘ours.’”¹³ In a situation like this one, we may choose to ascribe the regime to an outside force, deflecting any responsibility for ourselves.

Scapegoating can succeed in uniting a group because it draws boundaries and excludes others. It creates outsiders, which can allow the group to define itself in terms of the ‘other;’ to be a member of the group, for instance, means first and foremost *not* to be one of the guilty outsiders. Honig describes the process by which scapegoating often takes place:

...the practice of scapegoating sometimes chooses its objects from an already existing, available pool of outsiders and at other times produces its objects from among the members of the community in crisis. The important point here is that scapegoating is not caused by scapegoats—an already existing pool of outsiders. Scapegoating is a social process that finds or produces the object it needs.¹⁴

The ‘other’ can be a foreigner, but it need not always be. Outsiders can also be excluded on the basis of a number of other classifications, from political ideology to ethnicity. Co-nationals can

¹² Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). 35-36.

¹³ W. James Booth, “Communities of Memory: On Identity, Memory, and Debt,” *American Political Science Review*, 93:2 (June 1999): 249-263. 250

¹⁴ Honig, 34.

become scapegoats in quite arbitrary ways if the nation finds itself in need of someone to blame, for either of the two reasons detailed earlier. Elite can attribute historical contradictions to some ‘other,’ thus creating a continuous shared narrative of national history.

Contestation and the Different Wills to Memory

Naturally, manipulating memories for political goals is a controversial process. People with different political views or personal experiences than those represented in the predominant public memories will likely disagree with the powers that be. Narratives about the national past are often contested; that is why it is more useful to think in terms of public memory than collective memory. People may disagree completely with the narratives told in the public sphere, or they might instead object to the meanings assigned to those memories. Either way, as Bell notes, “Memory can thus function as a counter-hegemonic site of resistance, a space of political opposition.”¹⁵ Dissenters may present alternate versions of the same narratives, claiming that they are unveiling the truth that the political regime seeks to hide. It is important to remember, though, that even opposing public memories will likely be influenced by the dissenters’ political agendas. Predominant public memories, though generally constructed for specific political purposes, are not always wrong, and opposing views are not always right. I do not mean to imply that every elite in society purposefully lies about the past in order to fulfill his political agenda; many people do genuinely want to educate their co-nationals about the truth, and to attempt to reconcile historical discontinuities into a cohesive national identity. I simply mean that, in looking at public memories put forward by powerful people, it is important to identify their potential political interests and ask what purpose this particular public memory will fulfill.

¹⁵ Bell, 66.

Eyal explores this widespread contestation, arguing that controversies generally arise when people have different ideas about the goals and outcomes of public memories. People with different political goals will likely have different conceptions of both an ideal usable past and national identity. They will thus likely create and use memories in dissimilar, sometimes contradictory, ways. Eyal specifically examines the ways that different people choose to remember events in the past that are seen as *traumatic* to the nation. Emphasizing once more the constructed nature of public memories, he uses the term “will to memory,” defining it as “...a constellation of discourses and practices within which memory is entrusted with a certain goal and function, and is invested, routinely, as an institutional matter, with certain hopes and fears as to what it can do.”¹⁶ A will to memory is just as constructed as the memory itself, as different people can choose to use memory for different purposes.

Eyal introduces two different wills to memory for remembering tragic events, each with different goals, desired outcomes, and potential conflicts. In the first version, memory is “...the guarantor of *identity* and maintains it through time—it is the mechanism of *retention* responsible for the experience of being a selfsame individual moving through time...”¹⁷ This version usually contains some feelings of victimization, as there is a sense that national identity and even the nation as a whole are being challenged from the outside. In order to stand strong and be true to one’s past, it is necessary for the group to focus on the continuous nature of the nation’s history, constantly challenged by outsiders and their versions of history. Eyal notes that this version of memory is often subject to the criticism that there is “too much memory,” and it is usually accompanied by a certain degree of nationalism. In the second version of the will to memory, “...memory plays a role in overcoming psychic *trauma* and the processes of disassociation it sets

¹⁶ Eyal, 6-7.

¹⁷ Eyal, 7.

in motion. Individuals are healed by remembering that which was repressed.”¹⁸ In this will to memory, there is a sense that although history may be discontinuous and unstable, remembering will help to make things right again. Memory may be “undermined from within” and it is only through truly remembering the past that the nation will be able to create a positive future and a newer, improved identity.¹⁹ This version may be accompanied by a ‘never again’ type of attitude, and, in opposition to the first will to memory, may be subject to the complaint about “too little memory.” People who utilize this will to memory often hold beliefs that are more liberal and cosmopolitan, and are generally more willing to accept a degree of national responsibility for past traumas.

There are three dimensions of memory that can be found within both of the different wills to memory. The first is the *injunction to remember*, which hearkens back to the idea of memory as constructed for a particular purpose. People must have a reason for remembering in order to create any public memory; this *injunction* is often provided by the sense that people have forgotten important pieces of the past. The second is the *mnemonic substance* of the memory, or the historical narrative that is told. To identify the *mnemonic substance*, Eyal asks, “...which part of the past is deemed of consequence for the present and hence must be remembered?”²⁰ The final dimension is the *mnemonic operation*, or what it means to remember. There are many different ways to remember, and they can carry very different messages about the significance of the past and what it means for the future. Eyal notes, “There is, for example, an important distinction between repetition and recollection, but I don’t think it exhausts the various options at

¹⁸ Eyal, 7.

¹⁹ Eyal, 7.

²⁰ Eyal, 10.

play.”²¹ Repeating a memory consists mainly of acknowledging, objectively, that is happened, while recollecting implies a more personal connection with the past; people who recollect either remember events that actually happened to them, or perhaps imagine what it would have been like if they had happened to them. Eyal’s distinction between the two wills to memory, and further between the dimensions of each of those types, provides a useful framework for understanding the contestation and various understandings of the work of public memories. This framework will be used throughout the course of this thesis.

Public Memory in Museums

This thesis examines public memories as represented in three government-funded historical museums. Because the museums represent the histories of very similar time periods, and are all officially funded and supported by the government, one might expect that the public memories would be the same. In actuality, some of the public memories are different in each museum, and in some cases, they even contradict one another. Inevitably, such different interpretations of history also result in political controversy and debates about both Hungarian history and identity. But what exactly is the relationship between museums, national identity, and public memory? In other words, what role do museums play in the debate over the politics of memory?

Many scholars generally agree that museums can contribute to conceptions of both the national past and national identity.²² The reason that museums have so much power in affecting identity is because of the way that large segments of society perceive them. Many people view museums as institutions that are both apolitical and scholarly and, as a result, honest and

²¹ Eyal, 11.

²² Andrew Newman and Fiona McLean, “The Impact of Museums upon Identity,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 12:1 (Jan. 2006): 49-68.

objective purveyors of historical truths. Of this perception, Fiona Cameron writes, "...exhibitions are perceived as based on quality and rigorous scholarship... Apoliticality is predicated on the belief that a museum's voice is impartial and value neutral."²³ Very few ordinary people enter museums with the expectation that the information they receive may be politically motivated; they go to learn or be entertained, and generally take the information they receive as fact. Most visitors view museums as legitimate institutions that are relatively objective and free from overt political messages and calculations.

At the same time, though, many people view museums as moral protectors, or as guardians of certain values that are key to the nation or even all of humankind. Biases are accepted and even expected in certain cases; Cameron notes, for instance, that participants in focus groups generally agreed that there were some issues, like drug use and September 11, in which 'both sides' should not be represented.²⁴ Visitors expect that museums will provide objective, yet morally palatable versions of history—these narratives, however, may not be possible unless the exhibit smoothes over certain discontinuities or contradictions. Museums thus have a potentially strong reserve of power on public memories of controversial ideas and histories; "Many institutions, when exhibiting contentious subjects, act as moral guides as part of a broader process of social mobilisation, to valorise, affirm, and represent moral values that structure social life in certain ways."²⁵ Visitors are likely to believe the stories that museums tell about controversial historical events (especially if they fit in with the visitors' conceptions of national identity). Although Carol Duncan's argument specifically concerns art museums, it is just as applicable to historical museums:

²³ Fiona Cameron, "Moral Lessons and Reforming Agendas," in *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*, ed. Simon J. Knell et al. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 330-342. 331-332.

²⁴ Cameron, 336.

²⁵ Cameron, 335.

We can also appreciate the ideological force of a cultural experience that claims for its truths the status of objective knowledge. To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community.²⁶

Because museums are so highly respected and generally viewed as apolitical, scholarly, and unbiased, they hold great power over public memories and feelings of national identity.

Public memories presented in museums are also especially powerful, and potentially controversial, because they are displayed in the public sphere and are, at least in some ways, public goods. To be a public good, the item in question must satisfy two criteria. It must be non-rivalrous, meaning that multiple people can ‘consume’ the good at once without decreasing the ability of others to do the same. It also must be non-excludable, meaning that nobody can prevent others from ‘consuming’ the good.²⁷ The museums in this study all charge admissions fees, so they do exclude to some degree.²⁸ They are still public goods in some sense, though, because their exteriors, which are symbolic and often contain pieces of the exhibit, are both non-rivalrous and non-excludable. People who walk by the museums have virtually no choice but to view their exteriors, and even those who have never actually visited the museum generally have at least some sense of what is displayed inside.

Despite the reserve of power that many museums hold, they are also limited in certain ways. Even highly respected museums would have a very difficult time simply inventing huge new pieces of history—critics and visitors would recognize the lies, and would choose not to visit that particular institution. Museums are businesses, even when they are publicly funded. They must attract visitors in order to remain functioning. This need for visitors can be both

²⁶ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995). 8.

²⁷ Forest and Johnson, 273.

²⁸ There are, however, certain holidays when admission to each of the museums is free, so on those days they can be considered true public goods.

beneficial and harmful to historical objectivity; on the one hand, museums must present truthful exhibits in order to maintain their legitimacy and respect in society. On the other hand, being popular with the masses might mean forsaking a bit of historical accuracy or analysis in favor of drama or sensationalism. In an increasingly technological society, museum visitors expect an entertaining experience, and many modern museums have developed new techniques that make use, often quite dramatically, of multimedia and object-based displays. Beth Lord argues, though, that while many modern museums are very rich in their presentation of objects, they are too light in their interpretation of the historical significance of those objects.²⁹

Museums are also potentially limited in the narratives (the *mnemonic substance*) that they are able to tell. Publicly funded museums, like the three examined in this study, are ultimately accountable to the government. Although the public memories they display may not be totally in line with governmental views, if they stray too far from the official narrative, they could risk losing public funding. Without that funding, they could lose legitimacy or even cease to operate at all. Similarly, museums cannot drift too far from popular opinion about the past and identity, or else visitors may be unwilling to accept the message. Linda Ferguson notes, for instance, that in her surveys of museum staff, many expressed concern about the possible reactions of visitors from potentially controversial exhibits.³⁰ This concern results from the fact that museum visitors, although generally holding the belief that museums are legitimate, believable institutions, are not completely passive.³¹ They can choose to reject the messages presented in the museums or

²⁹ Beth Lord, "From the Document to the Monument," in *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*, ed. Simon J. Knell et al. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 355-366. 355.

³⁰ Linda Ferguson, "Pushing Buttons: Controversial Topics in Museums," *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (August 2006). <<http://hosting.collectionsaustralia.net/omj/vol8/index.html>>

³¹ Jem Fraser, "Museums—Drama, Ritual and Power," in *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*, ed. Simon J. Knell et al. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 291-302. 296.

attempt to reconcile them with their own views and past experience. Visitors tend, however, to accept at least most of the public memories presented in museums.

Public Memories in Museums

Barry Schwartz differentiates between two ways that museums can represent public memories: through chronicling and commemoration. When chronicling, museum creators record various events and the impacts that they have made on the present. They generally try to appear both politically neutral and factually objective, even though, as we have seen, public memories are virtually always the product of strategic (often political) calculations, and are therefore at least somewhat biased. Events and people that are commemorated, on the other hand, are assigned moral value and labeled as significant and unique parts of the past. Eyal's two forms of the will to memory are different types of commemorating, as they reflect an attempt to remember and overcome past tragedies. Each will to memory assigns moral value, albeit in different ways, to events in the past. Chronicling preserves apparent historical facts, while the more subjective commemoration identifies the ideal.³² All historical museums take part in chronicling, and many also explicitly (or implicitly) commemorate certain parts of the past. Troubles arise, though, when the line between chronicling and commemorating is blurred, and visitors are left with beliefs that morally charged and politically motivated exhibited memories are factually accurate.

There are a variety of ways that museum creators (and their funders) can create, represent, and prioritize public memories in museums. The location of a museum plays an important role in how it, and the public memories it displays, will be viewed by the general public. Most people are more likely to visit a museum that is located downtown rather than one that is on the outskirts of the same city. Location can also suggest that certain aspects of history

³² Schwartz, 377.

are more important than others; Mary Callahan notes, for instance, that the fact that Thailand's only military museum is located in a remote town suggests that military history is not an essential part of Thai public memory and national identity.³³ A museum can also serve as a *lieu de mémoire* if it is housed in a historically or symbolically significant location. Inside the museum, the texts and objects on display are usually the most potent sources of public memories, as they contain the *mnemonic substance* of the memories themselves. The texts on display, objects in cases, videos on the walls, and soundtrack in the background all contain aspects of the narratives of the past. The combination of all of these factors also makes up the difficult to explain, yet easy to experience, sense of *feeling* that the museum strives to instill. Is the museum visit akin to reading a textbook, objective yet rather dry, or does the museum use tactics designed to frighten or sadden the visitor? All of these different factors shape and portray the public memories displayed by a museum. This study will thus analyze the three museums along these lines.

This chapter has served to outline the theoretical framework necessary to support the rest of this study. The first section explored the basic idea of memory, providing a definition for public memory. Next, I discussed the functions of public memory, explaining how historical narratives are necessary in creating a national identity, which is instrumental in unifying a nation-state. The past is never perfect, though, and so powerful people make use of certain strategies to smooth over discontinuities and contradictions in the national story. These constructed memories are contested by opposing forces with different views of the past and political goals. To understand this contestation, I introduced Gil Eyal's conception of the two unique wills to memory, and further differentiated between the dimensions of memory. These

³³ Mary P. Callahan, "Temples of Doom: Military Museums in Indonesia, Thailand and Burma," unpublished paper. 15.

two versions of the will to memory are instances of morally charged commemorating, whereas chronicling attempts to be factual and politically neutral. Finally, I explained that museums are powerful purveyors of public memories because of their reputation within society, and explored some of the techniques museums use to display those memories. The following chapters will apply this theoretical framework to East-Central Europe as a whole, then to three particular museums in Hungary.

Chapter Two will examine the challenges that all of East-Central Europe faces when confronting its recent national past. The purpose of this chapter is to show that Hungary, while a particularly interesting case study, is not unique in both the historical issues it faces and the ways that different people choose to remember that past. It will explain how the countries in the region sought to become legitimate, equal nation-states after the fall of communism, but they all faced a discontinuous and contradictory recent history, with little usable past. Elites with different views of the will to memory (often corresponding with specific political ideologies) dealt with the history of the twentieth century, particularly the issues of the Holocaust and communism, in quite unique ways.

Chapter Three will apply the theoretical framework to the Hungarian National Museum. This chapter will provide a brief, academic version of Hungarian history in the twentieth century, against which the narratives presented in the National Museum and the later two museums can be compared. National museums are symbolically significant institutions that are generally charged with displaying the continuous narrative of a nation and presenting the ‘official’ and ‘scientific’ version of the past. The Hungarian National Museum is no exception, although its exhibition is a bit out of line with current governmental views, since it was last updated in 1996. This museum, unlike the other two, does not serve as a memorial museum, and thus generally

chronicles the past instead of commemorating it. The public memories in this museum are somewhat nationalist and conservative, presenting a narrative of general Hungarian victimization, but they also depict a uniquely benign view of the later communist years.

Chapter Four will examine the House of Terror. This chapter will provide an overview of contemporary political dynamics, since the House of Terror is the product of the current right nationalist Fidesz government. In this museum, memory serves as a guarantor of identity, as the exhibit presents a narrative of history in which Hungary is repeatedly victimized by foreign forces. Despite the fact that it claims to be a memorial to both ‘regimes of terror’ in the twentieth century, the House of Terror tends to emphasize the horrors of communism while seemingly only including the Holocaust for comparative purposes. This focus, coupled with the nationalist view of identity, was at least partly a political tactic directed toward Fidesz’s opposition, the Socialists (MSZP).

Finally, Chapter Five will explore the Holocaust Memorial Center. It will re-emphasize the conception of the Holocaust as a negative founding myth for the new Europe, arguing that part of the rationale behind the construction of this museum was a desire for closer integration with Europe. In this museum, memory serves as a means of overcoming trauma, as the exhibit depicts the (largely unprecedented) view that Hungary holds some responsibility for the Holocaust. The Holocaust Memorial Center, however, has found itself in the middle of political controversy, as the current government objected to the way that this national responsibility was presented, undermining the liberal public memory and national identity represented in the museum.

Chapter Two: Facing the Past in East-Central Europe

This chapter will put the case of Hungary in context by providing an overview of the memory battles that take place throughout East-Central Europe. After the collapse of communism, the countries in the region wished to become legitimate, democratic nation-states. When facing their recent histories, however, they found that they had no real usable pasts. The next section will present a broad overview of twentieth century history in the region, ranging from the interwar period to the regime change. Elites with different political goals and conceptions of the function of memory created unique public memories about this recent past. Finally, I will explain how people used each form of the will to memory—both as a means of overcoming trauma and as a guarantor of identity—to create different, politically appealing narratives of the past.

Political debates about the nature of both national identity and public memory take place across the world. It is quite common for elites to manipulate memory for political gain, and it is equally common for opposing forces to contest those memories. In contemporary East-Central Europe, however, this political debate has been especially fierce. In this region, controversies continually arise about public memories of the past, what they mean for the future, and the political motives behind those historical narratives. Milan Kundera captured the significance that many people attach to the past:

People are always shouting that they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past.¹

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1980). 22.

Though possibly an exaggerated claim, there is undoubtedly some truth to his statement; the politics of memory are particularly important, and particularly controversial, in East-Central Europe. Radoslaw Poczykowski explains, “The political elites perceive the past as a source of commonly shared values and a platform for potential national integration... But this past-orientation is causing new divisions and deepening already existing memory conflicts.”² The rest of this chapter will explain why the past of East-Central Europe is so complicated, discontinuous, and contested. It will put the case of Hungary in context by showing that Hungary is not alone in either the challenges that it faces or the ways that political elites seek to address those issues. Each country in the region is, of course, unique in both its history and its current political climate, but there are a number of similarities that span across East-Central Europe.

The Twentieth Century in East-Central Europe

After the collapse of communism, much of East-Central Europe found itself in a time of both great excitement and uncertainty. The post-communist elites knew that they had overthrown the regimes in the name of democracy, yet they were unsure of exactly what their new states would look like, both domestically and within the new world order. They had to liberalize their economies, create democratic institutions, and organize viable political parties. At the same time, elites felt a sense of needing to prove that their states, like those in the West, were legitimate, modern, democratic nation-states. Each state sought to unify its citizens around a proud identity and history and show the outside world that this state was worthy of acceptance in the new world order. The problem was, though, that while national identities existed, they had rarely (if ever) been linked to independent states. These elites know who they were as a nation, but they did not

² Radoslaw Poczykowski, “Building the Past, Forgetting the Future: Is Poland a Historical Knowledge Based Society?” *LIMES*, 1:1 (2008): 22-31. 26.

know what it was like for that nation to have its own independent state in the twentieth century. East-Central Europe had remained under the influence of various empires for centuries longer than their neighbors in Western Europe; many of the states in the region did not gain independence until after World War I. The elites looked back in their recent national pasts for useful memories about independence and democracy in order to legitimate their nation-states, but they were largely unsuccessful. Instead, what they found was a contested, discontinuous history, with little or no experience with independence and democracy.

The Interwar Period

The interwar period was, for many states in East-Central Europe, the one true era of twentieth century independence until the collapse of communism. Far from being a ‘golden age’ of independence and democracy, however, the region at this time was plagued by a number of issues. World War I brought independence for several states, but it also introduced many economic and political problems to East-Central Europe. With the threat of communism from the East and domestic issues at home, authoritarian governments came into power. All of the countries in the region, with the exception of Czechoslovakia, failed their first tests at democracy. In the midst of the chaos of the times, right-wing and even fascist leaders gained control in many of the countries. They established authoritarian regimes with appalling records regarding human rights and civil liberties.

Political attitudes within East-Central Europe generally shifted even further to the right as time went on. Along with these shifts in ideology also came increased feelings of antisemitism. Antisemitism had previously existed in the region even before the troubles of the interwar period, but never to the degree and in the way that it now appeared; previous discrimination based on religious grounds became more extreme as Jews were increasingly seen as members of

a different race. Of these times, William Hagen writes, “Before Hitler’s regime launched the wartime genocide, political anti-Semitism in central Europe rose to levels of destructiveness unprecedented in modern history.”³ Jews became the scapegoats for various political and economic problems throughout much of East-Central Europe. These attitudes and political sentiments, widespread throughout East-Central Europe, were a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the Holocaust and other dark events during World War II.

World War II and the Holocaust

All of East-Central Europe was either allied with or occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II. Within each and every state the population was divided, with collaborators, resisters, and those who simply watched to see what would happen next. The similarities among the states in the region, however, end there. Some were invaded by the Nazis and installed with puppet collaborationist governments, while others took a more active role in siding with Hitler. The Polish and Czech states were occupied by Nazi Germany, while Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania were more eager allies of Germany. The collaborationist governments received certain benefits from their alliances with Germany; Slovakia gained its independence and Hungary regained territory lost after World War I. Over the course of World War II, the leadership of several countries in the region were replaced by pro-Nazi and even more overtly antisemitic and authoritarian groups.

Resistance to the Nazis was generally the strongest in Poland, with the exception of the Partisan movement in Yugoslavia. Even within states, though, levels of resistance, collaboration, and quiet acceptance varied greatly—it is impossible to say that one entire nation supported the

³ William W. Hagen, “Before ‘The Final Solution’: Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 68:2 (June 1996): 351-381. 351.

Nazis, while another one opposed them. In every single state, there were those who risked their lives by resisting the Nazis and helping their persecuted neighbors or even strangers. Likewise, even in the states that were victimized by German occupation, there were people who wholeheartedly supported the Nazi mission and profited greatly from their deeds. As Gerhard Hirschfeld explains, “There is no doubt that the demarcation line between Nazi occupation policy and Fascist collaboration was very thin, so far as it did not actually overlap as a result of the extent of ideological identification.”⁴ It is difficult to categorize people as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ during this period, and impossible to categorize entire nations.

