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Pető, Andrea

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# The Lost and Found Library

## Paradigm Change in the Memory of the Holocaust in Hungary

Andrea Pető,  
Central European University, Budapest

L'article examine les dilemmes politiques auxquels les organisations juives hongroises ont dû faire face pendant l'année de commémoration de l'Holocauste, en 2014, et illustre le changement de paradigme le plus récent dans la mémoire de l'Holocauste en Hongrie, faisant valoir que le respect international de celle-ci par le gouvernement actuel peut être aussi un moyen efficace de susciter un changement de paradigme au niveau national. Cela prouve également que les lois mémorielles conformes aux normes internationales peuvent être facilement détournées.

**Mots-clés:** Hongrie, politique mémorielle illibérale, révisionnisme de l'Holocauste, géopolitique, double occupation, changement de paradigme.



How could one possibly chance upon a library of tens of thousands of volumes in the basement of a functioning scientific institution? On September 16, 2014, the Budapest University of Jewish Studies discovered a complete collection of books of Holocaust victims, who had deposited their personal libraries there before they were forcedly moved to yellow-star houses or deported. The leaders of the University of Jewish Studies assumed that the wide media coverage of the “find” would help them securing government resources to start organizing and structuring the library. They were wrong. The fate of this scattered books illustrates the political dilemmas Hungarian Jewish organizations had to counter during the “Holocaust Memorial Year” in 2014, when the government organized commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Shoah. Furthermore, it illustrates that international compliance with Holocaust remembrance can be at the same time an effective way of initiating a paradigm change on the national level. It also proves that memory laws complying with the international standards can be easily hijacked. Unlike in Poland when a new law was passed denying any Polish collaboration in the Nazi occupation causing international protest in 2017, in Hungary the paradigm change has started earlier and within the already existing memory laws.

### MEMORY POLITICS AS A STRATEGIC POLITICAL WEAPON: “THE DOUBLE OCCUPATION”

In 2010, 2014, and 2018, the right-wing populist Fidesz – in coalition with the Christian Democratic Party (KDNP) – won three consecutive elections. During the past five years Fidesz has been under international pressure to comply with written and unwritten laws, including those related to Holocaust remembrance. Still, the party continues to be very popular inside Hungary and has increased its electoral support considerably (Pető, 2017a, p. 18). This long-term victory has several reasons. I wish to analyse how the politics of memory of this illiberal state contributed to the consolidation of Fidesz’s political power.

In the past years, political scientists and analysts scrutinizing this impressive series of electoral victories were forced to reconsider not only their analytical toolkit, but also their concepts when trying to understand the new phenomenon of “democratic authoritarianism,” “illiberal state,” or “mafia state”. Together with the Polish sociologist Weronika Grzebalska, we compared the cases of Hungary and Poland, and based on our findings we argued that we are facing a new form of governance, which stems from the failures of globalized (neo)liberal democracy (Grzebalska & Pető, 2017, 2018). Based on its *modus operandi*, we called this regime an “illiberal polypore state,” because as a parasite, it feeds on the vital resources of the previous



political system, but at the same time actively contributes to its decay by setting up parallel institutions and channeling resources to them. The polypore state works within the framework of what is referred to as “mnemonic security” by controlling hegemonic forms of remembrance (Mäliksoo). The translation of history and its application, as well as the identity-shaping effect of these manoeuvres become geopolitical factors (Pető, 2017b). This is especially true about the memory of the Second World War.

After 1989, along with the revision of progressive political traditions, anti-communism, fuelled by the persecutions which took place during the Soviet occupation, became the foundation of the emerging political discourses within the former Eastern Bloc countries (Pető, 2017c). Meanwhile, the various states have concealed how far they were historically involved in the system in order to prove that they were merely victims.

Because of the failure of the Hungarian political system, two armies occupied Hungary: the German army on March 19, 1944, following the unsuccessful Hungarian peace conferences and Romania's successful change of sides; then from the autumn of 1944, the Red Army too. For a long time the German and the Soviet occupations were discussed independently from each other in Hungarian historiography. The Germans, who were Hungary's allies, basically entered the country without facing any resistance, and for that reason the German occupation was later often discussed in the framework of political and diplomatic history. But the long Soviet occupation, during which much blood was spilled, was rather analyzed as part of the newly built political system, communism. This categorization was then challenged by the theory of “double occupation” which, as part of the turn in memory politics of the early 2000s, was meant to revive the myth of Hungarian victimhood and thus avoid the uncomfortable questions about Hungarian responsibility during the Second World War. The Hungarian Holocaust memorialization is challenged by two thorny political issues. The first one is the chronology: when did the persecution of Jews start? Before the German occupation with the *numerus clausus* law in 1920 and the anti-Jewish legislation of 1938, or just after the German occupation of 19<sup>th</sup> March 1944? And when did the persecution end? In 1945, as the anti-fascist narratives states, or in 1948 as the revisionist rhetoric claims, since the communist Hungarian state persecuted Jews while fighting against religion? The question of chronology is also related to the second question about the responsibility of the Hungarian state in the persecutions.