Even greater in number than the extreme resisters and collaborators, though, are the ordinary masses who watched Nazi atrocities and decided simply not to get involved. Tony Judt explains, “Another way of putting this is to say that most of occupied Europe either collaborated with the occupying forces (a minority) or accepted with resignation and equanimity the presence and activities of the German forces (a majority).”⁵ Most East-Central Europeans may have disliked the Nazis and their co-national counterparts, and indeed privately decried their horrible actions. For the most part, however, ordinary citizens kept these sentiments to themselves and looked the other way as their neighbors were rounded up, bound for ghettos and then concentration camps. This quiet acceptance was made possible by a number of factors, including fear of the consequences of resistance, but also the feelings of antisemitism that were pervasive throughout society. The culture of accepted, even expected discrimination and the messages portrayed by government leaders made it much easier for ordinary people to accept Nazi ideology and ignore the Holocaust.

⁴ Gerhard Hirschfeld, *Nazi Rule and Dutch Collaboration: The Netherlands under German Occupation*, trans. Louise Willmot (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988). 6-7.

⁵ Tony Judt, “The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe,” *Daedalus*, 121:4 (Fall 1992): 83-118. 85.

Communism

The communist regimes added another forty years of occupation and authoritarianism to a region already faced with a discontinuous and contradictory past. The Red Army liberated the concentration camps and nations under Nazi occupation, but any excitement about their arrival disappeared once East-Central Europeans realized that the Soviets were there to stay. Within the next few years, communists in each state had gained power, thanks to the help of the Soviets. Although each regime was unique, they were all one-party systems that were heavily influenced by the Soviet Union. The early, Stalinist years of communist rule were characterized by repression and extreme state control. There were several quashed uprisings in the 1950s and 60s, yet in the following years, a sort of reform communism spread throughout several countries in the region. As with the Holocaust, East-Central Europeans are faced with questions of responsibility in the post-communist era. Communism was imposed by the Soviet Union, yet implemented by communist national elites, and tolerated by large numbers of the national masses.

The public memories about the past advanced by the communist regimes themselves were also quite contradictory. Each regime had a single view of identity and memory of the past, and all citizens were expected to conform. The states framed memory of historical events through the Marxist lens of class struggle, with the communists always portrayed as among the righteous. World War II was not represented as a war against a genocidal dictatorship, but was instead a fight against fascist imperialists, who were eventually defeated by the triumphant Soviets. The word 'Holocaust' was not used, and official communist rhetoric did not recognize that certain ethnic, religious, and social groups were specifically targeted by the Nazi regime. Victims were instead described as 'anti-fascists' or merely 'nationals;' the 1947 memorial at

Auschwitz, for instance, described the place merely as one where “Poles and citizens of other nationalities fought and died a martyr’s death.”⁶ The states also officially denied the existence of antisemitism, even though it remained an issue throughout the communist era.

The communist regimes in East-Central Europe portrayed the Soviets as the liberators and saviors of the state from the fascism of World War II and before. Communists did not wish to ‘complicate’ their own version of history by acknowledging that certain groups had been victimized, which might detract from the narrative of a ‘heroic communist struggle.’ They certainly did not want to remember that Stalin and Hitler had once worked together, parceling out pieces of Polish and Baltic land amongst themselves in 1939. Similarly, in both East and West, the memories of World War II and the Holocaust were downplayed in the postwar years so that leaders could ‘forget’ that Cold War enemies had, just years before, been anti-Nazi allies.⁷ The communist regimes “banned all reference to uncomfortable or conflictual moments save those which retroactively anticipated its own arrival...” and overemphasized “the myth of wartime fascist resistance.”⁸ Calling the Nazis fascists had helped the communists to gain power in the late 1940s. The governments, prodded by the USSR, banned all fascist (i.e. rightist) parties after the war and then, using the salami tactic, succeeded in gaining power with the help of the leftists. “The myth of wartime fascist resistance” provided moral authority to the communist cause; the poor, downtrodden East-Central European states were vehemently anti-Nazi and everyone welcomed the Soviets with open arms.

⁶ Michael Shafir, “Between Denial and ‘Comparative Trivialization’: Holocaust Negationism in Post-Communist East-Central Europe” (article presented to The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Jerusalem, November 2001), 1-48. 2. <<http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/actatxt1.html>>

⁷ Jeffrey Herf, “The emergence and legacies of divided memories: Germany and the Holocaust since 1945,” in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 184-205. 204.

⁸ Judt, “The Past is Another Country,” 100.

Facing the Past: Creating Public Memories

Post-communist elites generally found national histories that were discontinuous and contradictory. They were largely unsuccessful in discovering usable pasts that would help each state to prove that it truly belonged in the new, democratic world order. Even though people in each country felt a sense of national identity, those nations had rarely had the opportunities to have their own states. Many countries had little modern experience with independence until after World War I. For much of the region, the interwar period was the only true era of autonomy in the twentieth century, but that independence was cut short by Nazi occupation in many states. Soviet occupation quickly followed, as communist regimes were established across the region. The nations of East-Central Europe, though quite sure of their national identities, simply did not know what it was like to be truly independent, raising concerns about the abilities of these states to function and govern themselves autonomously.

Equally troublesome was the utter lack of past democratic or liberal traditions. The only time of true autonomy in the region was in the interwar years, and those governments were, as a general rule, authoritarian and right-wing. They acted in ways that would hardly be accepted in contemporary society, and especially within modern Europe. The governments were extremely nationalistic, marking "...a turn away from the representative democratic ideas of the founders of the new European order."⁹ As Shari Cohen explains, these states lacked both existing liberal ideologies on which to base their new political systems, and any past ideological commitments.¹⁰ The post-communist governments of East-Central Europe, thus, found themselves faced with the

⁹ R.J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997). 33.

¹⁰ Shari Cohen, *Politics without a Past: The Absence of History in Postcommunist Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

challenge of building modern democratic nation-states without any real experience with democracy itself.

Elites created different narratives in order to deal with this discontinuous past lacking in experience with sovereignty and democracy. Naturally, however, people differed in both their views of history and the political goals that they hoped to achieve by mobilizing the past. All of the dark events of the twentieth century, but especially the communist regimes, left society “without common meanings of history” and common ideologies for what the future should look like.¹¹ Elites, therefore, took it upon themselves to craft public memories of their tumultuous national histories that could help to achieve their own political goals. Although public memories of the twentieth century tragedies do not always fall neatly into a single category—sometimes a memory fits in both, while another may fit in neither—they can generally be divided according to Eyal’s conception of the will to memory. One group of national narratives uses memory as a means of overcoming trauma, whereas the other sees memory as a guarantor of an embattled identity. Each group has a different idea of what both a usable past and a future national policy should look like, resulting in historical narratives that can be quite dissimilar.

Memory as a Means of Overcoming Trauma

There is a group of East-Central Europeans who tend to view memories of the dark past as a means of overcoming trauma. Instead of ignoring or papering over the tragic discontinuities in their national history, they are generally more willing to acknowledge them with the hopes that memory will make the nation stronger. Although this group is rarely *eager* to create public memories of past tragedies and potential national responsibility, many will eventually be willing to incorporate such discontinuous stories into the national narrative. This type of memory, as

¹¹ Cohen, 4.

Eyal puts it, "...is meant to cure society and protect it from itself, from its tendency to repeat abnormal and dangerous patterns of behavior."¹² It is only through recognizing these past ills, members of this group might argue, that the nation will be able to move forward in positive ways. There is a sense implicit in this form of the will to memory that national identity can progress; instead of creating a public memory that aligns perfectly with national identity, perhaps we can shift our conception of identity so that it includes acknowledgement of a dark past. This recognition is never easy, as even those who see memory as a form of overcoming trauma will likely have a difficult time dealing with a particularly discontinuous past. With this form of the will to memory, however, remembering is ultimately the only way to overcome such traumas.

This form of the will to memory is often, though not exclusively, associated with liberal democrats. Liberals are generally more pro-European and eager to join and be fully accepted in Western institutions and political culture. They generally hold views that are less nationalist than their more conservative opponents, and also tend to promote ideologies of multiculturalism and minority rights. The liberal democratic conception of national identity and future policy often leads to the creation memories that may incorporate contradictory pasts, for reasons that will be outlined further in this section.

Powerful people who use this version of the will to memory tend to represent the interwar period and governmental leaders in a negative light. They emphasize the authoritarian, ultranationalist, and antisemitic nature of the regimes, as well as their links to Nazi Germany. Some utilizing this form of memory may even make comparisons between the interwar leaders and the contemporary right nationalists. Although people using memory as a means of overcoming trauma may be more willing to incorporate the Holocaust and national responsibility

¹² Eyal, 12.

into public memory, they still often have a very difficult time dealing with that part of the past. In 2000, for instance, a great deal of controversy surrounded the publication of Jan Gross' *Neighbors*, which detailed the 1941 massacre in Jedwabne, Poland. In the book, Gross uncovered the fact that it was not German Nazis who murdered the Jews in the community, but was instead their Polish neighbors. This finding directly challenged the predominant narrative of total Polish victimization, and many Poles across the political spectrum refused to believe it. According to a 2002 poll published by the Institute of National Memory, fifty percent of respondents claimed that they did not know who was responsible for the massacre.¹³ Admitting a degree of national responsibility for something as terrible as the Holocaust is extremely difficult; it is the ultimate discontinuity in the past of any nation aspiring for legitimacy in the modern world order. This challenge is not limited to East-Central Europe, as Western countries like France have also struggled with questions of national responsibility. Although liberal democrats are generally more willing than right nationalists to include the Holocaust in national public memories, people of every political ideology struggle with public memory of the Holocaust.

Those who are able to remember and acknowledge national responsibility for the Holocaust tend to treat the memories as a way of overcoming trauma and ensuring that the past will not be repeated. There are a number of reasons why this group might be willing to create such memories, despite the difficulties inherent in remembering. Some may feel that it is simply the moral thing to do, and that they must openly discuss the past out of respect for those killed, whether they are family members or simply co-nationals. People who utilize this type of memory also tend to be more accepting of minority populations than their conservative counterparts.

¹³ Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, introduction to *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, ed. Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). 39.

Their commitment to multiculturalism creates incentives to acknowledge the sufferings of past minority groups (especially Jews and Roma). Those who hold more discriminatory views, on the other hand, would likely be less interested in remembering the plight of minority groups, especially when one's own nation holds responsibility for those hardships.

People who choose to incorporate the Holocaust into national narratives may also do so because of European-oriented policy goals. There has been, according to many scholars, a 'Europeanization' of the Holocaust; accepting responsibility and appropriately commemorating the Holocaust have become integral parts of what it means to be really European. Ljiljana Radonic argues that, after the fall of communism, Western Europe focused on the Holocaust as the "negative icon of our era," using it as the representation of ultimate evil.¹⁴ Although Germany had already acknowledged national responsibility, it was only after the end of the Cold War that other Western European states, like France and the Netherlands, began (slowly) to incorporate narratives of national responsibility into their public memories. Radonic argues that the Holocaust became a "negative European founding myth," writing, "The unified Europe after 1945 is understood as a collective sharing a common destiny that has learned a lesson from the Holocaust and developed shared structures in order to avoid a recurrence of such a catastrophe."¹⁵ The end of the Holocaust marks the beginning of a modern united Europe, as leaders across the continent joined together to ensure that it never happened again. Cecilia Banke argues, "In this sense, the Holocaust acts as a benchmark for what Europe should be and for what

¹⁴ Ljiljana Radonic, "Croatia—Exhibiting Memory and History at the "Shores of Europe," *Culture Unbound*, 3 (2011): 355-367. 358.

¹⁵ Radonic, 358.

it should avoid becoming.”¹⁶ Europe in the twentieth century is defined by the Holocaust, and it defines the post-war years in terms of cooperation and agreement upon certain standards to ensure that the future is brighter.

In order for the post-communist states to be able to join the club that is the united Europe, they must acknowledge and appropriately commemorate the Holocaust. People who use memory as a means of overcoming trauma also tend to hold views that are more pro-European. They are thus willing to include the Holocaust in public memory because it is a necessary condition for integrating with the rest of Europe. The depiction of the Holocaust as the ultimate form of evil has become universally accepted among liberal Westerners, and they publicly decry anyone who denies or trivializes its importance. Appropriately commemorating the Holocaust and acknowledging that co-nationals share some of the blame are necessarily European activities. Jörg Hackmann writes, “In addition, with regards to the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe an implicit connection was made between discussing one’s own commitment to the murder of Jews on the one hand and a positive political impact on integration into Western institutions on the other hand.”¹⁷ Those who view memory as a means of overcoming trauma may be willing to include the Holocaust and issues of responsibility in national narratives because, among other reasons, they wish to integrate fully with Europe.

This will to memory often also results in a complicated and multifaceted narrative of the time under communism. People are generally quite willing to commemorate the oppression and the atrocities committed by the various communist regimes. Those who see memory as a means

¹⁶ Cecilia Felicia Stokholm Banke, “Remembering Europe’s Heart of Darkness,” in *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance*, ed. Malgorzata Pakier and Bo Stråth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 163-174. 169.

¹⁷ Jörg Hackmann, “From National Victims to Transnational Bystanders? The Changing Commemoration of World War II in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Constellations*, 16:1 (2009): 167-181. 170.

of overcoming trauma, however, may also try to incorporate narratives of national responsibility into predominant public memories. They may acknowledge that the communist leaders *were* co-nationals, not merely Soviet traitors. Accepting this national responsibility is often very difficult, but these elites may see it as a way of ‘curing’ society and thus allowing it to progress. Even further, some of these generally more liberal elites may stress the complicity of the masses, arguing, like Timothy Garton Ash, that, “Society was kept down by millions of Lilliputian threads of everyday mendacity, conformity and compromise... No one was simply a victim, everyone was in some measure responsible.”¹⁸ They rely on narratives like Václav Havel’s story of the greengrocer who places a sign in his shop window that reads “Workers of the World, Unite!”¹⁹ The grocer does not put the sign up because he has a genuine enthusiasm for its message; he puts it up because that is what is expected of him. That’s what he has done for years, and he worries about what might happen if he suddenly did not do it one day. Havel says that the greengrocer announces his loyalty to the regime and the system as a whole “...by accepting the prescribed *ritual*, by accepting appearances as reality, by accepting the given rules of the game. In doing so, however, he has himself become a player of the game, thus making it possible for the game to go on, for it to exist in the first place.”²⁰ People who wish to overcome past traumas do not argue that greengrocers and other ordinary people are equally responsible as, say, the Secret Police in maintaining the regime; some simply state that ordinary co-nationals *did* play at least some role in maintaining the status quo.

¹⁸ Timothy Garton Ash, “Treating a difficult past in post-communist Europe,” in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 265-282. 271.

¹⁹ Václav Havel, “The power of the powerless,” trans. Paul Wilson, in *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the state in central-eastern Europe*, ed. John Keane (New York: Palach Press, 1985), 23-96. 27.

²⁰ Havel, 31.

Among those who use memory as a means of overcoming trauma, social democrats (socialists, or reform communists) in particular are most likely to acknowledge the possible benefits of communism. Communist regimes industrialized and developed places like Slovakia and succeeded in programs of urbanization, education, and literacy in several countries in the region.²¹ They also tend to acknowledge that the periods of communist rule were not uniformly oppressive and deadly; after the 1950s, several of the regimes loosened up and became comparatively less authoritarian. For much of East-Central Europe, the height of communist terror was during Stalin's rule, and conditions improved at least somewhat after his death. These social democrats generally acknowledge the horrors of the 1940s and 50s, but argue that the later more reformed communism had its benefits. They say that, without the terror of the early Stalinist regimes, many people felt that some of the economic and social policies had merit. Many of these social democrats are members of political parties that descended from the communist parties, and so they choose to insist that their predecessors' policies were not so terrible. Some are even former communists themselves, and thus obviously have an interest in presenting communism in a more positive light.²²

Memory as a Guarantor of Identity

An alternate group within East-Central Europe sees memory as the guarantor of identity and insists that they must remember the traumas of the past, or else their very identity will be destroyed from the outside. They believe that 'others' seek to undermine the nation by telling false narratives about the past, and so they must seek the truth in order to maintain the pride of the nation. Eyal writes of this form of memory, "...it typically depicts an *external* assault on

²¹ Judt, "The Past is Another Country," 111.

²² There are also former communists who lean towards right nationalism.

collective memory by competing narratives composed by the enemies of the nation, who thus attempt to undermine its identity, integrity and territorial claim, indeed its very existence.”²³ There is a sense of victimization inherent in this type of memory, a feeling that ‘the other’ is out to get ‘us.’ Scapegoating is also a commonly used tactic in this will to memory. This external assault may be committed by foreigners or by insiders who are not true nationals, but their ultimate goal is to degrade the very nation. In this view, national identity remains constant throughout time, and so narratives must reflect the nature of the proud, continuous nation that stands up to its aggressors.

This form of memory is generally, though not exclusively, associated with right nationalists. They are usually more inward-looking, and more skeptical of European institutions and integration than the opposing liberal democrats. Because of their nationalist views, they can often have an especially difficult time incorporating discontinuous or contradictory past elements into public memories; the rhetoric of victimization by foreign forces is much easier to accept. Right nationalists also tend to hold views of national identity that are based on ethnicity, unlike their more civic-minded liberal opponents.

The people who use memory as a guarantor of identity are likely to ignore the negative aspects of the interwar period and leaders. Instead of focusing on the authoritarian nature of the regimes, they may instead choose to reminisce about the glory days before the Nazis and communists marched in and brought the region to a standstill. They focus on the positives of the interwar period, like national sovereignty and the widespread feelings of nationalism. Some encourage these same nationalist sentiments to flourish in the current era. They view the interwar period, though imperfect, as a potential usable past; it can be seen as a precursor to modern

²³ Eyal, 18.

democracy, which was only interrupted when the Germans invaded. Despite the stark realities, some within this memory group may excuse or even glorify the deeds of former authoritarian leaders and the public sentiments of past, less than accepting populations. These attitudes become especially evident when placed in the context of the relationship between the Holocaust and communism, which I will discuss later in this section.

Although most Europeans struggle with the legacy of the Holocaust, those who see memory as a guarantor of identity are especially unlikely to focus on national responsibility. Instead, they often concentrate on the essentially German nature of Nazism and the Holocaust. While it is true that within each and every East-Central European state there was some degree of both resistance and victimization, there were also nationals in each state who are guilty of accommodating or actively helping the Nazis. Elites who use this will to memory often craft public memory to focus only on these heroes and victims, largely ignoring national collaborators and perpetrators. Michael Shafir calls this focus on the wrongs done to ‘us’ by the Germans “deflective negationism.” He writes, “Rather than negating the Holocaust, deflective negation transfers the guilt for the perpetration of crimes to members of other nations, or it minimizes its own-nation participation in their perpetration to insignificant ‘aberrations.’”²⁴ According to this narrative, the nationals who *did* participate in the Holocaust and other tragedies of World War II were on the very fringe of society, and essentially all of the guilt lies with the Germans. *They* did it to *us*. This view is, understandably, especially pronounced in those states that underwent German occupation, whether post-communist or not. Many Austrian memoirs, for example, rarely describe their co-nationals as “Nazis;” instead, they are simply “Nazi sympathizers.”²⁵

²⁴ Shafir, “Between Denial,” 26.

²⁵ Jacqueline Vansant, “Challenging Austria’s Victim Status: National Socialism and Austrian Personal Narratives,” *The German Quarterly*, 67:1 (Winter 1994): 38-57. 41.

Along the same line, people in this memory group sometimes argue that their nation had no other choice but to join the Axis; they were forcibly invaded, threatened, or the Nazis made promises and deals that were impossible to ignore. They ignore the fact, or regard it as an “aberration,” that there was a (sometimes significant, often quite small) population in every state that either agreed with the Nazi ideology or stood to benefit, economically and socially, from the Nazi policies.

Some elites who use memory as a guarantor of identity hold certain discriminatory views (or at least have constituencies who hold those views) and are thus unwilling to accept the Holocaust as among the darkest moments in a nation’s history. Antisemitism remains an important problem throughout much of East-Central Europe. Many also view Roma and other ethnic minorities with prejudiced attitudes. People who hold such discriminatory views may have little interest in ensuring that memories of the Holocaust, and especially national responsibility, are integrated into the national narratives. They may believe that the Holocaust, though terrible, was something that happened to the ‘other’ and not to core members of the nation; what reason is there, then, to include the Holocaust in the national history?²⁶ They exclude these narratives from public memory, just as they exclude the minorities from the core nation. Some in this group even take these views to the extreme, even going so far as to label those (often liberal politicians) who admit national responsibility as ‘traitors to the nation.’²⁷ Those who admit national responsibility for something that happened to the ‘other’ (and which was inflicted by the Nazi ‘other!’) must not be true nationals.

²⁶ This attitude is especially pronounced with regards to the Roma Holocaust, which only recently has become a topic of discussion in much of East-Central Europe

²⁷ Shafir, “Between Denial,” 16-18, 20.

People who treat memory as a guarantor of identity often, quite understandably, create narratives of the horrors committed by the communist regimes. Sometimes, however, they take it to the extreme, engaging in what Peter Gay calls “comparative trivialization.” Gay used this term when describing the work of Ernst Nolte, a German historian who claimed that American policy in Vietnam was comparable to (or perhaps worse) than Nazi actions during the Holocaust. Gay wrote, “I call his method ‘comparative trivialization,’ for at its heart lies the device of acknowledging Nazi atrocities but, as it were, ‘humanizing’ them by pointing, indignantly, at crimes committed by others—crimes presumably as vicious as those perpetrated in the Third Reich.”²⁸ Some in this memory group use comparative trivialization as a technique in public memory creation, arguing that communism was ‘just as bad,’ if not ‘worse’ than the Holocaust. In attempting to put comparative values on very different, yet truly terrible events, people tend to downplay one at the expense of the other. Trying to figure out who has suffered more, or who has been more victimized, puts people at the risk of engaging in what Vladimir Tismaneanu calls “competitive martyrology,” an exercise that is certain to offend and perhaps even perpetuate discriminatory or negative beliefs.²⁹

Much of this sentiment originates from a sense of victimhood, compounded perhaps by the ‘Eastern’ feeling that the rest of the world simply does not care. Some Eastern Europeans have historically experienced feelings of inferiority in comparison to Western Europe. There is a sense, within East and West alike, that East-Central Europe is not ‘real Europe,’ or is otherwise a second-rate region in some way.³⁰ Hungarian Péter Esterházy recognized this distinction by

²⁸ Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). xi.

²⁹ Vladimir Tismaneanu, “Communism and the Human Condition: Reflections on *The Black Book of Communism*,” *Human Rights Review*, 2:2 (January-March 2001): 125-134. 132.

³⁰ Holly Case, “Being European: East and West,” in *European Identity*, eds. Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111-131. 113.

writing, “And while I see no serious reasons for not translating this new division (core/non-core) with the terms ‘first-class’ and ‘second-class,’ still, I’d rather not speak in that habitual Eastern European, forever insulted way.”³¹ Of this regional sense of victimhood, John-Paul Himka writes, “Many East Europeans feel that their sufferings have been rendered invisible, as though their dead are not equal to other dead, as though they are not recognized as endowed with the same human dignity as others.”³² The more nationalist members of this memory group, who believe that their nations have been victimized throughout history, wonder why the Western world is so preoccupied with the Holocaust when all of East-Central Europe spent years under Soviet domination. They are less interested in integrating with Europe than the liberal democrats, especially since they perceive that much of Europe discounts the horrors of the communist regimes.