Before the 2004 European Union enlargement, the new member states, including the Visegrád 4 countries and the Baltic States, had successfully lobbied for the acceptance of the Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism. It was expected to counterbalance the Holocaust Memorial Day, created a built-in fracture in the memory culture of Europe, and invisibilized the collaboration of Eastern European

national elites with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In Hungary both memorial days were accepted in 2000, during the first Fidesz government. The theoretical frame of all these different national memory strategies, which are founded on national victimhood, and blame Nazi Germany and the Soviets for all the traumas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is “repressive erasure” – a memory frame based on exclusion (Connerton, 2008, p 60-61). Now particularism was inserted in a system originally based on universalism.

In 2011 the Hungarian Parliament accepted the Fundamental Law of Hungary replacing the Constitution. The Preamble (*National Confession* in the English translation) states: “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 organ of popular representation was formed.” With this Hungary caught up with other former communist states that after the end of the Cold War started to promote the memory of “double occupation,” and to increasingly rely on the concept of victimhood in their memory politics (Lim, 2018). In this context memorial years also serve as litmus tests. The 2014 commemoration of 1944, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary, illustrates the process of how the illiberal polypore state redefines memory politics and gains national and international support at the same time.

## HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

The paradigm of “double occupation” equates the trauma of the Soviet occupation with that of the German occupation (Pető 2014). Political debates turn into debates about the past; in other words: instead of talking about their party's programs, politicians debate various interpretations of history. This of course suits the interest of the polypore state, because in the meantime it can dynamically develop its system of institutions. The change of paradigm also takes place within those international organizations that were meant to protect the previous paradigm. In 2014, right before the national elections, the Hungarian government could not risk losing the Chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which it assumed precisely to be able to foster the new turn in memory politics on the international level. This turn nationalized the international framework, as well as secured the position of Hungarian victimhood in the international discourse.

The designers of the Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year started from the foundational premises of transnational memory politics: that memory has power and that silence is not an alternative. Thus they decided to focus on discourse instead, and began to regulate it in accordance with their political interests. Next, a battle evolved for the power over the discourse of memory politics. However, in the meantime through the Civil Alap (Civic Fund), a public



Le mémorial des victimes de l'invasion allemande, place de la Liberté à Budapest, édifié par le gouvernement de V. Orban en 2014 et immédiatement dénoncé comme occultant les responsabilités hongroises dans l'extermination de plus d'un demi-million de Juifs, qui constituent l'écrasante majorité des victimes de l'occupation nazie en 1944.

fund established to finance the Memorial Year, the Hungarian government offered monetary support to Hungarian Jewish communities in order to develop and propagate its narrative of the Holocaust in Hungary. I.e. the actors of the Memorial Year engaged with the symbolic battle – and real power struggle – for the control over the discourse of Holocaust memory with very different plans and resources.

What we remember is always determined by our cultural framework, moral sensitivity, and political interests. Forgiveness can happen only if it is interconnected with remembrance. The survivor becomes the subject of the process only when he has the power to forgive the state for the crime it has committed. The long-term aim would be to establish a "shared memory," a framework within which the survivors' stories could be told as they were meant to be told before the act of recognition takes place. During the Holocaust Memorial Year the main actors of the process: the government, the Jewish organizations, the civil sphere, and the historians, were all internally divided by duels of interest (Gyáni). The events of the Memorial Year as well as the related decisions all took place on multiple levels.

## THE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL YEAR

There has been a considerable amount of scientific publications, primarily in English, analyzing the Memorial Year based on its media coverage (Kovács & Mindler-Steiner). The articles thus mainly focused on the Hungarian government's historical revisionist attempts and the resistance that followed; and relatedly, they discussed the failure of the whole Memorial Year project. What I claim is that the Memorial Year brought fundamental changes into the Hungarian memory politics of the Holocaust independently from the first major, organized resistance of Hungarian Jewish communities against the state since 1945.

The Janus-faced, double performance of the government during the Memorial Year (i.e. that on the international stage they made speeches befitting all international expectations and standards, like the speech of President Áder during the March of the Living in Auschwitz on 29 April, 2014, while their actions in Hungary pointed in exactly the opposite direction) leads different experts to different conclusions. The most widespread explanation was that with the 2014 elections approaching, Fidesz tried to reach out to the voters of far-right Jobbik, and used a historical revisionist governmental rhetoric in memory politics, which is unparalleled in Hungarian history since 1945.