Elites who use memory as a guarantor of identity sometimes have the tendency to use comparative trivialization in their public memories of the interwar leaders. There has been a tendency to glorify the anti-communist policies of these leaders, while at the same time ignoring their roles in allying with Germany or collaborating in the Holocaust. In some East-Central European states, right nationalists have rehabilitated such leaders or formed new cults of personality around them. After the regime change, for instance, former Romanian leader Ion Antonescu enjoyed a renewed positive legacy and call for rehabilitation until his role in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people was officially announced in 2003. There exists a large group that still views Antonescu as a hero, though, even after that truth commission. Judt discussed Antonescu’s legacy, writing, “...his part in the massacre of the Jews and others in

³¹ Péter Esterházy, “How Big is the European Dwarf?” in *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe: Transatlantic Relations after the Iraq War* (New York: Verso, 2005), 74-79. 75.

³² John-Paul Himka, “Obstacles to the Integration of the Holocaust into Post-Communist East European Historical Narratives,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 50:3/4 (September-December 2008): 359-372. 364.

wartime history [weighed] little in the balance against his anti-Russian credentials.”³³ These views of praise-worthy interwar leaders are not restricted to the radical right:

However, many of the figures prominent before the postwar communist takeovers had been extreme nationalists, anti-Semites, or even fascists. Their cults were particularly embraced by rightist politicians, but they also had a large popular appeal. The roles these figures played in the Holocaust were denied or downplayed. Alternatively, the cult denied or downplayed the Holocaust itself.³⁴

By holding up these leaders as heroes, people tacitly imply that fighting communism was a more worthy goal than fighting Nazism, or even that one’s anti-communist record overrides a pro-Nazi one. Alternatively, people might even decry these leaders, claiming that they actually *protected* the Jews at the expense of aiding their own national constituents, or that they only stopped these protections when budgets or other constraints required it. According to some Slovakian historians, for example, Jozef Tiso (head of the Slovak National Socialist government) personally saved tens of thousands of Jews and only refrained from resigning in protest of anti-Jewish legislation because of the insistences of a few Slovakian rabbis.³⁵ In both cases, whether glorifying anti-communist leaders or lamenting their supposed pro-Jewish policies, comparative trivialization is a relatively common tactic in public memory creation.

Virtually all public memories advanced by elites from across the political spectrum include tales of resistance to the communist regimes. Famous dissidents and ordinary revolutionaries alike serve as prototypes for heroism in East-Central European public memories. These memories generally focus on the uprisings of the 1950s and 60s, as well as the events preceding the regime change. Elites who use memory to maintain identity tend to use the rhetoric of ‘revolution’ and the images of Soviet tanks in these narratives, insisting that these freedom

³³ Judt, “The Past is Another Country,” 103.

³⁴ Himka, 364.

³⁵ Shafir, “Between Denial,” 32.

fighters sought the end of communism and new democracies. They often treat these uprisings as founding myths, as the time when citizens demanded new beginnings for the nation. The post-communist systems, then, are the final products of those goals that their co-nationals worked so hard to achieve. These uprisings, they argue, are the precursors to the current democracies.

While emphasizing the people's uprisings, people in this memory group also often downplay the national character of the communist regimes. According to their public memory, the communist governments were foreign, Soviet-imposed regimes with no domestic autonomy. Similarly, when certain nationals are seen as guilty, they (like the Nazi collaborators) are depicted as mere co-conspirators and minority aberrations in the grand scheme of things. The communist regimes, despite being headed by nationals, employing many nationals, and tolerated by a majority of nationals, are seen as foreign and unnatural; they are instances of Soviet domination and do not belong in the narratives of Czech, Polish, or Romanian history and identity. Right nationalists have a special tendency see their co-nationals as pure victims instead of considering questions of national responsibility:

So instead of exploring what Poles did to Poles, Czechs and Slovaks to Czechs and Slovaks, Hungarians to Hungarians, each nation dwells on the wrongs done to it by the Soviet Union. Instead of quietly reflecting, as Havel suggested, on the personal responsibility which each and everyone had for sustaining the communist regime, people unite in righteous indignation at the traitors who invited the Russians in.³⁶

Communism was, they argue, imposed and maintained by 'the other,' and the only nationals who deserve any responsibility are not *true* nationals. They are outsiders, and do not belong within the realm of national identity.

This chapter has explored the reasons why public memory is particularly important, and particularly contested, in post-communist East-Central Europe. It has examined some of the

³⁶ Garton Ash, "Treating a difficult past," 277.

issues that people in the region face when looking at their national pasts, especially the lack of experience with past independence and democracy. The twentieth century, especially the interwar period, the Holocaust, and the time under communism, is particularly discontinuous and thus subject to contestation. The last section outlined some of the basic strategies that people using both forms of the will to memory take when crafting (politically beneficial) national narratives of the past and of current identity. The treatment of memory as a means of overcoming trauma is generally associated with a pro-European, liberal democratic ideology. The use of memory as a guarantor of identity tends to be associated with right nationalism, and the sense that outsiders have assaulted the nation. Having placed Hungary in context, the next three chapters will apply this framework to three Hungarian historical museums: the National Museum, the House of Terror, and the Holocaust Memorial Center.

Chapter Three: Hungarian National Museum

This chapter will examine the public memories presented in the National Museum. Unlike the other two museums in this study, the National Museum does not commemorate the past, but instead seeks to chronicle it in a way that is as neutral and ‘scientific’ as possible. It is necessary to examine the historical narratives in the National Museum because they represent the ‘official’ public memories of Hungary. The National Museum is an important symbolic organ of the state, as it claims not only to house national history, but also to present the past in a scholarly and unbiased way. It seeks to establish the permanence and continuity of the Hungarian nation over time, thus legitimizing the state as the guardian of the nation. While other museums may also present ‘official’ versions of national history, it is the National Museum alone that presents *the* official and continuous narrative of the glory of the Hungarian nation.

This chapter will begin by discussing national museums in general, explaining how they were established across Europe in the nineteenth century (and have since spread across the world) to present a common national history that would unite and educate a national group. Because all museums, but especially national museums, generally strive to present an unbiased, neutral account of history, I will then provide a brief overview of a more academic version of Hungarian history against which to compare the museums’ public memories. The next section will examine the Hungarian National Museum itself, arguing that the museum seeks to chronicle history in a way that is both scientific and unbiased. The public memories in the museum follow a somewhat conservative, if fairly mainstream narrative of a continuous Hungarian nation that was interrupted by (foreign) Nazism and communism; the exhibit mostly brushes over the Holocaust and generally presents Hungary as a victim of foreign forces. This narrative creates a usable past and thus legitimizes the Hungarian state by largely blaming the tragedies of the

twentieth century on non-Hungarian forces. Interestingly, unlike other sites of memory I am aware of in Hungary, the National Museum presents a relatively benign view of the late communist period, which is perhaps a reflection of the leadership of MSzP (the Socialist Party) at the time.

National Museums

A national museum is a unique institution, charged with a significant task that is quite distinct than those assigned to other museums. Most historical museums represent the past in ways that affect national identity. National museums, however, explicitly serve to shape and represent the collective identity of the nation; they “...have long served to house a national heritage, thereby creating a national identity that often fulfilled national ambitions.”¹ In their exhibitions, they showcase objects and texts that are important to national identity and history, whether they are cultural or natural. In these displays, the national museums make clear to each visitor *what* is important in the national history and *who* can be included among the co-nationals.

National museums originated in Europe in the 1800s, though they have now spread across the world. There is a sense that every modern and legitimate nation-state must have its own national museum in order to display its history and objects of national pride. The first national museums (and many of the later ones) were established by elites in society. These elites often donated their own personal collections—ranging from rocks in the Czech Republic to works of art in Hungary—for public consumption in hopes of creating some sense of “patriotic identity.”² During these times, Romantic senses of nationalism had become quite popular,

¹ Flora E.S. Kaplan, introduction to *Museums and the Making of “Ourselves,”* ed. Flora E.S. Kaplan (New York: Leicester University Press, 1996), 1-15. 9.

² Luis Gerardo Morales-Moreno, “History and Patriotism in the National Museum of Mexico,” in *Museums and the Making of “Ourselves,”* ed. Flora E.S. Kaplan (New York: Leicester University Press, 1996), 171-191. 185.

resulting in the beginnings of the modern nation-state. Elites were motivated by these new feelings of nationalism, and they hoped to unite the masses under a single national identity that remained continuous over time. To do so, they created depictions of a common past, supposedly shared by all members of the nation, which would unite them in an imagined community.³ The creation of national museums marked the beginning of new, unified senses of national identity across Europe, and later, across the world.

National museums maintain the same role today. Virtually every modern state has a national museum, which is generally located in the capital city or another important location. They “house national heritage” and serve as identity centers within nation-states. They are generally highly esteemed, as many view the national museum as the preeminent historical museum within a country. They are institutions that serve to connect the modern national identity to its past, even ancient, origins.⁴ Because the national museum is so highly esteemed, it holds high symbolic value; it is seen, in many ways, as the guardian and educational facility for the nation’s history and identity. The public memories presented in national museums are (supposedly) scholarly, unbiased representations of the official narratives of the nation. Many museums (and all of the museums in this study) receive government funding and thus represent, in some ways, the views of the government, but national museums above all represent the official public memories of the national past. They serve as organs of the state and help the state in its quest to create a unified nation with a shared, continuous common past. National museums seek to portray a vision of the state as a permanent, continuous institution, serving as guardian of the nation, regardless of what political party holds power.

³ Morales-Moreno, 171.

⁴ Ali Mozaffari, “Modernity and Identity: The National Museum of Iran,” in *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*, ed. Simon J. Knell et al. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 87-104. 88.

A Brief Overview of Hungarian History

Hungarians have always viewed themselves as somewhat a lonely nation, fearful of encroachment by outsiders. The Magyars are believed to have originated around the Ural Mountains, and they founded what is now Hungary as a federation of tribes in the late 800s. In the year 1000, Stephen I founded the Kingdom of Hungary and established Christianity throughout the region, linking Hungary to the rest of the states of Western Europe. Hungary spent the next several hundred years trying to guard its sovereignty against foreign powers, surviving Mongol invasion, and then time under both the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. Since early times, Hungarians have felt a sense of victimization by foreign powers, perhaps intensified by the feeling that they are linguistically and ethnically isolated from the people of the surrounding countries. Hungarians, after all, speak Hungarian, a Finno-Ugric language that is distinct from the Slavic, Germanic, and Romance languages of their neighbors. As my Hungarian history professor was quite fond of saying, “We Hungarians, we are motherless, we are brotherless.”

Hungarians demanded greater autonomy in the early 1800s, but were ultimately unsuccessful in the Revolution of 1848.⁵ In 1867, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was created, and the Hungarian Kingdom (including much of Transylvania, Slovakia, Ruthenia, Croatia, and other land) was granted internal autonomy.⁶ This period is generally represented in public memory as a sort of golden age in Hungarian culture, epitomized by the millennium celebrations in 1896. Everything abruptly changed after World War I, as Austria-Hungary was on the losing side. After the war, Hungary gained its independence, but much of the Kingdom was under occupation

⁵ Despite the failure, 1848 is treated as a founding myth for the modern Hungarian nation, as the Revolution and its demands for increased civil liberties are celebrated annually on March 15.

⁶ Crampton, 11.

by various foreign forces. Within two years, both a democratic revolution (headed by Mihály Károlyi) and a communist revolution (led by Béla Kun) had taken place; the two together “...destroyed the liberal centre and socialist left. Only the right remained.”⁷ Rightist military forces took back Budapest and governmental power in 1919, and in early 1920, Miklós Horthy was declared Regent and became the head of state.

In June of 1920, at the end of the war, Hungary and the Allies signed the Treaty of Trianon. Under Trianon, Hungary lost almost three-quarters of its territory, more than one-half of its population (including one-third of its ethnic Hungarians), and its access to the sea. Paul Lendvai writes, “A single word, Trianon, sums up for all Hungarians to this day the most devastating tragedy in their history... Trianon was a tragedy from which Hungary—regardless of the prevailing political attitude—has never completely recovered.”⁸ Hungary became very homogenous and lost much of its industry. Irredentism—regaining the lost territories, especially Transylvania—became the predominant political attitude of the time. Looking for a scapegoat, some Hungarians began to blame Jews for Trianon. Jews had historically been very accepted and assimilated in society, often considering themselves (and being seen by others) as true Hungarian nationals. After the war, however, some people used the Jewish population as a scapegoat, arguing that they were to blame for the short-lived communist regime that they claimed had brought on Trianon.

A few months later, Prime Minister Pál Teleki introduced to Parliament the Numerus Clausus law, the first piece of anti-Jewish legislation since the end of World War I. Lendvai says of this period, “This was the beginning of an unmistakable official Christian-nationalist, right-

⁷ Crampton, 84.

⁸ Paul Lendvai, *The Hungarians: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). 372, 374.

wing conservative counterrevolution, giving expression to an anti-Semitism of a kind which had been alien to the liberal élite of multinational Hungary.”⁹ The next decade, however, passed in relative peace, although antisemitism, extreme irredentism, and nationalism were common sentiments among the Hungarian populace. After Hitler came to power in Germany, though, Hungarian sentiments drifted further to the right, especially as many saw an alliance with Germany as a means to regain some of the territory lost at Trianon. In 1940, Hungary officially joined the Axis powers and regained part of Transylvania, though it hoped to avoid direct involvement in the war. In 1941, however, Hungarian forces assisted in the invasions of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, regaining more territory, but becoming even more linked to Nazi Germany.

Meanwhile, the Hungarian legislature passed more discriminatory Jewish laws.¹⁰ Tens of thousands of Jewish males were sent to forced labor service, as Jews were generally not trusted to fight as soldiers. Many of them died. Hungary also deported nearly 20,000 non-Hungarian Jews from the regained territory—the vast majority of them were sent to the East and shot by Nazi forces. Most Jews, however, lived in relative safety during the early part of the war, as Horthy resisted “...every effort to tackle the Jewish problem aggressively.”¹¹ On March 19, 1944, however, German forces occupied Hungary. Adolf Eichmann, with the eager help of Hungarian gendarmes and civil servants, quickly began the deportation of Jews to concentration camps. Lendvai writes of that summer in 1944, “But nowhere else in Central and Eastern Europe were Jews sent to their death so quickly and so brutally... The Hungarians in charge proudly reported to their German masters that between 15 May and 7 July they had expedited 147 trains

⁹ Lendvai, 384.

¹⁰ Lendvai, 412.

¹¹ Lendvai, 420.

to Auschwitz, containing 437,402 Jews.”¹² Most of the victims who were deported were from the countryside.

In October 1944, Horthy attempted, unsuccessfully, to surrender to the Allies. The Nazis, anticipating this move, had kidnapped Horthy’s son, and insisted that he appoint Ferenc Szálasi as Prime Minister. He did. Szálasi was head of the Arrow Cross, a right-wing national socialist party that had won about twenty-five percent of the vote in the 1939 elections.¹³ The Arrow Cross began a reign of terror, killing tens of thousands of Jews and political opponents alike, often by shooting them into the Danube. Soviet troops had already entered Hungary in September, and by December they encircled the capital, beginning the siege of Budapest. During the siege, tens of thousands of civilians died, thousands of homes were destroyed, and the Germans blew up all of the bridges. The city finally surrendered in February of 1945.

After the war, Hungary lost all of the territories it had regained from its alliance with Germany. The Soviets remained in Hungary, helping local communists take part in ‘salami tactics,’ in which they ‘sliced’ away at the most conservative parts of the opposition until only the liberal elements remained. By 1949, the Hungarian Working People’s Party (MDP) had declared a communist state, led by Mátyás Rákosi, who proclaimed himself “Stalin’s best pupil.”¹⁴ Rákosi’s regime was characterized by extreme repression, the collectivization of agriculture, and heavy industrialization. Hundreds of thousands of non-party *and* party members were imprisoned, and thousands were executed. After Stalin’s death in 1953, though, the reform communist Imre Nagy replaced Rákosi and began to initiate some more liberal reforms. In 1955, however, a more traditional communist leadership replaced Nagy.

¹² Lendvai, 422.

¹³ Lendvai, 416.

¹⁴ Lendvai, 436.

The 1956 Revolution began on October 23, as students in Budapest demonstrated their solidarity with the Poles and read a list of demands including "...free elections, a free press, the reintroduction of Hungarian national holidays and national symbols, and, after the early evening hours, negotiations for the withdrawal of Soviet troops."¹⁵ Things escalated quickly, Soviet tanks rolled in, and, for brief moments, it seemed that the revolutionaries, under the reinstated leadership of Nagy, would receive their demands. Days later, though, the communists crushed the revolution and put János Kádár, head of the newly formed Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSzMP), in power. In the following weeks, many Hungarians fled to the West and were imprisoned or even executed.

In the early 1960s, Kádár announced his new policy of "who ever is not against us is with us" (a reversal of Rákosi's earlier policy, "who ever is not with us is against us"), allowing more freedoms and liberalization of the economy.¹⁶ Hungary began its own brand of 'goulash communism,' and was relatively better off than its neighbors and certainly better off than in the 1950s. In the late 1980s, prompted by an economic crisis and a less powerful Soviet Union, Hungary began its transition to a Western-style democracy. The reburial of Imre Nagy in June 1989, attended by over 100,000 Hungarians, marked a turning point in the downfall of the communist regime. In October, the communists held a round table discussion with the opposition. The Republic of Hungary was officially re-declared, and the conservative (MDF) József Antall won the first free election in the post-communist era.

¹⁵ Lendvai, 451.

¹⁶ Lendvai, 458.

Hungarian National Museum¹⁷

Unlike the other two museums in this study, the National Museum chronicles the past instead of commemorating and explicitly treating public memory as a way of dealing with past tragedies. The memories in this museum thus fall somewhat outside of Eyal's dichotomy. The museum's *injunction to remember* is to create a continuous narrative of the nation in order to emphasize the permanence of (and increase the legitimacy for) the state. The public memories in the National Museum represent the official public memories of the Hungarian state. The *mnemonic operation* is simply to chronicle and remember the past, so that Hungarians are reminded of their shared history. The exhibit seeks to create a neutral and scientific version of the past, though as we will see, total objectivity is impossible when dealing with such contentious issues. The *mnemonic substance* is the predominant, somewhat nationalist and conservative narrative that Hungary has been repeatedly victimized by foreign forces, but now, newly independent, it will be a successful and legitimate nation-state. Somewhat uniquely, too, the National Museum presents a clear distinction between early Stalinism and the later 'goulash communism,' a view that does *not* appear in the more conservative and nationalist House of Terror.

Hungary's National Museum is the oldest and most traditional of the museums in this study. It was founded in 1802 when Count Ferenc Széchenyi (father of István Széchenyi, one of the most esteemed Hungarians of all time) donated his large collection of arts and other objects to the creation of a new national institution. Péter Apor notes, "Ordinarily, his act of generosity

¹⁷ Observations of the National Museum are based on the official guidebook and my own notes and photographs from my visit on November 17, 2011.

is related to the birth of the modern Hungarian nation.”¹⁸ This desire for some sort of national collection originated from Enlightenment ideas of modernization and nationalism that were already flourishing in Vienna and in other European capitals. In Budapest as in these other cities, aristocrats and other elites were the originators of these early civil initiatives in the public sphere.¹⁹ In order to construct the building in which the current museum resides, the government instituted special taxes on nobles, thus firmly establishing a relationship between the museum and the state. At this time, the National Museum also served as an assertion of Hungarian autonomy within the larger Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which was especially pronounced when the national poet Sándor Petőfi read his “12 Points” and “National Song” on its steps. This demonstration marked the beginning of the 1848 Revolution. From its very inception, the National Museum was a public institution with stated goals of educating the masses and serving as a means of national modernization. Around the time of the Millennium Celebration in 1896, the museum developed a strictly historical focus. Apor says, “This development resulted in national identity becoming bound to historical representations. The National Museum claimed that the nation equaled its history.”²⁰ The National Museum, as a preeminent scholarly institution of the time, dictated that history—not science, culture, or art—was *the* integral part of the Hungarian nation. Hungarians became defined by their shared sense of a common past. Knowing, respecting, and sharing this history, then, would prove equally important in being a ‘true Hungarian.’

¹⁸ Péter Apor, “National Museums in Hungary,” (paper presented at European National Museums conference “European National Museums: Identity Politics, The Use of the Past and the European Citizen,” Bologna, Italy, 28-30 April 2011). 5.

¹⁹ Apor, “National Museums in Hungary,” 6.

²⁰ Apor, “National Museums in Hungary,” 11.

After World War I and the devastating Treaty of Trianon, political sentiments became increasingly conservative and radical. During this time, the National Museum became a political tool for promoting irrentism and nationalism; “The interwar governments... cultivated a distinctly nationalist agenda concerning museums, considering them as a means to demonstrate the superiority of ethnic Hungarian civilization, culture and education in the Southeast European region.”²¹ This nationalism, based on the concept of an ethnic Hungarian identity, was necessarily exclusive. The museum was relatively unchanged through World War II, but when the communists gained power, they nationalized all public educational and cultural institutions.²² This state ownership limited the autonomy of the museum, but also guaranteed it funding. Communist exhibitions often dealt with very early history, but even these non-political and pre-Hungarian exhibits sought “...to produce the impression of a temporal continuity of civilization and the national political unit.”²³ The communist leadership, acting as any government intent on promoting national unity, attempted to portray the glory of the Hungarian nation, while at the same time emphasizing the continuous nature of Hungarian history. The permanent exhibit created in the 1960s remained in use until it was updated in 1996 with the display that remains in the museum today. The institutional structure of the National Museum also remains the same as during communism, as it is overseen by the Ministry for Culture and Education and funded by the government.

The National Museum is housed in a beautiful neoclassical building in the eighth district of Budapest, an area that is relatively close to the center of the city and frequented by Hungarians and tourists alike. The museum serves as important symbol of national pride, especially for its

²¹ Apor, “National Museums in Hungary,” 16.

²² Apor, “National Museums in Hungary,” 17.

²³ Apor, “National Museums in Hungary,” 18.

historical significance with regards to the 1848 Revolution. On the national holiday March 15, important speeches and other events take place outside of the museum. The 1848 Revolution is, in many ways, a founding myth for the Hungarian nation; contemporaries often draw parallels between it and the 1956 Revolution.²⁴ The National Museum is thus a *lieu de mémoire*, as it symbolizes not only the pride and high culture of the Hungarian nation, but also the desire for freedom and independence. It ‘houses the Hungarian heritage,’ serving as the preeminent institution of national identity in the capital city. At the same time, it calls to mind a time of both pride and sorrow in national history, as the Hungarians demanded independence and democratic reforms—quite fittingly, the building is in the neoclassical style, symbolizing democracy and modernity.

The National Museum strives to represent all of Hungarian history, from ancient times to the twentieth century. It seeks to provide a continuous narrative of the Hungarian nation in a way that is objective but also establishes the permanence of the Hungarian state. The government may change, but the state itself remains the same, and it exists to serve as a guardian over the Hungarian nation. In order to make such a claim, though, the exhibit must present a past that is both usable and continuous. Museum director László Csorba, appointed in 2010, acknowledges the importance of identifying and constructing such a usable past. In a lecture given at an International Council of Museums (ICOM) conference, he said, “We must therefore be circumspect when selecting from the treasury of traditions—it does matter greatly what we decide for and when. This does not mean denying the past. Yet it is important what we highlight,

²⁴ Both Revolutions were defeated by the Russians, and both are now celebrated by nationwide holidays

what we put in the foreground, what we regard as examples, emblems, symbols in our age.”²⁵ He recognizes that museums hold great sway over public memory and national identity in the narratives that they choose to depict. Picking the appropriate events to “highlight” can help the museum to succeed in creating a narrative that is continuous and generally favorable to the nation.

Despite its need to create a continuous narrative, the National Museum also prides itself on its status as an objective, scholarly institution. On its website, the museum describes itself as “...a temple of science and arts, but [also] a vital organ of education, which teaches and entertains at the same time. However, it is not easy to keep its status as a scientific workshop at the same time, so that its important tasks related to research and protecting relics would not suffer neglect.”²⁶ The museum thus strives to chronicle the past in a neutral, unbiased way. It is merely an organ of the unbiased, permanent Hungarian state, which serves as a “scientific workshop” to educate its citizens and other visitors about the past. This scholarly, scientific air can be experienced throughout much of the National Museum. Much of the text on the wall and in the guidebook reads almost like a textbook, stating many facts and figures in a quite dry, but very informative manner. It is a very traditional museum and does not make use of any of the new media that is popular in more modern museums, like the House of Terror and the Holocaust Memorial Center.

Despite its intentions, however, and despite how objective the museum might seem, no public memory is completely neutral. Csorba acknowledges this fact, arguing that total objectivity is impossible, or at least impossible to monitor:

²⁵ László Csorba, “The Historical Memories of National Conflicts in the Museums of New Europe,” (paper presented at the ICOM conference “Ways to the Museum, Ways Through the Museum,” Budapest, Hungary, 22-25 September 2011).

²⁶ “About Us,” Hungarian National Museum, accessed 16 January 2012. <<http://www.hnm.hu/en/>>

An aim of historiography and [sic] the museum's activity as a profession is to prevent the past from being continuously exploited arbitrarily and to make sure that this happens in view of the currently valid scientific paradigm. Thus, of course, only the crudest demagoguery can be ruled out. More refined distortions of interpretation may not be checked, since the historiographical paradigm itself is always subject to contemporaneous intellectual relations, networks of interest, etc.²⁷

Small biases, he says, may simply be inherent in representing history—especially in national history, as he notes that national bonds are, and will continue to be, the strongest ties bonding communities together.²⁸ The public memories represented in the National Museum are, inevitably, somewhat biased. They present an uncritical, nationalistic narrative of the twentieth century in which Hungary generally falls victim to foreign forces. This narrative, representing the official position of the state, presents an otherwise continuous Hungarian state that is disrupted and victimized, time and time again, by foreign forces. They are somewhat conservative and nationalist—because alternative narratives about Hungarian responsibility would raise questions about the legitimacy of the state—but not especially extreme or provocative. Overall, the public memories fit in with the predominant nationalist narrative of Hungary in the twentieth century.

It is very difficult to ascertain the political dynamics surrounding the museum's creation, especially since the exhibit dates back to 1996. On the one hand, the political leadership of the time may have affected the museum's representation of communism; when the exhibit was created, Socialist (MSzP) Gyula Horn was Prime Minister.²⁹ Opinions of Horn are very mixed, largely because of his role as a party official before the regime change. Although he was reform-minded and played a large role in opening the border between East and West Germany, he also played a very controversial role in the 1956 uprising. It is possible that the MSzP leadership

²⁷ Csorba, "The Historical Memories."

²⁸ Csorba, "The Historical Memories." It is very possible that Csorba's reference to the "crudest demagoguery" might be a slight against Orbán and the House of Terror, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

²⁹ The next chapter will explore Hungarian political parties and dynamics in greater detail

influenced the museum's generally positive portrayal of 'goulash communism.' On the other hand, the prominent Holocaust historian Randolph Braham accused one of the exhibition creators, István Ihász, of being "an unabashed rightist."³⁰ Braham described the exhibit at the national museum, writing, "In my assessment and that of many other scholars, it virtually glorifies the Horthy era and denigrates the tragedy of Hungarian Jewry."³¹ Although Braham certainly has a point, he also comes from a relatively liberal perspective; he was one of the forces behind the creation of the Holocaust Memorial Center, and has long advocated for a public memory that is more critical of Hungary's role in the Holocaust (which the Memorial Center provides). As we shall see later on in the exhibit, the treatment of Horthy is sympathetic and largely exonerates him from responsibility, but it does not quite glorify him. Similarly, the exhibit does not denigrate Jews so much as it simply ignores them. In the end, the public memories presented in the National Museum are somewhat conservative, but not *too* far from other popular narratives of the past (especially those dating from 1996). Most importantly, the narrative of the museum emphasizes the continuity of the Hungarian nation.

A Walk Through the National Museum

After climbing the steps and walking through the enormous white pillars, the visitor enters the museum. The interior is very ornate and lavish, with classical paintings on the walls, marble floors, and an enormous dome in the middle. A quick look around reminds the visitor that nineteenth century aristocrats designed the museum. Although the National Museum is quite large, displaying medieval stone relics and the history of the Hungarian state from its very foundation, the part of the exhibit of relevance to this thesis is the twentieth century. This part of

³⁰ Randolph Braham, *Studies on the Holocaust: Selected Writings, Vol. 2* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). 206.

³¹ Braham, 206.

the exhibit, entitled, “The Short Century of Survival,” spans five rooms. The museum is very traditional and somewhat old-fashioned; there is no music, interactive screens, or videos. On display are objects in glass cases, posters and paintings, mannequins wearing period attire, and recreations of important rooms or other places. All of the long historical texts are displayed in both Hungarian and English. Many of the descriptions of the objects on display, however, are labeled only in Hungarian, implying that the target audience is not foreign tourists but is instead mostly Hungarians. Schoolchildren in the city commonly take field trips to the National Museum. Beyond that function, it is certainly not the most popular museum in Budapest; during my afternoon spent browsing the exhibit, I encountered no other visitors. The old-fashioned, somewhat bureaucratic nature of the museum probably adds to its lack of popularity, especially in comparison with the flashy, dramatic House of Terror downtown.

The exhibition is chronological, running from the “Belle Epoch” (literally “beautiful era”) at the turn of the century to the end of communism in 1989. Four of the five rooms represent distinct periods in Hungarian history: 1900 to the end of World War I, Trianon and the interwar era, World War II, and the communist period. One room in the middle, which seems somewhat out of place, displays ordinary life during the interwar period, focusing on new schools and the introduction of modern cinema to Hungary—suggesting that the museum may emphasize this era as a usable past. Throughout the exhibit, the visitor passes portraits of famous figures in Hungarian history—from Franz Joseph to János Kádár—and propaganda posters reflecting changing political sentiments. The exhibition ends with depictions of the end of the communist era and the first free elections in 1990.

The Pre-War Years and the Impact of Trianon

The National Museum first makes clear its impression of the time prior to World War I by referring to it as “The Belle Epoch,” or “beautiful era.” By using the term that is frequently employed in reference to the rest of Europe, the museum creators may have also been trying to emphasize how Hungarian society flourished at this time, just like its Western neighbors, and thus was linked with the rest of Europe. The exhibit explains, however, that despite the economic, cultural, and technological progress of the time, a large percentage of the population remained poor and disenfranchised. One text remarks briefly on the degree of acceptance for minorities during this time; it reads, “The ethnic groups—the Germans, the Jews and to some extent the Slovaks—that had better succeeded in joining the middle classes, had largely assimilated with the Hungarians.”³² During this ‘golden age’ of economic, social, and cultural development, at least middle-class members of minorities were largely assimilated into Hungarian society.

Although the political landscape in the early 1900s was often unstable (largely because of disagreements about Hungary’s place within the Austro-Hungarian Empire), the golden age lasted until World War I. During the war, not only were hundreds of thousands of Hungarian soldiers killed, but it soon became clear that “The right of nations to self government proclaimed by America’s President Wilson had long ceased to apply to Hungary.”³³ The exhibit details the injustice of Trianon, displaying the famous “Nem! Nem! Soha!” (“No! No! Never!”) poster and a large copy of an ethnographic map (created by Pál Teleki) that was used during the peace talks. The visitor reads that many conservatives and even those on the extreme right mobilized around

³² Hungarian National Museum History Exhibition guidebook 4, “The Short Century of Survival (1900-1990),” ed. István Ihász, trans. Andy Rouse. Budapest: National Museum. 1996, revised 2008. 13.

³³ National Museum guidebook, 31.

the new leader Horthy, as they blamed the Kun's communists "...and because of the many Jewish leaders of the Hungarian Soviet Republic Jewry in general."³⁴ Regaining the lost territories, the exhibit explains, became the primary goal of Hungarian politics.

The Interwar Government to German Occupation

The texts in the National Museum discuss the irredentism and antisemitism that spread throughout Hungarian society, but they also provide lengthy explanations of moments of national pride, like increasing levels of literacy and the victories at the 1936 Olympics. Walking through the exhibit, the visitor is reminded, time and time again, how Trianon was at the forefront of the mind of every Hungarian and affected political sentiments and policy. The exhibit emphasizes how the tragedy of Trianon caused Hungarians to become more and more politically radical; "After the great economic crisis following the short period of stability, this [desire to regain the territories] involuntarily channeled the factors, individuals and parties that defined politics, as well as Hungarian economic life, into certain ideologies."³⁵ These "certain ideologies" surely must be the right-wing antisemitic parties that gained traction during the interwar period. The language, however, implies that the formation of these parties was inevitable, or somehow to be expected because of what the Hungarians had experienced with Trianon.

Although the exhibit repeatedly makes reference to Prime Minister Pál Teleki, it does not mention his role in the several pieces of anti-Jewish legislation. Instead, the exhibit emphasizes his desire to maintain Hungarian autonomy and how, under his reign, "...Hungary became a kind of sanctuary for refugees fleeing the occupied countries."³⁶ Although these statements *are* true, Teleki remains one of the most controversial figures in Hungarian history because of his anti-

³⁴ National Museum guidebook 34.

³⁵ National Museum guidebook, 80.

³⁶ National Museum guidebook, 84.

Jewish sentiments and the laws passed while he was in office. Of these laws, however, the exhibit reads, “Meanwhile, attempts were made to expel the strongly assimilated Jewry from the national framework through racist, exclusion laws.”³⁷ The guide does not specify *who* made these antisemitic laws; it merely says, “...attempts were made.” This language, combined with other surrounding sentences that describe German pressure and ideology, implies that perhaps the Germans, not the Hungarians, were the ones truly responsible for the anti-Jewish laws of the late 1930s and early 1940s.

The exhibition mentions Horthy a surprisingly small amount. It describes how antisemites and radical right nationalists mobilized around him, but says little about his political ideology. At one point, the guide reads, “...he also achieved his wish as governor that the unarmed military personnel—most of them of Jewish origin—carrying out work alongside the fighting and hinterland units should not be exposed to the ever intensifying anti-Semitic atrocities.”³⁸ It is true that some Jewish men who were forced into labor service during the war survived. In fact, many of them were luckier than the women, children, and elderly that they left behind who were later deported to concentration camps. To imply, however, that these forced labor units were not “exposed to the every intensifying anti-Semitic atrocities” is simply not true. The public memories of Horthy and his policies are, while not positive, overall quite sympathetic, arguing that he was victim to foreign forces outside his control.

The Holocaust

The exhibition largely denies Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust. Describing the German occupation, the text reads, “With the loss of Hungary’s sovereignty real power was in

³⁷ National Museum guidebook, 80.

³⁸ National Museum guidebook, 86.

the hands of Hitler's all-powerful representative, the German Ambassador Edmund Veessenmayer, helped out by the puppet government of the Nazi sympathizer Döme Sztójay and backed up by the German secret police..."³⁹ Real power, it claims, rested in the hands of the Germans and the Hungarian "puppet government." István Déak addressed this idea of a puppet government:

...the country still retained its governor, government and legislative assembly as well as a half million strong national army, which easily could have dealt with the few thousand German troops stationed on its soil. Hungary also maintained a powerfully armed gendarmerie, a police service and an enormous administrative apparatus. No, the Hungarian government was not a puppet government...⁴⁰

Despite the fact that a large number of Hungarians actively assisted in deporting the country's Jews and Roma, the exhibition largely places responsibility on the Germans. It implies that Eichmann forced Hungarian authorities to assist in the deportations, when in reality many eagerly helped. The exhibit appears to have made the explicit decision to smooth out the discontinuities of ordinary Hungarian accommodation and collaboration, instead placing all of the blame on the Germans and, later to some extent, the Arrow Cross.

The section of the exhibit on the Holocaust itself is quite short. The text briefly mentions how Jews were deported to concentration camps, but goes no further in explaining the conditions of the camps or even how many victims were killed. It does, however, applaud Horthy for managing to postpone the deportations of many Jews from Budapest. The only mention of life under the Arrow Cross—which, granted, only lasted for a few months—is the fact that, after they gained power, "...the protected Jews were also found subjected to the Nyilas [Arrow Cross]

³⁹ National Museum guidebook, 89.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Thomas Ország-Land, "New Hungarian Constitution Shirks Responsibility for the Holocaust," *New English Review*, September 2011. <<http://www.newenglishreview.org/>>

authorities and to the arbitrary terror of various armed groups.”⁴¹ There is no mention of the thousands killed in the streets by Arrow Cross thugs. The exhibit does not explicitly trivialize the Holocaust, but mostly pushes it to the side, doing its best to ignore both the events of the Holocaust itself and the roles of Hungarians who were involved. This tactic serves to create a more continuous narrative, implying that Germany forced Hungarian involvement in both the war and the Holocaust. It ignores Hungarian accommodation of the Holocaust and Nazi-supported governments, placing total blame mostly on the Germans but also on the Arrow Cross scapegoats.

These public memories are, in some ways, to be expected, as the Hungarian Holocaust was still a little-mentioned subject in 1996. Apor explains that the coordinator of the twentieth century exhibit had a difficult time adequately representing such a controversial and dark recent past. He says, “Therefore, the organizers decided to confine the narrative to the frames of political history that determined the everyday experiences of Hungarian citizens.”⁴² Visitors can notice this tension in the exhibit, as the recreated bomb shelter (labeled “We remember the tribulations of the population...”) is physically much larger than the display of an Auschwitz uniform and yellow star.⁴³ Instead of representing the dark and terrible experiences of the minority (a rather large minority, of over 600,000), the exhibition coordinators chose to focus on the memories of the majority. Focusing on these memories can unify much of the population, as they can remember their parents and grandparents who lived through a truly terrible war and the Siege of Budapest. They can feel a shared sense of past. Neglecting the experiences of the Jews (and all others persecuted during the Holocaust—the Roma are not even mentioned at all),

⁴¹ National Museum guidebook, 94.

⁴² Apor, “National Museums in Hungary,” 21.

⁴³ National Museum guidebook, 96.

however, can serve to create boundaries and exclude. Merely brushing over the surface of these horrific times for certain groups, especially in an institution as symbolically significant as the National Museum, can imply that their history is not part of Hungarian history. It may be seen as the history of the ‘other,’ and thus does not belong in the Hungarian National Museum.

The Time Under Communism

After the section on World War II and the Holocaust, the exhibit details the Soviet invasion of Hungary, implying that one authoritarian regime was simply replaced by another. The exhibit describes the communist takeover using the language of victimization, explaining, “Radical reform of the political situation began after the elections with Soviet assistance and exploiting the Hungarian Communists in order to keep a firm hold on the Ministry of the Interior and the police force.”⁴⁴ Even the Hungarian communists were victimized, as they were “exploited” by their Soviet counterparts. The Stalinist years of communist rule are detailed in dark, yet still textbook-like language.

The Revolution of 1956 is celebrated in the National Museum, not as a call for democracy but instead as an uprising initiated by “communist reformers” like Imre Nagy.⁴⁵ The MSzP of 1996 generally sought to downplay the Revolution, because they still identified with Kádárism and did not wish to send the message that his rise to power was in any way illegitimate.⁴⁶ Then-Prime Minister Horn himself also maintained a complicated relationship with the legacy of 1956. This celebration of the past is thus not ideal for MSzP, though the interpretation is certainly preferable to the narrative that will be presented in the House of Terror.

⁴⁴ National Museum guidebook, 109.

⁴⁵ National Museum guidebook, 126.

⁴⁶ Zoltán Csipke, “The Changing Significance of the 1956 Revolution in Post-Communist Hungary,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 63:1 (January 2011): 99-128. 108-109.

The exhibit at least implies some continuity between the reformers of 1956 and the current social democrats, painting the activities of reform communists like Nagy (and perhaps MSzP themselves) in a positive light. The exhibit implies that the reform communists had the best interests of the Hungarian nation in mind when *they*, led by the reformer Nagy, started the uprising.

The exhibit then makes a clear demarcation between the early Stalinist Rákosi regime and the later, more liberalized ‘goulash communism’ of the Kádár era. The exhibit provides a long description of the various consumer goods available and the general increased quality of life in Hungary. There is a representation of a modern, albeit cramped, living room and a shop window; the descriptions read, “We provide a picture of the improvement in the social conditions of the population, the construction of apartments, the modernisation of everyday life through electrical appliances placed in high-street window displays, as well as a housing-estate room furnished with the Varia furniture brand of the 1960s.”⁴⁷ There is even a small sense of pride, as the museum explains how Hungary’s economic development, though slow, allowed for increased numbers of luxury goods and even vacation homes.

Public memory even represents Kádár in a somewhat favorable way, saying, “In the course of his long leadership he acquired a Franz Joseph-like paternalism through his tamed greyness and willingness to make compromises.”⁴⁸ Kádár was able to implement domestic policy with relatively little intervention from the Soviet Union, and was thus able to make certain liberal reforms. The exhibit notes, again with a hint of pride, “...this caused the West to look upon

⁴⁷ National Museum guidebook, 139.

⁴⁸ National Museum guidebook, 142.

Hungary differently from upon its neighbors.”⁴⁹ The public memories presented in this museum—which are quite distinct from the memories in other museums like the House of Terror—may have been constructed for political reasons. According to the National Museum, under goulash communism, Hungary was better off than its neighbors, and much better off than during the early Stalinist years. This positive framing of the later communist era is understandable, as Horn and many of his fellow Socialists had been members and leaders of the communist party during that time. They displayed the horrors of the late 1940s and 50s, telling visitors, quite truthfully what they wanted to hear. But by emphasizing the benefits of goulash communism, the museum coordinators could remind Hungarians that times were not so bad then; the early (MDP) communist party was fundamentally different from the (MSzMP) Kádár-era party (which is also quite different from its partial legal successor, MSzP).

The exhibit describes the regime change as somewhat inevitable, and largely caused by the economic crisis and then stagnation of the late 1970s and 80s. ‘Goulash communism’ began to decline during this time, and inflation, debt, and social problems worsened in the 1980s. The exhibit highlights the important role that Hungary played in ending communism across the region; “The restructuring of Hungary—together with parallel changes made in international politics and in the Soviet Union—played an outstanding role in shattering the autocratic rule of communist parties in the region and in the reunification of Germany.”⁵⁰ The museum maintains a level of national pride as a leader in East-Central Europe. The special focus on the reunification of Germany may also be in part due to the fact that Horn (Prime Minister when the exhibit was created) had, as Communist Foreign Minister, played an instrumental role in opening the western Hungarian border to East Germans seeking to emigrate to West Germany.

⁴⁹ National Museum guidebook, 142.

⁵⁰ National Museum guidebook, 150.

The exhibit ends with the triumph of democracy over communism. There is a large photograph taken at Imre Nagy's ceremonial funeral, a number of political posters from the first free elections, and old street signs with the communist names crossed out. The last line of the guidebook, however, states a clear political message regarding the years immediately following the transition:

...in the background, thanks to their connections, those in political and economic circles close to the reins of power were able through privatisation of the most valuable part of public ownership to turn into capitalist owners of factories, property and capital, as a result of which they occupied decisive positions for decades to come...but that is the story of the years with a deficit in democracy following the change in regime.⁵¹

This description of the first (center-right nationalist MDF) governments, in combination with the glorification of goulash communism, likely exists to serve a specific political goal. The first post-communist governments, the exhibit claims, were corrupt, and their administrations resulted in “a deficit in democracy.” Although the last years of communist rule may have been difficult economically, there is an implication that the democratic and capitalist system that emerged was a very imperfect solution. This is not necessarily because the new systems themselves were inherently flawed, but instead likely due to the policies of the new, conservative leaders. Although the museum does not depict the new social democratic government elected in 1994, there is a sense that the early “deficit in democracy” no longer exists, perhaps because of new MSZP policies. Any visitor with knowledge of the political history of the 1990s (as, presumably, at least most older Hungarians do) may interpret from the exhibit that the Socialists saved the Hungarian nation from the corruption of the first center-right nationalist administrations. The social democrats, like their reform communist predecessors who potentially initiated the uprising

⁵¹ National Museum guidebook, 155.

of 1956 and the goulash communism that followed, are the implicit heroes in the narrative of the National Museum.

View of National Identity

The National Museum presents a continuous narrative of national identity in which Hungary holds no real responsibility for the tragedies of the twentieth century. This nationalist version of identity represents the official, predominant view of the Hungarian nation. This view of identity, though somewhat conservative, is not too far from many mainstream conceptions of the nation. The exhibit implies that the continuous Hungarian nation has been (repeatedly) interrupted and victimized by foreign forces; without these foreign interventions, Hungary would have done quite well on its own. Overall, history had been unkind to Hungary. This sense of victimization is can be seen quite easily in the exhibition's title: "The Short Century of Survival." Despite their many challenges, though, the exhibit implies that Hungarians have been very resourceful even during tough times. The country has often served as a leader in East-Central Europe, and thus Hungarians should be quite proud of their heritage.

The museum presents a type of national identity that includes certain minorities. Early on, the exhibit notes how middle-class Germans, Jews, and some Slovaks had largely assimilated with Hungarians. It further read, "At the same time, the Ruthenians, Serbs and Romanians were obstructed from doing likewise not only because they were more backward but also because [sic] they differed in their Greek Orthodox religion."⁵² Some minorities were simply too un-Hungarian to be considered within the nation. Other groups, on the other hand, had become sufficiently Magyarized, and so they *were* considered Hungarian. The exhibit advocates for a Habsburg-type national identity that harkens back to the 'golden age' before Trianon; if a

⁵² National Museum guidebook, 13.

minority assimilates, he too can become Hungarian. Perhaps because of this national identity ideal, the museum downplays the antisemitism of the interwar period, claiming that anti-Jewish sentiments were largely limited to the far-right. Implying that anti-Jewish (even to assimilated Jews) feelings were limited to the fringe allows the museum to smooth over this discontinuity in historical conceptions of national identity, and to use the interwar period as a potential usable past for the democracy of today.

This chapter has explained why the Hungarian National Museum is symbolically significant as the ‘house of national heritage.’ It provided an overview of Hungarian history in the twentieth century, then detailed the National Museum’s rise to becoming the official representation of public memory. The National Museum takes a specific approach to the past that is quite different from the two museums that will be described in the next two chapters; instead of commemorating the past, it attempts to chronicle it as objectively and scientifically as possible. This style does not, however, mean that the museum is unbiased, as it represents a specific, somewhat nationalist conservative view of identity in which Hungary is generally the victim of foreign forces, yet triumphs later with its comparatively better ‘goulash communism.’ This narrative serves to promote the continuity of the Hungarian nation, thus legitimizing the state as a permanent guardian of the nation. The following two chapters will apply a similar framework of analysis to the House of Terror and then the Holocaust Memorial Center.

Chapter Four: House of Terror

This chapter will apply Eyal's theories to the House of Terror in Budapest, and seek to explain how politics affect the public memories in this popular museum. I focus on the narratives presented in this museum for a number of reasons. Not only is the House of Terror one of the most popular museum destinations in Budapest—for foreign tourists and Hungarian nationals alike—but it is also one of the most controversial. Debates have waged since the museum's opening in 2002 about the accuracy of the historical narratives told and the appropriateness of the techniques used throughout the exhibition. A significant population sees the museum as a form of right-wing propaganda, yet large numbers of visitors continue to visit the House of Terror every day. Many people, who are unaware of these controversies, view the House of Terror (just as they view all other museums) as an unbiased and scholarly institution that serves merely to educate visitors about the past. The House of Terror, with its immense popularity and dedicated opponents, serves as an ideal museum in which to examine the politics of Hungarian public memory.

First, I will present an overview of the key contemporary Hungarian political parties. Special focus will be placed upon Fidesz, the current ruling party that was also responsible for creating the House of Terror. It is very useful to have some knowledge of Fidesz's ideology and political goals in order to gain a better understanding of their public memory creation in the museum. I will also briefly examine the new Fidesz-initiated constitution, which shares some of the same memory themes as those presented in the museum. The next section will consist of a description and analysis of the public memories represented in the House of Terror. I argue that the museum presents a narrative of Hungarian history in which nationals hold no real responsibility for the atrocities committed either during the Holocaust or the communist era. The

museum absolves the interwar government of any responsibility, claiming that Hungary was purely a victim both before and during World War II. The horrors of communism are emphasized at the expense of the Holocaust, as the Holocaust serves only as a yardstick against which to measure the (comparatively worse) crimes of communism. All of these public memories serve to promote Fidesz's nationalistic and conservative view of Hungarian identity.

Contemporary Hungarian Politics

In the 2000s, a surge of right nationalist sentiments spread throughout all of Europe, bringing, in many cases, conservative new elected officials. In Hungary, this political change was especially apparent. In the 2010 elections, the right-nationalist party Fidesz won 52% of the vote, which, because of election laws, translated to 68% of the seats in Parliament. Viktor Orbán, who had served as Prime Minister from 1998 to 2002, was reinstated at this time. In Hungary, the line between liberals and conservatives has for many years been drawn at the distinction between urbanism and populism. Although speaking before the fall of communism, and referring mostly to the early twentieth century, Timothy Garton Ash's description of the stereotypical distinction between the two types of intellectuals is useful in understanding current political dynamics:

The 'populists' have traditionally celebrated the folk virtues of Hungarian village life, *la terre et les morts*, *Kultur* rather than *Zivilisation*. The 'urbanists' were (and are) more cosmopolitan and often Jewish... Traditionally to be found on the left bank of the Danube, in the cafés of Pest rather than the hills of Buda, politically also 'on the left,' they have looked outward to Vienna and the West rather than inward to the Transylvania strongholds of agrarian Hungarianness. They have been drawn to sociology rather than ethnography, and to socialism rather than nationalism.¹

¹ Timothy Garton Ash, "The Hungarian Lesson," *New York Book Review*, 5 December 1985, 5-9. 6.

These categorizations are somewhat exaggerated and always subject to exception, yet they do in many ways apply to the political divide within Hungary.² The urbanist liberals have historically been drawn to the West and ideas of liberal democracy. The populist conservatives, on the other hand, have generally looked inward, as they are more drawn to ideas of nationalism and ethnic Hungarianness. These fault lines, though muted during communism, arose again with the introduction of the multiparty system. After 1989, the two key parties that emerged were the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), representing populism, and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz), representing urbanism. Both parties have lost significant power, though, as neither currently hold any seats in Parliament. Today they have been replaced by Fidesz and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP).³

Fidesz was formed in 1988 as a youth anti-communist movement—its name comes from the acronym for ‘Alliance of Young Democrats.’ In fact, until 1993, the maximum age allowed of party members was 35. Fidesz gained political popularity and legitimacy at the summer 1989 reburial ceremony of Imre Nagy in Hero’s Square, an event that symbolized the fast approaching demise of the communist system. At the ceremony, young Viktor Orbán gave a passionate speech demanding the withdrawal of Soviet soldiers and free and fair elections. The Fidesz of the Round Table discussions and the early 90s is quite different from the Fidesz of today, though. As Csilla Kiss puts it, “Its road to power, however, was neither smooth nor straightforward, but riddled with contradictions, inconsistencies, and 180-degree turns that require explanation.”⁴

² Beverly James, *Imagining Postcommunism: Visual Narratives of Hungary’s 1956 Revolution* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2005). 7.

³ Fidesz and MDF shared a coalition from 1998 to 2006, and SzDSz shared one with MSzP from 1994 to 2008. The new parties, however, are not indistinguishable from the old parties; Fidesz is generally considered to be more conservative than the center-right MDF. SzDSz too was formed as a liberal democratic opposition group to the communist regime, but has since been replaced by MSzP, a party that leans more toward social democracy.

⁴ Csilla Kiss, “From Liberalism to Conservatism: The Federation of Young Democrats in Post-Communist Hungary,” *East European Politics and Societies*, 16:3 (August 2002): 739-763. 740-741.

Fidesz, which is generally described as center-right or right-wing (depending on who you ask), started out as a liberal party. It emphasized the importance of free markets and paid little attention to social problems; Shafir described it as an almost Thatcherite party.⁵ In the early 1990s, Fidesz gained a reputation for offering “radical, intelligent and relentless criticism” to the conservative MDF, often voting against the government’s attempts to “test the limits” of the new democracy or control the media.⁶ It also criticized MDF’s efforts to spread their ideology of nationalism and Christianity, and at the 1992 Congress, Orbán said that MDF “by and large represented a rotten, decaying, old world that would never again return to Hungary.”⁷ Fidesz considered itself firmly in opposition to a revival of the old nationalist right. In 1990, for instance, Fidesz members walked out of a Parliamentary session in protest of a proposed commemoration of Trianon.⁸

In 1994, however, following a terrible loss to MSzP, Fidesz began to go through a political identity change. At the 1995 Congress, Fidesz distanced itself from the left and “...declared its goal to become the leading force of the Christian-nationalist right.”⁹ That declaration marked the end of the old party and the beginning of the new, rightward-leaning one. Through all of this change, though, Fidesz and especially Orbán have remained consistently and staunchly anti-communist. The new Fidesz touts a Hungarian identity based upon ethnic nationalism and Christianity. Taking care of ethnic Hungarians living abroad is a major foreign policy concern of the government, as evidenced by the 2001 ‘status law’ which provided a number of benefits to ethnic Hungarians in other countries. The targeted ethnic Hungarians were

⁵ Michael Shafir, “Hungarian Politics and the Post-1989 Legacy of the Holocaust,” in *The Holocaust in Hungary: Sixty Years Later* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 257-290. 272.

⁶ Kiss, 741. This past is especially ironic when compared to Fidesz’ recent controversial media law.

⁷ Quoted in Kiss, 741-742.

⁸ Kiss, 745.

⁹ Kiss, 744.

those living in neighboring countries as a result of the Trianon-imposed territorial borders. The status law angered the governments of these neighboring countries, especially Slovakia and Romania.

Although Fidesz is the dominant party in the Hungarian Parliament, opposition parties still maintain important seats in the legislature. The largest opposition party is the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP), partial successor to the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSzMP), which ruled from 1956 to 1989. The social democratic MSzP was in power from 2002 to 2010. MSzP has also faced controversy because of its past and the fact that some members were among the former communist elite. In fact, several MSzP Prime Ministers and other leaders have faced accusations of being former Secret Police informants or holding other communist roles, some of which have proven to be true. MSzP clearly seeks to differentiate itself from its predecessor; the banner of its website reads "New MSzP. New policy."¹⁰ Despite its background, MSzP is not purely a social democratic, reform communist type party; it held, at least earlier in the 2000s, an ideology that combined both liberal and social democratic ideas. In fact, from 1994 to 2008, MSzP and SzDSz (the liberal party with its roots in the democratic opposition to communism) maintained an alliance. MSzP can be differentiated from Fidesz based on its relative lack of nationalism, especially regarding Hungarian minorities abroad. After MSzP's 2002 election victory, they renegotiated the 'status law' with the neighboring countries. At the inauguration that year, new Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy told the crowd that, instead of appealing only to his base, he would govern for all ten million Hungarians. In his resignation speech, however, Orbán said, "Let me repeat, so that it can be heard everywhere where it should be heard: the future of Hungary lies not in the Hungary of 10 million but in the Hungarian nation of 15

¹⁰ MSzP, accessed 21 January 2012. <<http://mszp.hu/>>

million.”¹¹ This “15 million” is in reference to a speech given by the first post-communist Prime Minister, MDF József Antall. He famously declared that the nation consisted not only of the citizens living within Hungarian borders, but all ethnic Hungarians, regardless of where they lived. Orbán explicitly differentiated his view of the Hungarian nation from that of the socialist Medgyessy, who focused on the Hungarians living within the Hungarian state. MSZP generally rejects nationalism and supports multiculturalism and diversity with society.

Jobbik, the Movement for a Better Hungary, is currently the third biggest party in the National Assembly. Jobbik calls itself “...a principled, conservative and radically patriotic Christian party.”¹² Non-members usually call it a right-wing or far-right party, and sometimes antisemitic, anti-Roma, homophobic, or even fascist. They espouse the importance of nationalism, generally celebrating the pride of the ethnic Hungarian nation. In Jobbik’s “electoral manifesto,” they establish their platform of “bring[ing] an end to gypsy crime” and promoting Christian values.¹³ They further announce their plan of introducing a gendarmerie, or rural police force. The term is associated in Hungary, today as in the 1940s, with the pro-Nazi police force that helped the Arrow Cross to deport Jews, Roma, and other groups. For many moderates, Jobbik is a disliked, and even feared, symbol of the resurgence of the far right.

The Constitution Controversy

Nowhere has Fidesz more clearly stated its view of the Hungarian nation, or provoked so much domestic and international controversy, than in the new constitution. A constitution is, quite simply, one of the most important symbols of national identity. It recognizes the ideology

¹¹ Quoted in Michael Stewart, “The Hungarian Status Law: A New European Form of Transnational Politics?” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 12:1 (Spring 2003): 67-101. 67.

¹² “A Short Summary About Jobbik,” Jobbik, accessed 21 January 2012. <<http://www.jobbik.com>>

¹³ “Radical Change: Jobbik’s Electoral Manifesto,” Jobbik, accessed 21 January 2012. <<http://www.jobbik.com>>

that is central to the nation-state, effectively establishing the basis from which every continuous public memory or national narrative should begin. The Hungarian constitution, which replaced the old one from the communist era, came into effect on January 1, 2012. The constitution would not have passed without Fidesz's two-thirds majority, as all of the other parties opposed the new document; MSZP walked out in protest before the vote and Jobbik voted against it. Many people, both Hungarian and foreign, have raised grave concerns about the constitution, citing issues with checks and balances, a newly weakened judiciary, conservative social policy, and requirements for a two-thirds majority to make many new policy changes, among other factors.¹⁴ The constitution implies a religious-based version of Hungarian national identity by explicitly recognizing the "role of Christianity in preserving nationhood" and the pride of being "a part of Christian Europe."¹⁵ The preamble identifies the official public memory of much of the twentieth century:

We date the restoration of our country's self-determination, lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944, from the second day of May 1990, when the first freely elected body of popular representation was formed. We shall consider this date to be the beginning of our country's new democracy and constitutional order.¹⁶

This statement—featured in an extremely prominent place, in the preamble of the first Hungarian constitution created in the post-communist era—effectively denies Hungarian responsibility for any atrocities committed during that period. It lumps German and Soviet occupation into one half-century long period of victimization without acknowledging any of the complexities of either regime. It claims that both Arrow Cross and communist rule were foreign-imposed and not really Hungarian, and thus should not be considered as part of true Hungarian history. This public memory is not new, though; Fidesz has been promoting it since the party's ideological

¹⁴ Kim Lane Scheppelle, "Hungary's Constitutional Revolution," *The New York Times*, 19 December 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com>>

¹⁵ Hungarian Constitution, accessed 12 September 2011. <<http://www.kormany.hu>>

¹⁶ Hungarian Constitution.

shift. Mark Pittaway writes, “In power since 1998, they [Fidesz] had used cultural policy as a political tool far more overtly than any government since 1989. This extended to unprecedented state intervention into the writing of contemporary history and, later, overt state attempts to present the recent past to the general population.”¹⁷ This “writing of contemporary history” can be clearly seen in the House of Terror, one of Budapest’s most popular and most controversial museums.

House of Terror¹⁸

Stylistically, the House of Terror is quite different from the National Museum, because it explicitly serves as a memorial to the victims of both Nazism and communism. It chronicles the past, yet also commemorates the tragedies of the twentieth century and the heroes who rose up against authoritarianism. Because the museum generally depicts Hungary as an embattled nation, constantly under threat from foreign forces, the public memories presented serve as guarantors of identity. They tell the story of a victimized nation that went through a terrible ordeal, yet emerged at the end (thanks in part to Orbán himself), stronger and more united than ever. The *injunction to remember* arises from a sense of indignation. Not only have we failed to acknowledge appropriately what has happened to our nation, but those national traitors (the communists turned social democrats) now enjoy new power within society. We must remember the past, and all that those former communists have done, so that the opposition MSzP loses credibility. The *mnemonic operation* then, is not simply to remember; those guilty of past terrors must confess to what they have done, and be punished appropriately. This *mnemonic operation* is also quite politically convenient for Fidesz, as it would detract support from their political

¹⁷ Mark Pittaway, “The ‘House of Terror’ and Hungary’s Politics of Memory,” *Austrian Studies Newsletter*, 15:1 (Winter 2003): 16-17. 16.

¹⁸ Observations of the House of Terror are based on the official guidebook, the observations of other scholars, and my own notes and photographs from my visit on November 18, 2011.

opposition. The *mnemonic substance* of the House of Terror is the narrative told throughout the museum, namely that both Nazism and communism were foreign-imposed regimes, and that the horrors of communism largely outweigh the horrors of the Holocaust.

The House of Terror is located on Andrásy Avenue, Budapest's preeminent boulevard. The street was modeled after the Parisian Champs-Élysées to link the downtown to the City Park. Andrásy was originally lined with the neo-Renaissance style palaces of aristocrats and other wealthy Hungarians, and is now home to many restaurants, luxury stores, and the Opera House. Strolling down the tree-lined, beautiful street is a popular activity for Hungarians and foreigners alike. The House of Terror is at 60 Andrásy Avenue, in a former palace built in the 1880s. In 1937, a branch of the Hungarian National Socialist movement rented the building, and in 1940, it became the headquarters for the Arrow Cross. They called it the 'House of Loyalty' or 'House of Faith,' depending on the translation. Existing scholarship is quite vague on what exactly took place in the so-called 'House of Loyalty,' and how many Jews or political opponents were imprisoned, tortured, or killed inside. Regardless, the building certainly symbolized violence and extreme antisemitism, especially after the Arrow Cross gained national power in October of 1944. After the war, the Ministry of the Interior acquired the building; István Rév writes, "After the war, at the beginning, Fascist war criminals were kept and interrogated in their former House of Faith. Where Jews and Communists had been tortured and killed before 1945, their torturers and interrogators were tortured and interrogated after the defeat of Nazi Germany and its Hungarian ally."¹⁹ In 1949, the state police (ÁVH, later ÁVO) was created, and they chose 60 Andrásy Avenue for their headquarters, partly for symbolic reasons.²⁰ The building was notorious as the headquarters of the feared ÁVH, and political opponents or other 'traitors' were

¹⁹ István Rév, *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Communism*, (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2005). 279.

²⁰ Pittaway, "The 'House of Terror,'" 17.

imprisoned and tortured in the basement. The building was closed in 1956. Because of the rich and terrible symbolism of the building itself, the House of Terror serves as a *lieu de mémoire*. The account of a Hungarian schoolteacher exemplifies the symbolic significance of the museum. She recounted how, as a child, her mother would always make her walk on the opposite side of the street from 60 Andrassy, explaining, “Everyone knew Andrassy 60. It was feared.”²¹

In 1998, after Orbán came to power, the government completely cut financial backing for the Institute for the History of Politics, and reduced funding to the Institute for the Study of the History of the 1956 Revolution from 73 million to 6 million forints. The funds were instead redirected to create a Public Foundation for the Research of Central and East European History and Society. Although this new foundation was privately owned, its director, Mária Schmidt, was also a senior advisor to Orbán, and thus clearly had connections to Fidesz.²² In December of 2000, the institute purchased the building at 60 Andrassy “...with the aim of establishing a museum in order to present these two bloody periods of Hungarian history.”²³ The museum opened its doors on February 24, 2002 in a large ceremony featuring a keynote speech from Orbán. The opening took place only months before the Parliamentary elections that Fidesz ended up losing to MSzP. Many people, both within and outside MSzP, believed that the museum’s opening was planned for political reasons, which will be explained in further detail later in the chapter. Regardless of the rationale behind the opening, the House of Terror attracted huge crowds of visitors in its first days, and ten years later it remains a popular destination.

²¹ Thomas Fuller, “Stark history/Some see a stunt: Memory becomes battleground in Budapest’s House of Terror,” *New York Times*, 2 August 2002. <<http://www.nytimes.com>>

²² Pittaway, “The ‘House of Terror,’” 16.

²³ “About Us,” House of Terror, accessed February 10, 2012. <<http://www.terrorhaza.hu>> Interestingly, nowhere on the “Welcome” or “About Us” sections of the website does the museum actually identify the periods of terror.

A Walk Through the Museum

It is difficult to miss the House of Terror as one walks down Andrásy Avenue. Although the building is similar to the other neo-Renaissance palaces on either side, it is physically separated from its neighbors by a black metal frame. The frame extends off of the roof with a perforated metal shield that reads “TERROR” backward, along with a five-pointed communist star and an Arrow Cross symbol. When the sun shines through the shield, the shadows of “TERROR” and the symbols are cast on the ground or on the building’s walls.²⁴ While walking to the door or waiting in line to enter the museum, the visitor passes a long line of small black and white photographs of some of the victims of the regimes, as well as a segment of the Berlin Wall. Entering the museum, the visitor is first faced with two twin monuments with Hungarian text; the black stone commemorates the victims of the Nazi terror, while the pink stone commemorates the victims of communist terror. These monuments immediately assert the duality and comparability of the regimes, a theme that will later be repeated. This commemoration is also the first and only time that the “victims of Nazi terror” will be placed on the same level as the victims of communism.

Although each of the rooms in the House of Terror is quite unique, they all make use of similar modern techniques. Rooms often have photographs and television screens on the walls, which usually either display footage of political speeches or the victims recounting their experiences. In some rooms, there are objects in glass display cases, while other rooms are completely centered on the theme of some object or concept. Nearly all of the text on the walls is in Hungarian, suggesting that the targeted audience is primarily composed of nationals. In each room, however, there is a sheet of paper with a long (usually several paragraphs) historical

²⁴ Rév, *Retroactive Justice*, 282.

recount in English. This narrative, plus more descriptions of the objects on display, is reprinted in the guidebook. In the exhibit, many of the objects are accompanied by no text at all, implying that they are meant to speak for themselves and convey their own messages. For the uninformed visitor, though, this lack of explanation can lead to confusion, or assumptions about the messages implied; for instance, one room is composed entirely of a maze of white, waxy bricks, with a paper-mache pig in the middle. When I first visited, my friends and I were confused—were the bricks soap? Upon reading the guidebook, though, I learned that the pig symbolized the “counter slaughters” and the bricks represented lard, two precious commodities on the black market during communism.²⁵

When entering the very first room of the exhibit, the visitor is hit by intense and scary music. This loud, suspenseful music and other noises are used over the course of the rest of the exhibition. In fact, in many places the music is so loud that it is difficult to think; one has to wonder if that was the intent of the museum creators, if they wanted visitors to feel so overwhelmed and almost hypnotized that they would believe everything that they read. Using loud music and sensational imagery, while appealing to the visitor’s emotions, is a tactic that is purposefully used throughout the museum. In fact, the Museum Director Mária Schmidt told a French magazine that the museum’s intention was not primarily to document history, but was instead “to give the visitor the sensation of what terror meant.”²⁶

The exhibition is roughly chronological, though later rooms do not necessarily represent an event or period in time but instead depict a certain theme or idea. The first few rooms detail World War II and the Holocaust, providing a historical recount of Hungary’s involvement in the

²⁵ House of Terror guidebook, ed. Mária Schmidt, trans. Ann Major. Budapest: House of Terror. 2008. 33.

²⁶ Quoted in Mark Pittaway, “Contemporary History and Hungary’s ‘House of Terror,’” Humanities and Social Sciences Online, 26 February 2002. <<http://www.h-net.msu.edu>>

war. On display in one room, entitled “Changing Clothes,” are two revolving headless mannequins that are back to back. One is dressed in a Nazi uniform, while the other is dressed in a Soviet uniform. The spectacle shows the visitor that one terror regime immediately followed another. Even more, by showing that fascists simply ‘changed clothes’ to become communists, the exhibit implies that the perpetrators of both regimes were one and the same—they were opportunists and traitors to the nation who could not even stay loyal to a single ideology. The rest of the exhibition concerns the communist regime in Hungary.

One room, entitled “Life Under Communism,” describes the endemic censorship, food shortages, and cultural changes instituted by the communists. The pastoral propaganda painting on the wall is directly at odds with the final sentence of the text: “Terror cast its shadow over daily life.”²⁷ Typewriters sit in the center of the room, and headphones hang from the ceiling. Several everyday items, like notebooks and stamps, are on display in glass cases. Moving on, though, other more menacing objects, like guns and handcuffs, are also on display, immediately causing the visitor to reframe the mundane objects in the context of these dangerous ones. A notebook is no longer just a book of pages; it must be filled with the notes of some ÁVH officer. After seeing the gun and handcuffs, I remember I looked back up at the headphones hanging from the ceiling—was it just me, or did they kind of look like nooses? Techniques like these caused even me, a visitor with a very critical eye, to feel a twinge of fear, just as director Mária Schmidt had intended. The next few rooms in the exhibit are generally unrelated; one details the leaders of the Secret Police, one displays hundreds of bright and garish propaganda posters, and another describes the communist persecution of Christian leaders and churchgoers. Despite their different subject matters and styles, they are all united in their message of communist terror.

²⁷ House of Terror guidebook, 19

The most terrifying and memorable part of the House of Terror, though, takes place in the museum's basement. At the end of the first part of the exhibit, the visitor is directed to an elevator where, without warning, the recounting of the terror continues. Rév describes this elevator ride:

It takes three and a half long minutes to lower the cabin two floors down, while a slobbery, unpleasant-looking elderly man, the former cleaning attendant at the executions, recalls at an extremely slow pace how the prisoners in the cellars were hanged. One has no choice but to stare at the distasteful face on the huge plasma monitor, which fully covers one side of the elevator. At the end of the unbelievably slow descent the visitor arrives in the cellars, the symbolic center of the House of Terror.²⁸

One cannot help but feel claustrophobic for this elevator ride, especially listening to the janitor's graphic and creepy story. The feelings induced by the elevator ride are quite muted, though, when compared to the fear one feels when surveying the reconstructed prison cells. The text describes, in detail, the treatment of the prisoners and the torture that they underwent. The prison cells themselves are tiny, with cement cots, dirty floors, and photographs and brief descriptions of the lives of some of the detainees. The first time I visited the House of Terror, I was separated from my friends by the time I reached the basement. All alone, I was actually afraid to enter the cells, as I imagined someone slamming the door on me once I went inside.

After a room depicting the 1956 Revolution, there is a room of gallows that serve to represent all those who were executed after the uprising. Children's voices read "the names of the martyrs."²⁹ The decision to use young voices was obviously made with the intent of evoking certain feelings in the visitors; hearing the names, one imagines that the children are remembering out loud their own executed parents, brothers, or sisters. Even though the guidebook reminds the visitors that the cells and gallows are merely reproductions and that

²⁸ Rév, "Retroactive Justice," 298.

²⁹ House of Terror guidebook, 64.

“There were no executions in 60 Andrassy Road, ‘only’ fatal bashings and suicides,” it is easy to imagine people being tortured and killed in the basement.³⁰ In Brianne Hwang’s analysis of blog posts about the House of Terror, she notes that a number of bloggers forgot that the cells were only reproductions. She writes, “Several bloggers mentioned the chilling effect of being in the place where innocent people had been hung.”³¹ In this sense, then, the basement serves as sort of a false *lieu de mémoire* for visitors who are taken in by the museum’s sensational techniques.

The last room of the exhibition is labeled “Farewell,” depicting the last few years of communism and then the regime change. One video shows clips from the opening ceremony of the House of Terror itself. The visitor then walks by a memorial called the “Hall of Tears” and finally ends up at the “Perpetrators’ Wall.” This red-painted hallway is lined on both sides with photographs of the “victimizers.” The visitor leaves the darkened museum, reentering the bright, busy street outside, with the images of these victimizers, and detailed ideas about all the terror they have done, in his head.

The Pre-War Years and the Impact of Trianon

The exhibition in the House of Terror does not cover any of the years at the turn of the century, but instead begins with Hungary’s loss in World War I. It details the tragedy of Trianon, emphasizing that a large number of Hungarians were “...placed under the jurisdiction of neighbouring countries... As the neighbouring successor states regarded Hungarians as their principal external and internal enemies, the millions of Hungarians forced into minority status were subjected to hitherto unsurpassed oppression.”³² The text turns these ethnic Hungarians,

³⁰ House of Terror guidebook, 56.

³¹ Brianne Hwang, “Constructing the Communist Other: A Comparative Study of Museum Representations of Communism,” Masters Thesis, Central European University, 2009.

³² House of Terror guidebook, 6.

now “forced into minority status,” into victims. Although it only specifically refers to the “hitherto unsurpassed” oppression of the interwar period, it hints at the idea that these ethnic Hungarians are oppressed even today.

The text immediately describes Hungary as a victim. It says, “Isolated politically, disarmed, encircled by hostile countries, she became one of Central Europe’s weakest, most vulnerable states. Territorial revision by peaceful means and the reinstatement of the historical Hungary became the focus of her policy.”³³ Like the National Museum, the House of Terror seeks, understandably, to justify the irredentism that was common at the time. By using the phrase “historical Hungary,” the museum implies that, perhaps even now, those lost regions rightly *belong* to Hungary. The short section on World War I and Trianon mainly serves to set the nation up as a victim of foreign aggressors and interests, a theme that will be repeated over the course of the museum.

The Interwar Government to German Occupation

Overall, the House of Terror paints a quite sympathetic picture of the interwar government, implying that it had no choice but to ally with Germany. Interestingly, it does not mention at all that territorial aspirations played a large role in the government’s decision both to ally with the Nazis and to enter direct combat. Including this detail would, perhaps, be at odds with the museum’s simple narrative that “After the outbreak of World War II, Hungary made desperate attempts in order to maintain her—albeit limited—elbow-room and to avert the worst-case scenario: German occupation.”³⁴ The museum creates a public memory in which Hungary is simply a weakened victim with no interest in allying with Nazi Germany, effectively presenting

³³ House of Terror guidebook, 6.

³⁴ House of Terror guidebook, 6.

the nation as morally good, but simply subject to the evils of a more powerful force. On a similar note, the exhibit also does not discuss any of the antisemitism that was widespread throughout society in the interwar period. The text does say that Hungarians suffered from anti-Jewish laws, but uses the same passive language as the National Museum, saying only that the laws were “enacted.”³⁵

The exhibit is somewhat misleading in its description of how Hungary officially allied with the Nazis. One text reads, “On June 26, 1941 Kassa, Munkács and Rahó suffered bomb attacks. According to contemporary reports the bombardment was the work of the Soviet air force... Regent Horthy declared a state of war between Hungary and the Soviet Union.”³⁶ The exhibit does not explicitly identify *when* or *why* Hungary joined World War II. A visitor who was uneducated about twentieth century Hungarian history, however, would likely interpret this text as a statement of Hungary’s first involvement in the war, especially since there is no mention of the Hungarian invasion of Yugoslavia. This narrative only serves to further the public memory of the victimized Hungarian nation, which only joined the ‘Axis of Evil’ once it had been attacked.

The House of Terror is sympathetic in its description of the Hungarian government prior to German occupation. The text reads, “Up to the time of the Nazi occupation of 1944, Hungary’s affairs were conducted by an elected, legitimate parliament and government, with representatives of active opposition parties sitting in the chambers.”³⁷ This statement gives visitors the opportunity to view the interwar government as a precursor to the current democratic state. The text does not describe the authoritarian, ultranationalist nature of the Horthy

³⁵ House of Terror guidebook, 7.

³⁶ House of Terror guidebook, 6.

³⁷ House of Terror guidebook, 6.

government. It does not mention that, prior to German occupation, many Jewish males were sent into forced labor, or that the government had allowed the killing of thousands of non-Hungarian Jews living in newly acquired Hungarian territory.

Outside the museum itself, the Orbán Administration too seems to have a somewhat positive view of the interwar government. In December of 2000, while still Prime Minister, Orbán also said that he considered Pál Teleki as his model politician.³⁸ He said he believed that Teleki's ideas were more useful to contemporary Hungarian politics than "other fashionable ideas," which he did not identify.³⁹ Teleki remains a controversial figure in Hungarian memory because he held strong anti-war views, but also played a large role in the anti-Jewish legislation of the interwar period. A proposal to build a statue of him on Budapest's Castle Hill was abandoned after the protests of many Hungarians, both Jewish and not. Orbán's identification of Teleki as his model politician is quite controversial then, as it both glorifies the interwar government and implicitly excuses Teleki's anti-Jewish behavior.

The Holocaust

The House of Terror tends not only to place responsibility for the Holocaust squarely on the Nazi 'other,' but also to comparatively trivialize it. The exhibit does acknowledge the "active co-operation of the Hungarian authorities," but at the same time asserts that "real power" was in the hands of Edmund Veessenmayer, a German official, effectively placing "real" blame on the Nazis.⁴⁰ The House of Terror, like the National Museum, refers to the Horthy-Sztójay government as a Nazi-installed "puppet-government," implying that the government was

³⁸ Shafir, "Hungarian Politics," 259.

³⁹ "Hungarian Premier Says His Model is Teleki," *Newsline: Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 29 December 2000. <<http://http://www.rferl.org/>>

⁴⁰ House of Terror guidebook, 7.

imposed by the Nazi ‘other’ and is therefore un-Hungarian.⁴¹ It is certainly true that the Germans invaded Hungary, setting in motion the process that led to the new government and the Holocaust. Calling it a “puppet-government,” however, ignores the fact that there were many Hungarian leaders and ordinary citizens alike who were quite eager to welcome and accommodate this new government. The exhibit further denies any national responsibility for the Holocaust when the text reads, like the new constitution, “Hungary’s sovereignty was lost on March 19, 1944.”⁴² There is a hint of truth to that simple statement, but the history of the time is much more complicated and discontinuous than the exhibit allows. The House of Terror prefers a smoother version of history that, as Shafir puts it, “...turn[s] Germany’s last ally into its last victim.”⁴³

Of the twenty-some odd rooms in the museum, only three deal with the terror of the Holocaust. The Holocaust is, in many ways, only included in the museum to serve as a yardstick against which one can judge the cruelties of communism. Péter Apor describes this comparison that serves an important role in the House of Terror:

The depiction of communism solely as a terror regime conspicuously next to the already established icon of violence, Nazism, is an attempt to associate the Gulag with Auschwitz, to construct an understanding of the history of communism as the twin of the ultimate horrors of Nazism and as the Eastern double of the ultimate catastrophe of European civilisation.⁴⁴

The museum seeks to convince visitors about the cruelties of communism by comparing them, often quite explicitly, to the already-established atrocities of the Holocaust. This comparison, which in some ways began on the commemorative plaques in the lobby of the museum,

⁴¹ House of Terror guidebook, 9.

⁴² House of Terror guidebook, 7.

⁴³ Shafir, “Hungarian Politics,” 276.

⁴⁴ Péter Apor, “Eurocommunism: Commemorating Communism in Contemporary Eastern Europe,” in *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance*, ed. Malgorzata Pakier and Bo Stråth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 233-246. 242.

continues in the very first room of the exhibit. This room is labeled “Double Occupation,” with one wall representing the “Nazi Occupation” and the other depicting the “Soviet Occupation.” This “Double Occupation,” coupled with lines about Hungary’s position “...in the buffer zone between the increasingly more aggressive Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union” serves, once again, to equate the two regimes in the visitor’s mind.⁴⁵ The visitor notices this comparative technique once again in the basement room that examines life in communist work camps like Recsk. The text reads, “Until the spring of 1950, the political police ran four central, concentration-camp like internment camps at Recsk, Kistarcsa, Tiszalök and Kazincbarcika, where many thousands of prisoners performed hard-labour.”⁴⁶ Although it is true that the term “concentration camp” did not arise from the Holocaust, it is necessarily associated with it, especially in a museum like the House of Terror. Describing the camps as “concentration-camp like” is a specific technique that, in Apor’s words, seeks “to associate the Gulag with Auschwitz.”

The public memories in House of Terror do not merely compare the horrors of communism and the Holocaust, but also imply that communism was *worse* than the Holocaust. In the basement prison cells, there are photographs and descriptions of some of the people who were detained at 60 Andrásy, including Imre Nagy and Raoul Wallenberg. Shafir describes some of the other prisoners who are depicted on these walls:

But among those figuring as victims of the Communist atrocities—though never identified—one can recognize Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi [and other officials] convicted and executed in 1946 for the deportations and death of Jews at Auschwitz—that is, *before* the Communist takeover. The museum’s message regarding who is to be

⁴⁵ House of Terror guidebook, 6.

⁴⁶ House of Terror guidebook, 58.

considered a ‘victim’ and who a perpetrator of totalitarianism is thus conveyed without a need for further captions and comments.⁴⁷

Whether or not Szálasi and his cronies were executed before the communists came to power seems much less important in this situation than the fact that they are placed alongside other prisoners and labeled as victims. The House of Terror trivializes the actions of Szálasi (and, by association, the Arrow Cross) by implying that he was victimized and thus implicitly encouraging visitors to feel sympathy for him. It is almost as if the museum absolves him for (at least some of) his terrible deeds because he was victimized by the (even more terrible) communists. It is difficult to imagine that the museum would ever put a photograph of Kádár with the other victims, even though he too was at one time imprisoned inside the building.

The victims of the Holocaust are, in many ways, pushed to the side by the “Hall of Tears.” The dark space is brightened by illuminated metal crosses and carved names that circle around the edge of the room. The guidebook tells us, though, that only some victims are remembered in the Hall of Tears; “The names of those who were executed for political reasons between 1945 and 1967 are shown on the walls.”⁴⁸ There is no such memorial for the victims of the Holocaust in the House of Terror. Of course, if the exhibition had included the names of *everyone* who was killed during both dark periods, they would have needed a much bigger room. At the same time, by only listing the names of the political victims of communism, the House of Terror implies, once again, that the Holocaust was simply an introduction to the larger tragedy of communism. Mark Pittaway writes, “In short, the ‘museum’ is about emphasizing the importance of one group of victims over others and is also about condemning only one

⁴⁷ Shafir, “Hungarian Politics,” 277.

⁴⁸ House of Terror guidebook, 66.

dictatorial regime while attempting to equate it with others.”⁴⁹ The House of Terror is not, as it claims, a memorial museum devoted to the two regimes of terror of the twentieth century; it is a museum committed to describing the terror of communism by using the language of the Holocaust.

The Time Under Communism

The House of Terror effectively denies any responsibility for communism just as it does for the Holocaust. Communism is depicted as utterly foreign to Hungarians, and those Hungarians who became communists are not true nationals. The text in one room reads, “The Soviet occupiers set up a ‘new world order’ in Hungary, in which there was no place for old values, old virtues. It was a Soviet world, fit for Soviet-type people, but alien and unacceptable to the majority of Hungarians.”⁵⁰ Hungarian communists were not real Hungarians but were instead “Soviet-type people.” Throughout the entire museum, the texts remind us that everything was crafted according to the Soviet model or introduced by the Soviets themselves. The majority of Hungarians hated the new regime, and many actively engaged in resistance. One entire room is dedicated to “Resistance,” with videos of dissidents telling their stories. The text explains, “A country-wide resistance movement, extending over all social strata, emerged in response to the communist dictatorship... That is to say, in all parts of the country, in each generation, every social stratum, resistance was rife.”⁵¹ Not only did foreigners impose the communist regime upon Hungary, the public memory says, but also a huge number of true nationals actively resisted it on a routine basis.

⁴⁹ Pittaway, “Contemporary History.”

⁵⁰ House of Terror guidebook, 25.

⁵¹ House of Terror guidebook, 25.

This rhetoric of resistance is especially intense in the basement room dedicated to the 1956 Revolution. A revolutionary flag, a Molotov cocktail, and videos of people marching in the streets are on display in a quite somber way. The House of Terror, however, describes the aims of the Revolution in a quite different way than in the National Museum:

When the secret police opened lethal fire on the unarmed demonstrators first in Debrecen and then at Broadcasting House in Budapest, what had so far been a massive movement of protest against the die-hard communist elite turned into open revolution. Its objective: the radical transformation of society, the creation of an independent, free and democratic Hungary.⁵²

The public memory of the revolution is *not* a call for a reformed, more liberal type of communism but is instead a demand for democracy. Portraying the uprising in this way serves a political goal for Fidesz, as they are better able to use 1956 as a founding myth for a modern, democratic Hungary. They have no desire for the reform communists (the predecessors to the Socialists, MSZP) to play any role in this glorious tale of the Hungarian fight for freedom. Instead, these heroic revolutionaries, just like Fidesz, are young democrats who wish to overthrow the communist system.

The House of Terror focuses primarily on the early years of communism, as the Secret Police headquarters at 60 Andrásy was closed in 1956. There are several allusions to the later years of communism though and, not surprisingly, the words “goulash communism” are never used. One text at the very beginning of the exhibition reads, “The short, but disastrous Nazi occupation was followed by Soviet rule, which occupied itself for a long duration. Hungary’s sovereignty was lost on March 19, 1944. Occupying forces were stationed on its soil for over four decades. The last Soviet soldier, Viktor Silov, left our country on June 19, 1991.”⁵³ This text effectively paints the communist period (and the preceding years during World War II) as one

⁵² House of Terror guidebook, 61.

⁵³ House of Terror guidebook, 7.

continuous era of terror, which only ended in 1991. It ignores the differentiated phases during communist rule, and even melds them together with the (foreign) Nazi regime. Fidesz and the museum creators had no real reason to create a narrative that emphasized the potentially beneficial or comparatively better parts of communist rule, as that could add legitimacy to the social democrats. Instead, they chose to construct a uniform narrative of terror.

View of National Identity

Although the House of Terror does not explicitly outline its own version of Hungarian national identity, it does hint at what a ‘real’ Hungarian looks like. The exhibition largely denies any national responsibility for either the Holocaust or the period spent under communism. Outsiders have victimized the Hungarian people, and there is a sense that Hungarians must remember this terrible past to guarantee their national identity that has remained continuous throughout this difficult history. This view of ‘Hungarianness’ allows nationals to shrug off the crimes of the twentieth century and proclaim that they too were the victims of terrible crimes. It also justifies an inward looking worldview; if foreigners are the ones who always come in and cause our problems, why should we allow them to become involved in our affairs? This perspective, coupled with a view of national pride derived in part from a view of a glorious, blameless past, has produced a certain type of nationalism that Fidesz has generally embraced. This nationalism looks inward and does not require the approval of the outside (especially Western) world, as can be seen in Orbán’s general refusal to heed EU criticism regarding the new constitution and other legislation. Orbán also displayed this foreign-averse brand of nationalism in his speech on the March 15 holiday. He said, “We do not need the unsolicited assistance of foreigners wanting to guide our hands... We are more familiar with the character of unsolicited comradely assistance, even if it comes wearing a finely tailored suit and not a

uniform with shoulder patches.”⁵⁴ This second comment “[Drew] a clear parallel between Soviet domination until 1989 and the behavior of the European authorities...”⁵⁵ Comments like that one appeal to Fidesz’s nationalistic base, yet anger or even frighten Hungarian pro-European liberals.

In a similar vein, the perception of Hungarian identity presented in the museum is, implicitly, somewhat exclusive. The relative lack of attention paid toward the Holocaust may, as in the National Museum, cause visitors to believe that Jewish history is unique from Hungarian history. Museum Director Mária Schmidt exemplified this view when she said that the Holocaust had been but a “marginal issue” in the history of World War II.⁵⁶ There is an implication first that the Holocaust was not a particularly important event. Furthermore, Schmidt’s comments imply that the history of the majority (the ‘true Hungarians’) is more significant in national history than the experiences of the minority. Jews are *somewhat* Hungarian, and their history is *somewhat* important, though not as significant as the narratives of the ethnic Hungarian victims of communism. The total lack of mention of the non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust also sends an implicit message that their story does not matter at all, and they are certainly excluded from the Hungarian nation.

Membership in the Hungarian nation is also limited by political ideology. Because foreigners imposed the communist system, the social democrats are not true Hungarians, and are in fact traitors to the nation. The “Perpetrators’ Wall” reminds visitors that many of these traitor communists are still alive and remain unpunished. Rifles are displayed in glass cases just before the wall begins, perhaps to remind visitors that these “Victimizers” are capable of great violence. The inscription describing this piece of the exhibit is to the point:

⁵⁴ Ian Traynor, “Hungary prime minister hits out at EU interference in national day speech,” *The Guardian*, 15 March 2012. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk>>

⁵⁵ Traynor, “Hungary prime minister.”

⁵⁶ Shafir, “Hungarian Politics,” 274.

...The majority of these people served or held responsible positions in organizations where crimes against humanity and war crimes were committed, acts which were incompatible even within their own legal systems. The perpetrators either took part in such crimes, or gave orders for their implementation, or sanctioned such decisions, or supported them as instigators. Their behavior during their earlier or subsequent careers does not absolve them from personal responsibility.⁵⁷

Here is where the House of Terror's true *mnemonic operation* becomes clear. Of course, the museum serves as a monument to the victims of terror, and educates the public about the horrors of the regimes. It preserves many artifacts and certainly entertains its visitors, in a morbid sort of way. Just as important, though, is the apparent desire for retribution, for forcing the victimizers to admit to and repent for their evil deeds. This is also part of why the museum is so controversial, especially in the days before the 2002 election. Many of the victimizers on the wall are still alive, and at least one served, at the time, as an advisor to the MSzP government.⁵⁸ Original victimizers aside, the wall raises questions of exactly how closely connected MSzP is to its partial predecessor, the ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSzMP). Those concerns were especially significant in 2002, when Orbán emphasized his anti-communist ideology and never hesitated to remind the public of MSzP's connections to the old regime, as he had just uncovered in his new museum.⁵⁹ When faced with the charge that the museum was a political tactic, though, Schmidt explicitly denied it, saying, "I trust that the explanation is just coincidental timing. If the Socialist-liberal elites thought this museum is some kind of 'weapon' against them, then that reflects poorly on them, not us, since with this they are finding community with those behind the eras of terror. No one forced them to do that."⁶⁰

⁵⁷ House of Terror guidebook, 70.

⁵⁸ Fuller, "Stark history."

⁵⁹ Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, (New York: Berg, 2007). 116.

⁶⁰ Michael J. Jordan, "Around the Jewish World Terror Museum in Budapest Frightens Some Hungarian Jews," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 21 July 2002. <<http://www.jta.org>>

‘Coincidence’ or not, the House of Terror certainly is Orbán’s museum, a fact that is as true today as it was in 2002. In the “Farewell” room of the exhibition, Orbán himself is depicted in two places; in one video, he is delivering his speech at Nagy’s reburial, while the other shows the opening ceremony of the museum. Rév argues, “Thus the story comes full circle... His [Orbán’s] word has become flesh: the Russians have cut and run, and the terror is over; it has been locked into the museum that he, the leader of the new right, has built.”⁶¹ The public memory of the House of Terror, then, is not simply that communism was comparatively worse than the Holocaust, or that we only need the Holocaust as a yardstick against which to compare the horrors of communism. It implies that the current Socialists are no different (and in some cases, exactly the same) from the former communists, and they must be held responsible for their predecessors’ actions. Despite the good they may have done before or since, they still hold, as the exhibit says, “personal responsibility.” Fidesz and Orbán in particular are the future of Hungary, as they helped the oppressed nation to throw off its communist past and enter its new democratic and glorious future. Their conservative, nationalist view of the Hungarian nation, victimized by outsiders yet strong enough to rise again, served as a guarantor of identity which made democracy in the post-communist era possible.

This chapter has provided an outline of current Hungarian political dynamics. Using this understanding of Fidesz and the opposition groups, it then examined the House of Terror as a political project. I argued that the memories in the museum served as a guarantor of identity, as they emphasized how the Hungarian nation itself was repeatedly victimized by outside forces. Remembering this dark history, and placing blame upon the ‘other’ who holds responsibility, is the way that the museum comes to terms with Hungary’s past. The museum claims to be a

⁶¹ István Rév, “The Terror of the House,” in *(Re)Visualizing National History: Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium*, ed. Robin Ostow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 47-89. 71-72.

memorial to the victims of both regimes of terror, but appears only to include the Holocaust as a way to measure the (comparatively worse) horrors of communism. This focus on the deeds of the communists is in many ways a political tactic, as Fidesz and the museum creators wished to implicate MSzP and other former communists before the 2002 elections. The final chapter will apply this same type of analysis to the Holocaust Memorial Center, a museum with a quite different agenda and narrative of national history.

Chapter Five: The Holocaust Memorial Center

This chapter will examine the public memories presented in the Holocaust Memorial Center (HDKE) by viewing them in terms of the will to memory as a means of overcoming trauma. The HDKE is a very useful museum to explore because it represents a significant turning point for Hungarian national identity and views of the past. The museum's opening marked a new step for both European integration and admitting a (previously largely unacknowledged) degree of national responsibility for the Holocaust. In the last couple of years, however, the current Fidesz government has challenged the Memorial Center and the public memory it propagates. If Fidesz wins this battle, Hungary may take several steps back in its coming to terms with the memory of the Holocaust.

First, I will outline Hungary's accession to the European Union. I will argue that the museum's foundation is, in part, due to the then-MSzP government's desire for European integration. The next section will examine the Holocaust Memorial Center itself, describing the circumstances around its opening and detailing the narratives presented within the museum. It will explain how the public memories in the exhibit serve as a means of overcoming trauma. The HDKE presents the largely unprecedented narrative that Hungary *was* in part responsible for the Holocaust, and it provides a quite inclusive version of national identity. The chapter will also detail how this memory has been challenged recently, both with regards to the new constitution and in the museum itself.

The 'Europeanization' of the Holocaust

Hungary formally joined the European Union on May 1, 2004, following a referendum in which over eighty percent of voters supported membership. All of the major Hungarian political parties publicly backed accession. Fidesz did, however, warn voters that EU

membership could result in the loss of thousands of Hungarian jobs—a view likely related to their nationalist, more inward-looking political ideology. According to the European Commission, this vote marked the end of Hungary’s “tragic separation from the European family of democratic traditions.”¹ Only weeks before, the opening ceremony for the new Holocaust Memorial Center had been held in Budapest, with foreign dignitaries and large numbers of the international press in attendance. The new museum forced people to consider Hungary’s role in the Holocaust, and pledged to educate young people about “...the overall history of the Holocaust with a special emphasis on its socio-historical impact,” including, implicitly, the effects of the Holocaust that linger to this day.² The comment of the representative of the European Commission could have just as easily applied to the opening of this museum, and the subsequent incorporation of the Holocaust and Hungarian responsibility into public memory.

The decision to create a Holocaust Memorial Center was likely due, in part, to the desire to integrate more fully with Europe. In Chapter Two, I presented the idea of the Europeanization of the Holocaust, explaining that the Holocaust can be seen as a sort of “negative European founding myth.”³ Shared memories of the horrors of the Holocaust unify Europe, as do collective proclamations of ‘never again.’ Europe in the twentieth century is defined by the Holocaust, and it defines its future in terms of cooperation and agreeing upon certain standards to ensure that the past is not repeated. Although there are no explicit European standards regarding the commemoration of the Holocaust, Radonic argues that the suggestion to join the Holocaust Task Force and to assign a Holocaust Memorial Day can be seen as unofficial standards.⁴ The

¹ Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, “EU votes trigger parties in Malta and Hungary,” *The Telegraph*, 14 April 2003. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>>

² “Institute,” Holocaust Memorial Center, accessed 24 February 2012. <<http://www.hdke.hu>>

³ Radonic, 358.

⁴ Radonic, 359.

Croatian Jasenovac Memorial Museum opened its new exhibit in 2006, with apparent intent to memorialize the murders of thousands of Serbs and Jews in line with European standards. The director of the museum said the exhibit was designed “to meet the standards of the Council of Europe and the EU.”⁵ Radonic claims that this Europeanization of the Holocaust is, in part, a result of Croatia’s desire to qualify for membership in the EU. Similar dynamics can be seen in the case of the Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Center.

Holocaust Memorial Center⁶

Like the House of Terror, the HDKE explicitly serves as a memorial, and thus both chronicles and commemorates aspects of the twentieth century past. Unlike the House of Terror, though, the Holocaust Memorial Center presents a narrative in which memory serves as a means of overcoming trauma. The museum opposes much of the victimization rhetoric that is so noticeable in the past two museums, and presents a public memory of Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust. There is a sense throughout the HDKE’s permanent exhibit that Hungary can only progress as a nation (and, specifically, as a *European* nation-state) if Hungarians are able to come to terms with this difficult past. They must also recognize that the Holocaust *is* a part of Hungarian history, and is not simply the history of the Jewish ‘other.’ The *injunction to remember* arises from a feeling that the true nature of the Holocaust, and its Hungarian component, has been forgotten or otherwise left out of the Hungarian public memory; we must remember it, both for moral reasons and because it is an integral part of national history. Similarly, the *mnemonic operation* of these memories is not only to recognize this national responsibility, but also to educate future generations about it. The essence of the *mnemonic*

⁵ Quoted in Radonic, 362.

⁶ Observations of the Holocaust Memorial Center are based on my own notes and photographs from my visit on November 22, 2011.

substance, or the narratives told throughout the HDKE, is that Hungarians hold some responsibility for the Holocaust and therefore must include it within the national public memory. The atrocities of the Holocaust were committed *by Hungarians to Hungarians*.

Budapest's Holocaust Memorial Center is located on Páva Street, a quiet side street located somewhat off the beaten track. It is quite far from the center of the city and other popular tourist attractions; in fact, many English-speaking tourists on TripAdvisor.com mistakenly reviewed the Dohány Street Synagogue under the section on the Holocaust Memorial Center. Because the museum is in such an isolated place, they probably never came across it, and so may have assumed that the Dohány Synagogue (which marks the edge of the former Jewish ghetto) was the Holocaust museum in question. The Memorial Center was built around a 1920s synagogue that had served as an internment camp during the Holocaust. In this way, it is in some ways a *lieu de mémoire*, but not to same extent as other well-known Holocaust memorials, like those at Auschwitz or Anne Frank's house. The Memorial Center itself does not make the significance of its location very clear to visitors, as I only discovered the information on its website after already visiting the museum twice. In 1999, the Alliance of the Jewish Communities of Hungary (MAZSIHASZ) donated the synagogue, which was in very poor condition, to the Holocaust Documentation Center and Memorial Collection Public Foundation, a non-profit organization that receives government funding.⁷ In 2003, the foundation began renovating the synagogue, and in 2004, they constructed the rest of the building complex in preparation for the museum. The HDKE became the fifth state-sponsored Holocaust memorial museum in the world, and the first in East-Central Europe.

⁷ "Institute," Holocaust Memorial Center.

The official opening ceremony took place on April 15, 2004, and the museum opened its doors to the public the following day. At that time, the permanent exhibition was not yet finished, and would not be ready for another year or so. Instead, the “Auschwitz Album,” made up of the only surviving photographs that depict trains being unloaded at Auschwitz, was the sole exhibit on display. The year 2004 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust, and so two academic conferences coincided with the Memorial Center’s opening. One conference, entitled “The Holocaust in Hungary: Sixty Years Later” took place in Washington DC between March 16 and 18. The other, organized by the Holocaust Documentation Center and Memorial Collection Public Foundation, took place in Budapest between April 16 and 18, the days immediately following the museum’s opening. According to Éva Vajda’s analysis of Hungarian media coverage, the opening of the museum was a highly covered event, second only to EU accession.⁸ Media coverage of the HDKE’s opening was overwhelmingly positive.

Numerous important political figures, including Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy (MSzP), Viktor Orbán, Nikolas Sarkozy, US Congressman Tom Lantos, and Israeli President Moshe Katsav, were in attendance at the Memorial Center’s opening ceremony. The speeches delivered at the opening ceremony, as well as the media coverage leading up to it, made it quite clear that the public memory advanced by the HDKE differed from the predominant narratives in society. The Memorial Center explicitly recognized Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust. Medgyessy acknowledged this fact in his speech, saying, “As the Prime Minister of this Republic I declare that this heinous crime was committed by Hungarians against Hungarians. There is no excuse or explanation. But there are the memories, the common bereavement, and—hopefully—

⁸ Éva Vajda, “How the Hungarian Public Reacted to the Opening of the Budapest Holocaust Memorial Center?” (paper presented at the “Teaching the Holocaust to Future Generations” conference at Yad Vashem, 8-11 August 2004).

reconciliation after sixty years.”⁹ Vajda notes too that the notion of Hungarian responsibility was conveyed sharply by the Memorial Center’s opening, yet also says that the international press emphasized this narrative more than the Hungarian media in their reports on the museum.¹⁰ Regardless of the level of attention that this public memory received, the Memorial Center’s opening, and the two conferences along with it, represented a shift in official representations of the Holocaust.

Acknowledging national responsibility for the Holocaust—indeed, acknowledging the Holocaust at all—is an activity that is closely associated with Western-oriented liberals. It is no simple coincidence that the Holocaust Memorial Center opened just weeks before Hungary joined the European Union. The museum opened its doors months *before* its permanent exhibition was finished. This decision was made largely because April 16 is a Holocaust Memorial Day, and because the leadership of the Holocaust foundation wanted the HDKE to open in the historically significant year of 2004.¹¹ It is very likely too, though, that the date of the opening and the decision to construct any museum at all was motivated by the desire to ‘be more European’ or to integrate more fully with Europe. Medgyessy’s comments further on in his speech demonstrate this desire: “Never before have we Hungarians had so much confidence in our future. Within a matter of days we will become part of an even larger community. New perspectives open up to Hungary. The shaping of a new European, modern Hungarian republic starts now.”¹² This speech could not be more different than the one Orbán gave on the 2012 national holiday, in which he compared European bureaucrats to Soviet officers. The implication in Medgyessy’s statement is that only by acknowledging national responsibility for the

⁹ *Congressional Record: Extension of Remarks*, 108th Cong., 2d sess., 23 June 2004, E1215. <<http://www.gpo.gov/>>

¹⁰ Vajda, 3.

¹¹ 2004 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the beginning of the Hungarian Holocaust.

¹² *Congressional Record*.

Holocaust can Hungary move forward and become more “modern” and “European.” It is significant too that the Holocaust Memorial Center was opened under a Socialist administration, a party that tends to be more European-oriented in ideology and identity.

A Walk Through the Museum

Visitors to the Holocaust Memorial Center first enter a courtyard surrounded by the Memorial Wall, a glass wall engraved with the names of victims of the Holocaust. The main exhibition begins inside the building, which is described on the Memorial Center’s website: “The building’s asymmetrical outline, the dislocated walls, and the descending stairs in the exhibition halls, all symbolize the distorted and twisted time of the Holocaust.”¹³ The permanent exhibit is entitled “From Deprivation of Rights to Genocide” and although its main focus is on the Hungarian experience, it also looks at the broader European Holocaust. The rooms are all dark, with black walls covered in white writing. Like the House of Terror, the HDKE makes use of multimedia, with music, sound effects, and videos playing on some walls, but to a lesser extent.

The first room represents life, both for Jews and Roma, before the Holocaust. A projected video on the wall depicts everyday life at the turn of the century, and texts emphasize how assimilated and Hungarian the Jews, and even some of the Roma were. Festive wedding music plays in the background, and ordinary objects are on display in tall glass cylinders. The visitor then walks down a dark hallway with silhouettes of people marching on the walls, and the sounds of footsteps in the air. Pictures on the ceiling light up one by one: Horthy on his famous white horse, a group of Jewish leaders, Arrow Cross soldiers. The next sections detail the “deprivation of rights” that occurred after World War I in a variety of ways. The museum’s website explains, “Accordingly, the exhibition does not present the events in chronological

¹³ “Exhibitions,” Holocaust Memorial Center.

order; it is based on units that present the different stages of the persecution: the deprivation of civil rights, property, freedom, human dignity, and existence.”¹⁴ Lengthy texts cover the walls, explaining in detail the worsening troubles that fell upon Jews, Roma, and other groups. There are also a number of anti-Jewish propaganda posters and photographs with subjects ranging from ordinary people wearing the yellow star to attendees of right-wing rallies.

Throughout all of the rooms, the museum makes use of empathy by detailing the stories of various Hungarian victims. All of the stories are on one continuous wall that runs throughout the exhibit. The narratives concern people from all walks of life, including a patriotic Member of Parliament, a young girl whose mother was killed (she is explicitly compared to Anne Frank), and the famous poet Miklós Radnóti. Some of these people survived the Holocaust, while others died. The obvious intention in including these stories is to remind visitors that real people were killed, and to allow them to empathize with the victims. This technique is common in memorial museums, and is epitomized in the US Holocaust Museum, where each visitor receives a “passport” of a victim. These stories further serve to show visitors that the victims killed were Hungarians, and not ‘outsiders;’ many of them spoke Hungarian, identified as Hungarian, and lived lives quite similar to those of their non-Jewish or Roma compatriots.

At the end of the “Deprived of Human Dignity” section, the exhibition becomes particularly emotional and shocking. The visitor faces a grid of photographs depicting smiling Nazis, emaciated and naked children, and elderly men showing the numbers tattooed on their arms. Soon afterward, there is a section on Auschwitz-Birkenau, with barbed wire on the walls and video screens showing slideshows of photographs from the Auschwitz Album. Texts explain, in detail, the ways that prisoners in Auschwitz were killed, and a canister of Zyklon B is

¹⁴ “Exhibitions,” Holocaust Memorial Center.

on display serves to illustrate the brutality of the camp. The final room, “Liberation and Calling to Account,” directly concerns questions of responsibility. The text explains, “Most of the majority looked upon the suffering of their compatriots with indifference, but there were thousands who risked their lives trying to help.”¹⁵ Photographs and texts depict the various responses of different groups to the persecution, and detail some of the controversies and dilemmas they faced.

At the end of the exhibition, visitors enter the quiet refurbished synagogue. The synagogue is beautiful, with blue and gold detailing, and it still serves as a place of worship. A few more texts, focusing mostly on themes of rescue, are on the walls. There are pictures of famous people who saved Jews from deportation, like Raoul Wallenberg and Carl Lutz, but their deeds are not explicitly recognized. Rows and rows of glass pews feature photos and brief descriptions of some of the victims; the website explains, “The portraits on the pews keep the memory of the destroyed communities, the demolished synagogues and houses of prayer, and the murdered individuals.”¹⁶ The visitor leaves the museum with the pictures and memories of these real people—fellow Hungarians—who were killed fresh in mind.

The Pre-War Years and the Impact of Trianon

The exhibition at the Holocaust Memorial Center only mentions the pre-war years and Trianon in passing, probably because they come before and do not *directly* concern the Holocaust. Like the National Museum and much of the predominant public memory, the HDKE represents the time around the turn of the century as a golden age of Hungarian history. The museum focuses on the level of acceptance there was for Jews in society, noting, “By 1895, the

¹⁵ Museum caption for “Responses,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

¹⁶ “Exhibitions,” Holocaust Memorial Center.

legal equality of Jews had become complete... Most of the political elite was in favour of the emancipation and full acceptance of Jews. They were motivated by one of the most important ideas of the time: the right of every citizen to be considered equal before the law.”¹⁷ Jews flourished in the late 1800s and early 1900s, making valuable contributions to society and becoming good, patriotic, assimilated Hungarians. Even some Roma were relatively well off during this time period; although many lived in “near-slavery” until the second half of the nineteenth century, a large number moved to Transylvania (then part of Hungary), “an outpost of freedom for them in those days.”¹⁸ Hungarian society held Roma musicians in high regard during this time. In general, the exhibit emphasizes the open and accepting nature of Hungary in the pre-war years. It notes that the modern, racial version of antisemitism became an issue in the 1880s, but the majority of the Hungarian political elite publicly and strongly denounced this form of prejudice.¹⁹ This ‘golden age’ of acceptance and relative liberalism is obviously meant to contrast with the attitudes in the years leading to World War II.

The HDKE only mentions Trianon very briefly, and represents it in a way that is quite different from the other two museums. Trianon is not described as a national tragedy that spurred in motion the other dark events of the twentieth century; the text mentions it in a very matter of fact way, simply stating, “In the wake of its defeat in World War I, the Kingdom of Hungary lost two thirds of its territory and more than half of its population.”²⁰ The exhibition does not discuss the irredentism that became so widespread after Trianon. It explains that the “propagandists of the Horthy regime” claimed that the communist revolution of 1919 was responsible for the loss at Trianon, but does not mention that many right nationalists believed that Jews were responsible

¹⁷ Museum caption for “The Jews in Hungary,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

¹⁸ Museum caption for “The Roma in Hungary,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

¹⁹ Museum caption for “The Jews in Hungary,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

²⁰ Museum caption for “Hungary, 1920-1942,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

for Kun's regime. The exhibition's handling of Trianon is quite unique in Hungarian public memory (and probably would look quite different if the current Fidesz administration was the one that had designed the museum). It sets the stage for wholeheartedly accepting Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust; while other narratives may use Trianon as an explanation (or excuse) for the behavior of the interwar governments, the HDKE almost pushes it to the side. The other museums emphasize that regaining lost territory was Hungary's primary policy objective (and rationale for allying with Nazi Germany), but the Memorial Center does not, implying that irredentism did not justify the behavior of the interwar government or the sentiments of much of the public.

The Interwar Government to German Occupation

The Holocaust Memorial Center immediately introduces its general view of the interwar government, saying, "...a right-wing, antisemitic, nationalist and anticommunist regime was established under the leadership of Miklós Horthy."²¹ The exhibition details much of the anti-Jewish legislation passed, from the Numerus Clausus in 1920 to the progressively more discriminatory laws in the late 1930s. In a statement clearly acknowledging national responsibility, the exhibit reads, "Having abandoned the principles of civil liberty and equality as early as 1920, the Hungarian state, from 1938 on, deprived its citizens declared Jewish of their rights at an accelerated pace, by means of nearly two dozen laws and hundreds of decrees."²² This statement could not be further from the right nationalist assertion that the Horthy era was another type of 'golden age' or precursor to the current democracy. The state abandoned the main principles of liberal democracy and equality—principles that had been in effect around the

²¹ Museum caption for "Hungary, 1920-1942," Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

²² Museum caption for "Deprived of Rights," Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

turn of the century—and thus was simply another authoritarian regime, albeit not as bloodthirsty as the Arrow Cross to come. The exhibit emphasizes that these right-wing, racist sentiments were not limited to the political elite; large portions of the population shared them, too. This assertion makes the claim of Hungarian victimization difficult to defend, and demonstrates that the interwar government is not something that can be admired or even forgiven.

The HDKE decries the actions taken by various government officials, as well as the general political climate of the time. The exhibit emphasizes the antisemitic (but not violent) attitude of the controversial Teleki (Orbán’s model politician), saying that, under his leadership, Parliament passed the second anti-Jewish law in part because of the “deficiencies” of the first one.²³ It notes that it was common for public officials to insist that Roma were “born criminals” who should not be allowed to procreate.²⁴ The exhibit shows a very nuanced opinion of Member of Parliament Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, who also enjoys a somewhat controversial, yet generally positive, reputation. It explains that he publicly denounced the Hungarian massacre of a few thousand Serb and Jewish civilians around Novi Sad, and signed a petition demanding the discharge of the poet Radnóti from the forced labor service. He was “executed by the Arrow Cross as an antifascist resistance fighter,” but he is also described as “a former militant antisemitic, racist member of Parliament.”²⁵

Horthy is described in a particularly negative light, as a political opportunist who “was proud of being an antisemite.”²⁶ He is at least duly noted for standing up to the Germans and refusing to allow the government to deport Hungarian Jews, but he is criticized for his poor

²³ Museum caption for “Numerus Clausus and the Anti-Jewish Laws,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

²⁴ Museum caption for “Everyday Humiliations,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

²⁵ Museum captions for “Miklós Radnóti” and “Jewish Victims Before the German Occupation,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

²⁶ “The Responses of the Gentiles,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

attempt to pull out of the war. The exhibit further condemns Horthy's decisions after the German invasion, in direct opposition to the predominant public memory, which implies that he had no choice but to go along with the Nazis. One text reads, "Horthy did not resign after the German occupation, practically legitimizing the operations of the new government."²⁷ Statements like these clearly serve to ensure that Horthy and his entire government are not made into heroes or even excused for their behavior.

The Holocaust

A key piece of the public memory presented in the Holocaust Memorial Center is that Hungary does hold a great deal of responsibility for the Holocaust. This assertion was made in the media campaign leading up to the opening ceremony, the Prime Minister's speech, and repeatedly in the exhibition itself. The museum explains how many victims were killed even before the Nazis arrived; "The policy of antisemitism had taken tens of thousands of lives even before the German occupation."²⁸ The exhibit notes the thousands of men who were forced into military labor service, and describes the humiliations, and even executions, that they underwent before 1944. It further describes how 18,000 Jews from the re-annexed territories were declared "stateless or 'of unsettled citizenship,'" rounded up, and deported to occupied Ukraine, where they were killed by the Nazis.²⁹ The HDKE is very explicit in its insistence that not only were anti-Jewish and anti-Roma sentiments endemic in Hungary before the German occupation, but tens of thousands of people were actually killed before the Nazis arrived.

²⁷ "The Collaboration of Hungarian Authorities with the Nazis," Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

²⁸ "Deprived of Life," Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

²⁹ Museum caption for "Restrictions of Freedom Before the German Occupation," Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

The Memorial Center also makes it very clear that many Hungarians accommodated and collaborated with the Nazis and, later, with the Arrow Cross government. This accommodation was not limited to Hungary, though; “Antisemitic governments all over Europe, with the active and gleeful cooperation of a not insignificant part of the population, were ‘lawfully’ robbing Jews.”³⁰ One text, headed “The Collaboration of Hungarian Authorities with the Nazis,” explains how Adolf Eichmann arrived in Hungary with only 150 men, including drivers and personal guards. The text explains, quite tongue in cheek, how Hungarian collaboration was necessary with such a small group:

Without the active, initiative-rich assistance and tireless work of the Hungarian police, gendarmerie and public administration numbering close to 200,000 persons, it would have been impossible to ghettoize and then deport hundreds of thousands of people within a few weeks from a country whose total area then was roughly 66,000 square miles.³¹

The Nazis may have instigated the deportations, the exhibit claims, but they did not do all the ‘work’ themselves. Nowhere does the HDKE mention Edmund Veessenmayer, the German plenipotentiary whom the House of Terror described as holding “real power.”³² Instead, Döme Sztójay and Ferenc Szálasi are depicted as the real villains.

The HDKE does not claim, of course, that *all* Hungarians were responsible for the Holocaust. Even though “...Gentile Hungary, on the whole, looked on their troubles with indifference and often hostility,” many people did not support the governmental measures or even actively resisted them.³³ The last part of the exhibit details how many people, both Jews and non-Jews, risked their lives in the resistance movement. Additionally, non-Jews and members of other non-persecuted groups suffered during World War II, especially during Arrow Cross rule;

³⁰ Museum caption for “Deprived of Property,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

³¹ Museum caption for “The Collaboration of Hungarian Authorities with the Nazis,” Holocaust Memorial Center.

³² House of Terror guidebook, 7.

³³ Museum caption for “The Responses of the Gentiles,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

“The Arrow Cross authorities terrorized the non-Jewish population as well, and their fanatic ideology did not enjoy wide support.”³⁴ As times got worse, and more people became aware of where the deportation trains were actually headed, resistance efforts increased. Although it identifies some of the resistance activities, the exhibit makes no effort to describe the actions of the well-known resistance efforts of people like Lutz or Wallenberg, instead merely presenting photographs of them.

The Holocaust Memorial Center’s acceptance of Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust marks an important shift in public memory and national identity. Although admitting responsibility may mean incorporating a discontinuous and embarrassing history into the national narrative, it is something that Hungary feels it must do along with the rest of Europe. The HDKE’s website explains the need to acknowledge and commemorate the past in the “About Us” section:

The Memorial Center’s objective is to present the persecution based on race, religion, and political beliefs and its consequences, the Jewish and Gipsy Holocaust as part of the national tragedy and as a shameful chapter in the European culture and history. The Holocaust has to become a part of the Hungarian history and collective memory in the same way as it is in the European culture, and the memory of the innocently persecuted and killed Hungarians has to live on.³⁵

The museum implies that by acknowledging national responsibility, as the rest of Europe has done, Hungarians will be able to join in on the “European culture.” Recognizing national guilt, and educating future generations about that guilt, is the *mnemonic operation* of the Memorial Center. The museum of course has many other functions—it serves as a memorial for the victims, displays an attitude of “never again,” and pays tribute to the resistance. Its main purpose is, in the words of the website, “...to inform and educate the general public—especially the

³⁴ Museum caption for “The Responses of the Gentiles,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

³⁵ “Institute,” Holocaust Memorial Center.

young generations—about the true history of the Holocaust...” implying, perhaps, that these young people have learned an *untrue* history of the Holocaust.³⁶ Acknowledging this responsibility is important in advancing both a Hungarian and a broader European identity.

Depictions of this guilt, particularly as it relates to the memory of Horthy, have, however, resulted in some controversy under the current Orbán administration. In March 2011, State Secretary András Levente Gál visited the HDKE and expressed the need for a change in a certain piece of the exhibition. The piece in question, although not explicitly identified in any of the news reports, is very likely the section in the hallway that depicts the silhouettes of people marching on the wall:

I have notified a representative of the HDKE that part of the exhibit has to be reassessed, because it is set up in such a way that Horthy marching into various cities and regions is depicted, which is an altogether different sort of thing. It is different because there is no causal connection between the return of Hungarian-inhabited areas to Hungary and Regent Miklós Horthy and the Hungarian army marching in, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the subsequent death marches in which people were being herded to their deaths. This is the sort of skewed take on history that gives rise to unnecessary tension... Unfortunately, there were many of those who, in coveting the valuables of wealthy Jewish citizens, thereby steered Hungary—a country deprived of its legal capacity—in the direction of depravity. Hungary was, indeed, stripped of its legal capacity, for on March 19, 1944, German troops declared the takeover of a puppet government.³⁷

Gál’s claim that there was “no causal connection” between the re-annexation of territories and the Hungarian Holocaust angered many people, because it is simply not true. It was only after allying with Nazi Germany that Hungary regained some of its territories lost at Trianon, and this alliance eventually led to the deportations of hundreds of thousands of Jews, Roma, and others. Part of the rationale behind this assertion is undoubtedly the fact that Fidesz, but especially other right nationalist groups, wish to use Horthy and his government as a positive frame of reference

³⁶ “Institute,” Holocaust Memorial Center.

³⁷ Quoted in László Harsányi, “The Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest is Under Attack,” Gedenkstätten Forum, 5 April 2011. <<http://www.gedenkstaettenforum.de/>>

and precursor to the current administration. This desire may be particularly evident in someone like Gál, a man whose ideology former Yale professor Eva Balogh describes as “close to that of Jobbik.”³⁸ They dislike that he is depicted as one who played a role in the policies that led to the Holocaust, and instead wish that he could be represented as, at the very least, a weak man who was bowled over by the Nazis.

In a broader sense, though, Gál insisted that the leadership of the Memorial Center change the larger narrative behind the exhibition. By asking for a new depiction of Horthy and, by extension, the entire Hungarian government and its relationship to the death camps, and saying that Hungary was “stripped of its legal capacity” after German occupation, Gál reiterates a theme that is becoming common with the Orbán administration; Hungarians cannot be held responsible for the Holocaust. In a piece entitled “The Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest is Under Attack,” former HDKE executive director László Harsányi wrote, “His target is a crucial component of the conception behind the exhibit: should we or should not we face the issue of Hungary’s responsibility. We find it unacceptable that politicians would rewrite history themselves or order others [sic] to rewrite it.”³⁹ Harsányi and others on staff at the museum feared that changing the exhibit would create a new (old) narrative where responsibility for the Holocaust was placed on Germany alone, and they believed that Gál’s criticisms of the HDKE were politically, not historically, motivated. They refused to change the exhibit according to government policy.⁴⁰ Although Gál’s statement *did* acknowledge that Hungarian citizens, coveting wealth, steered the country “in the direction of depravity,” these people seem like aberrations in contrast to the supposedly helpless government “stripped of its legal capacity.” He

³⁸ Eva Balogh, “Rewriting history: The fate of the Holocaust Memorial Center,” *Hungarian Spectrum Blog*, 23 May 2011. <<http://esbalogh.typepad.com/>>

³⁹ Harsányi, “The Holocaust Memorial Center.”

⁴⁰ Ország-Land, “New Hungarian Constitution.”

implies that these depraved citizens were only motivated by wealth. Many people *were* of course motivated to do terrible things for material gain, but many others also held deeply racist beliefs. Furthermore, by referring to the victims of the Holocaust as “wealthy Jewish citizens,” he perpetuates negative stereotypes about the ‘swindling’ and illegal economic activities of Jews, potentially contributing to the already widespread antisemitism in contemporary Hungarian society.

In May 2011, the HDKE’s new (government-appointed) board fired both László Harsányi and chief historical advisor Judit Molnár. Harsányi, who had directed the museum since 2009 and had a contract that ran until April 2012, claimed that he had been given no reason for his dismissal.⁴¹ The new head of the board, György Haraszti, announced that Szabolcs Szita (whom Hungarian news agency MTI described as a “conservative historian”) would be the new acting director, and that a team of experts would design a new concept for the exhibition.⁴² Although the board did not say that the controversy over the exhibit on Horthy was the reason behind the dismissals of Harsányi and Molnár, many scholars and journalists believe that it was. As Molnár said, “We could not change the permanent exhibition to align with the new political expectations since we regard that as a falsification of history.”⁴³ Regardless of the true reason for the dismissals of members of the HDKE leadership, in the future, the permanent exhibition will likely be changed to represent Horthy in a more positive light and to accept less Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust. In an email regarding the Memorial Center, one of my Hungarian art history professors, Beatrix Basics, wrote, “Although the present (newly changed) leadership is far from being good and effective, still its permanent exhibition is excellent.” When

⁴¹ “Hungary Sacks Holocaust Museum Chief,” *IPOT News*, 20 May 2011. <<http://www.ipotnews.com/>>

⁴² Quoted in “Hungary Sacks Holocaust Museum Chief.”

⁴³ Julia Michalska, “Hungary’s government tightens grip on arts,” *The Art Newspaper*, 9 February 2012. <<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/>>

I asked her what she meant, she replied, “I mean that the HDKE—like many other museums in Hungary—became the victim of political fights and the new leaders are loyal to the new political leadership. That’s Hungary... unfortunately.” While I was in Budapest, Professor Basics expressed her opinion to me that Hungary had not adequately dealt with its role in World War II and the Holocaust. This conversation took place before Harsányi was fired, but apparently many people saw it coming for a few months prior.

The controversy over the exhibition and leadership of the HDKE can also be seen in the larger political context arising from the new constitution. As mentioned earlier, many people believe that the constitution “shirks responsibility for the Holocaust,” and forty “eminent Hungarian historians” signed a petition before the constitution’s ratification, asking the government to reconsider the way that the Holocaust was represented.⁴⁴ The constitution effectively denies Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust by arguing that the country’s self-determination was lost after the German occupation, just as Gál insisted when discussing the memorial center. Based on the memories presented in the House of Terror, the new constitution, and Gál’s remarks, we may infer that Fidesz seeks a return to earlier public memories, in which Hungary was a victimized nation that held no responsibility for the Holocaust. These public memory shifts could have large implications for Hungarian national identity, both in how Hungarians view themselves and how outsiders view them.

View of National Identity

The national identity presented in the Holocaust Memorial Center is very inclusive of minorities that right nationalists might view as ‘not truly Hungarian.’ The beginning of the exhibition emphasizes how, in the pre-war years, Jews were very assimilated into Hungarian

⁴⁴ Ország-Land, “New Hungarian Constitution.”

society. It says, “The overwhelming majority of the Jews who adhered to their own religion regarded themselves, to varying degrees, as part of the Hungarian nation in language and culture. Many of them proudly declared themselves to be ‘Hungarians of the Mosaic persuasion.’”⁴⁵ The exhibit repeatedly refers to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust as “Hungarians” and “compatriots,” so it is clear that the HDKE projects a vision of national identity that includes Jews. This may seem obvious to the majority of Hungarians and international observers alike, but there remains a portion of the population that views Jews as ‘outsiders’ or ‘foreigners,’ usually harboring antisemitic attitudes.

The Holocaust Memorial Center seeks to change these exclusionary and sometimes discriminatory views by stressing that Jews are Hungarians. The history of the Holocaust, then, is necessarily a part of Hungarian history. Bálint Molnár, a consultant in the creation of the HDKE, emphasizes this inclusive version of national identity. He explained that the museum creators sought to show non-Jewish Hungarians that Jews *are* Hungarians, and so the history of the Holocaust is a part of Hungarian history:

The centre wants to present the destruction of Hungary’s Jews as a national tragedy, and not just the private tragedy of the Jewish people... If you depict the Holocaust as the tragedy of the Jewish people only, this drives people away. They say, ‘That belongs to those people. What do we have to do with this? Instead, we want the centre to promote study and understanding to finally get (non-Jewish) people to realize that this is a part of their history.’⁴⁶

As Medgyessy announced in his opening speech, the Holocaust was “committed by Hungarians against Hungarians.” The museum emphasizes the inclusion of Jews within the Hungarian nation time and time again. The individual stories presented in each room in the exhibit, for instance, serve this task, as they stress that the victims were Hungarians and not outsiders.

⁴⁵ Museum caption for “The Jews in Hungary,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

⁴⁶ John Nadler, “Hungary enshrines the Holocaust,” *The Montreal Gazette*, 12 April 2004. LexisNexis.

The Memorial Center is also unique in its depiction of the Roma. Contrary to many popular views, which present Roma as a distinct, non-Hungarian minority, the museum describes them as an assimilated group; “By the end of the nineteenth century, most of the Gypsies in Hungary had settled down and spoke Hungarian.”⁴⁷ Whether or not the Roma are included within national identity is unclear, but the HDKE propagates a version of Hungarian identity that is at least accepting to Roma, and willing to admit the atrocities that were committed against them. This public memory was quite significant in a country where anti-Roma prejudice remains widespread and largely accepted by society. Before the opening ceremony, one of the Memorial Center’s primary goals for the media campaign was to ensure that the Roma Holocaust received significant coverage.⁴⁸ The only monument in Budapest that is dedicated to the Roma killed in the Holocaust is located in an unkempt park next to the Danube. Even though my dorm in Budapest was just minutes away from the monument, and I had actually been in the park before, I never noticed or heard anything about the monument. The HDKE’s emphasis on the Roma Holocaust, and their depiction of Roma as assimilated into Hungarian society, marks the introduction of a new and more accepting national identity, that emphasizes the importance of toleration. In an interview conducted while he was still director of the HDKE, Harsányi discussed the museum’s role in advocating a Hungarian identity that was accepting of others. He said that in addition to remembrance, the museum also charged itself with the task of promoting tolerance, and actively sought out successful European tolerance programs that Hungary might be able to model.⁴⁹ The Memorial Center reminds visitors of what people are possible of doing

⁴⁷ Museum caption for “The Roma in Hungary,” Holocaust Memorial Center exhibit.

⁴⁸ Vajda, 1.

⁴⁹ Interview with László Harsányi, *Memorial Center*. <<http://www.jewish.hu/>>

when they discriminate against others, and advocates a national identity that is accepting of differences.

As previously mentioned, the way that the Memorial Center acknowledges Hungarian responsibility in the Holocaust represents a key component of what the leadership sees as a valuable national identity. On its website the HDKE emphasizes its role as an educational facility, responsible for teaching future generations of Hungarians about what really happened during the Holocaust. The museum believes that acknowledging the Holocaust, as well as addressing the contemporary issues of antisemitism within society, is important in a modern and liberal Hungarian identity. There is a sense that remembering the past, however terrible, will allow contemporary citizens to feel proud about their nationality. As Medgyessy said in his speech at the museum's opening ceremony, "This is the time to confirm that we believe in the power of learning and teaching. We are not too lazy to learn from our own history and the example of other nations."⁵⁰ Ignoring the past creates a national identity based on false pretenses. It is only through educating future generations, the HDKE claims, that nationals will be able to feel truly proud about being Hungarian.

Inherent in this view is also the sense that acknowledging the past will allow Hungary to become more European and Western. The website reads, "The proper evaluation of the Holocaust era in Hungary began only recently after decades of delay in comparison with other European countries."⁵¹ For years, Hungary lagged behind its Western neighbors, presumably because of the communist regime, though the HDKE does not explicitly say so. By acknowledging the terrible nature of the Holocaust—an activity that is increasingly regarded as

⁵⁰ *Congressional Record*.

⁵¹ "Institute," Holocaust Memorial Center.

standard practice among liberal elements in Central and Western Europe—Hungary can finally rejoin Europe (symbolically, weeks later, by way of the EU). Admitting national responsibility, too, allows Hungarians to become truly European in their identities, as well as be respected by the rest of the West. As István Deák said, “I cannot overstate how much Hungary would gain in its international standing if, after seven years of deceitful evasions since the war, it would at last face up to its responsibilities from the past.”⁵² Establishing a Holocaust Memorial Center that acknowledges responsibility and pledges to educate the youth about the past is a means of displaying a European-oriented, liberal, renewed Hungarian identity.

The controversy over the permanent exhibit of the HDKE, especially when considered alongside the issues of the new constitution, may challenge this national identity that the museum advocates. There have been numerous public outcries that the constitution and the governmental interference with the museum take backward steps in dealing with the Holocaust. If political pressures are able to change public memories back to the old views of total German fault and Hungarian victimization, conceptions of national identity may change too. If Fidesz’s memories are accepted, it might become easier to assert a version of identity based upon victimization. National identity may also become more based on extreme nationalism or even exclusionary, anti-Jewish or anti-Roma sentiments. If it becomes possible and acceptable to deny national responsibility for the Holocaust, or even trivialize it, people may begin to admire and attempt to model the ideology of Horthy or even some of the more extreme-right groups of that time period.

Of course, the public will not accept public memories and national identities asserted in a museum unless they *visit* that museum. Tony Judt writes, “But much of the time this Holocaust

⁵² Ország-Land, “New Hungarian Constitution.”

Center stands nearly empty, its exhibits and fact sheets seen by a thin trickle of visitors—many of them foreign. Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Hungarians have flocked to the Terrorháza.”⁵³ If most of the visitors to the HDKE are foreigners, not Hungarians, then the exhibition will hardly succeed in changing the way Hungarians think about the Holocaust and their own national identity.⁵⁴ The Memorial Center certainly caters to foreigners much more than the House of Terror does; virtually all of the information in the HDKE is available in English. Similarly, Radonic points out that for several years, the homepage of the HDKE was in English, and a button had to be pressed in order to show the Hungarian version.⁵⁵ The website has since been switched, but the first version suggests that the Memorial Center anticipated their audience consisting of more foreigners than Hungarians. When I visited the HDKE the first time, it was a national holiday and admission to the museum was free. Granted, it *was* a beautiful day outside, but I did not encounter any other visitors enjoying the day of free admission. The second time I visited, I saw one school group. Many visitors to the museum do go with school groups, but Harsányi lamented the fact that not all Hungarian students are required to visit the Memorial Center.⁵⁶ At the opening ceremony, then-museum director András Darányi had expressed the hope that all students across the country would visit the Memorial Center before they graduated from high school.⁵⁷ The number of visitors to the HDKE will not matter, however, if Fidesz succeeds in affecting the public memory of the Memorial Center; instead of educating visitors about the nature of Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust, such a museum would propagate narratives about total victimization by the ‘other.’

⁵³ Tony Judt, “From the House of the Dead: On Modern European Memory,” *New York Review of Books*, 6 October 2005. <<http://www.nybooks.com/>>

⁵⁴ The popularity of the HDKE among foreign tourists does, however, further reemphasize Hungary’s integrated role within Europe

⁵⁵ Radonic, 357.

⁵⁶ Interview with Harsányi.

⁵⁷ Nadler, “Hungary enshrines the Holocaust.”

This chapter has provided a description of the Holocaust Memorial Center. The Memorial Center represents, in part, the political desire of MSzP to integrate more fully with Europe. The chapter reintroduced the theory of the Europeanization of the Holocaust, explaining that Hungary joined the EU just weeks after the museum opened its doors. I argued that the memories in this museum served as a means of overcoming trauma, as the HDKE presented the largely unprecedented idea that Hungary holds a degree of responsibility for the Holocaust. The next section explored these public memories, focusing particularly on this national responsibility and the museum's inclusive version of national identity. Finally, I outlined some of the political controversies that have recently surrounded the museum and argued that Fidesz seeks to re-establish a public memory that does not incorporate Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the politics of Hungarian public memory as represented through three historical museums. It has argued that elites often smooth over past contradictions in their quest to create a unified nation with a sense of a common, continuous past. This process is virtually universal, but is particularly apparent in the post-communist states, as they struggle to deal with discontinuous pasts and build legitimacy in the new world order. Elites with different political goals also often have different conceptions of what an ideal usable past should look like, and so the public memories they create can look quite dissimilar. I argued that, in some cases, museum creators used these politically motivated narratives in exhibitions. Small biases are virtually inevitable in all museum exhibitions, even when they seek merely to chronicle the past; some museums, however, appear to contain a large number of public memories that exist to fulfill elites' political goals.

The National Museum, despite its claims to present the official, neutral version of national history, presents a public memory of the past that is conservative, yet not too far from the mainstream. It depicts a narrative of a continuous Hungarian nation that is interrupted only by foreign forces; Nazism and communism are both portrayed as 'foreign,' and exhibit makes no real mention of co-nationals who supported either regime. The exhibit does, however, depict communism in an unusually benign way, which may be a reflection of the leadership of MSzP at the time of the exhibit's creation. The National Museum implicitly suggests a rather inclusive view of national identity, implying that even minorities who assimilate can become true Hungarians.

The House of Terror presents much more nationalist views of the past and national identity. It uses strong victimization rhetoric when discussing both of the 'terror regimes' of the

twentieth century, yet also seems only to include the Holocaust as a yardstick against which to measure the (comparatively worse) crimes of the communists. The creation of the museum was, in many ways, a political tactic, as the right nationalist Fidesz constructed the House of Terror right before the 2002 elections—the museum implies that Fidesz’s MSZP opponents and the communists who took part in ‘terror’ are one and the same. The House of Terror presents a rather exclusive conception of national identity and suggests that only the right nationalists (and particularly Orbán) can lead the Hungarian nation toward modernity and democracy.

The Holocaust Memorial Center presents a much more liberal view of national history than the other two museums. The HDKE marked a turning point in Hungarian public memory, as the exhibit explicitly recognizes national responsibility for the Holocaust. It discounts the victimization rhetoric and scapegoating utilized by the other two museums, arguing that many Hungarians accommodated and even collaborated with the disenfranchisement and eventual deportation of Hungarian Jews. This museum suggests a very inclusive version of national identity, as it emphasizes the idea that the Holocaust is a part of *Hungarian* history, not just Jewish history; Jews are true Hungarians. As MSZP Prime Minister Medgyessy stated at the opening ceremony of the museum, “...this heinous crime was committed by Hungarians against Hungarians.” This liberal narrative of the national past has, however, been challenged in the last year, as Fidesz apparently wishes to remove any mention of national responsibility from public memory.

All in all, this thesis suggests that Hungarian historical museums tend to present rather conservative and nationalist public memories of the past. These memories serve to imply a sense of continuity of the nation, which has generally only been interrupted by the encroachment of foreign forces. More recent public memories have challenged this view of the past, arguing that

Hungarians should acknowledge historical discontinuities, however difficult that process might be. Right nationalist forces, however, have largely discounted these new liberal views, mainly by implying that Hungary in fact does not hold responsibility for the Holocaust. These controversies are unlikely to disappear anytime soon, and in fact may worsen as the new constitution, and perhaps new Fidesz-inspired legislation, is implemented. The politics of memory will continue to play an important role in Hungary. As this thesis has shown, the past can be a powerful political tool. It is important to understand and keep these politically inspired narratives in mind, especially with regards to contemporary Hungary, where democracy may be at risk.

This thesis has been limited by several factors. For one, the unfortunate fact that I do not speak Hungarian has surely affected my analysis. I relied on the English translations of exhibits, guidebooks, and other scholarly works, and it is always possible that nuances and certain meanings have been lost in translation. It is also impossible to determine with absolute certainty the political dynamics surrounding the creation of each museum; I have argued that political considerations *did* play a role in creating exhibitions that display certain narratives of the past. However, without access to documents detailing actions that took place behind the scenes in creating museums, we cannot be sure of the role of political interests in public memory creation. Further examination of these museums—and the interests that affected them—could continue perhaps indefinitely. I have been limited to presenting a relatively short account of these fascinating sites of memory.

This thesis has argued that Hungarian elites affect public memories in museums according to their own political interests and desires to create usable, continuous pasts. The next step in understanding the dynamic between power, memory, and identity would be to examine the *reception* of these memories. This thesis has only examined the memories created and

presented within the museums, but has not addressed their resonance within society. Although people tend to accept the narratives represented in museums, we do not know whether Hungarians believe the memories in these museums—or rather, *which* memories they might accept, as the narratives presented in each museum often contradict one another. The predominant public memory may be quite conservative, especially with Fidesz’s new narratives of the past, but this thesis leaves us unaware of how this memory resonates with the public. A continuation of this thesis, and a topic for further study, might ask the (inevitably complicated and contested) question: to what extent do people accept these public memories?

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