However, these interpretations were entirely misguided. In hindsight it is clearly perceptible that the master plan was to change the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary, not independently from the worldwide illiberal turn, which was fuelled by the 2008 financial, security and migration crisis. This was the turn which placed memory politics in a national security framework.

In his July 4, 2014 speech, Minister of Defence Csaba Hende stated that the goal of the Memorial Year was that the Shoah would "take its place in national history," adding: "may the Eternal help us." This summarizes both the pre-existent framework and the intrinsic goals of the Memorial Year: to replace the international and supranational framing of the Holocaust with a national one, and its laic framework with a sacral one. The placement of the Shoah into a national frame would not be problematic in itself (see the recent shifts in Poland); however, the way it happened exemplifies the memory politics of the illiberal state, which actively reinterprets the post-1945 consensus about the Holocaust.

The Holocaust narrative was conceived during the cold war, which, besides determining its characteristics, also elevated the moral command of "Never Again" into a



measure of universal integrity. The memory politics of the European Union is built on a positive notion, namely: that learning from the past is a process through which a negative experience may become a positive force. Consequently, European citizens should comply with democratic values and reject everything that led to the Holocaust – which, according to Frank Furedi is a “therapeutic censorship [which] both patronizes and infantilizes people” (Furedi, p. 132). International organizations, like the IHRA, established in 2000 with the Stockholm Declaration, supervise whether individual states are committed to these values in their education, in their museums, and when organizing events. Though these values are foundational for the EU, presently it is mostly a question of power whether the European memory politics can be further sustained.

The Hungarian Fidesz-KDNP government’s take is exactly the opposite of the “Never Again” paradigm; however, as a typical illiberal polypore state, they also used that memory discourse whenever it was necessary, but to further their own political aims. When they rejected the “Never Again” discourse, they did so, arguing that it is a tool of “western hegemony.” Therefore, one aim of the government with the Memorial Year – and in accordance with its general freedom fighter rhetoric – was to establish its own Holocaust terminology. In a related experiment, a historian on the government’s payroll, Sándor Szakály, the director of the Veritas Historical Research Institute, the flagship institute for the government’s memory politics, attempted to introduce the expression “police action against aliens” for the July-August 1941 deportation of 18 000 foreign Jews to Kamenets-Podolsk, where they were murdered by the Nazis. Certainly, further battles will follow, but in the long run the government’s “cacophonic memory” politics will result in the nationalization of the Hungarian Holocaust narrative without acknowledging the Hungarian collaboration (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger).

Another aim of the government with the Memorial Year was to popularize the discourse of remembrance, so that the related questions would not only be discussed by historians but also by the broader national community – it followed the same strategy in 2016 concerning the Memorial Year of the 1956 revolution (Pető, 2017b). This is exemplified by projects financed by the government: companies and institutions that had never dealt with Holocaust education or research before receiving considerable financial support, while other (experienced) entities disappeared; and even the sole, state-funded Holocaust institution, the Holocaust Memorial Centre, only applied for a modest sum. The “lost and found library” got no monetary support either. Beforehand, there was a consensus among historians about the framework and discourse of Hungarian Holocaust research. By opening up the framework of remembrance, the government questioned this monopoly of knowledge and gave impetus to a series of debates that were not void of personal collisions.

The literature on how post-1945 antifascist rhetoric invisibilized Jewish identity and the Jews as a group could itself fill a library. In the antifascist memory rhetoric, the survivors are all victims, while the perpetrators are forgotten. Hungarian Holocaust research did not integrate into international scholarship after 1989 either. Instead, Hungarian researchers used concepts and terminologies imported from the west, that is: from a different context. The construction of national remembrance coincides with nation-building, therefore the historical narrative should support the latter. The Hungarian government needed a narrative with a beginning and an ending, closed and complete with only one interpretation. And this led to the greatest conflict in recent history between the Jewish communities and the government.

On April 28, 2014, Tibor Navracsics, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Public Administration and Justice stated: “After having processed the tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having learned from the tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we should move on to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” That the Holocaust would be something that can be ended and closed into the past is the diametric opposite of the memory continuity of the “Never Again” model. Essentially, the survivors and the Jewish community felt that this attempt on closure was a dismissal of their memories. This was the foundation of the global Holocaust narrative as well as of the European human rights paradigm, which separated from the history of the war. This was the continuity that the government wanted to disrupt. As a result, the MAZSIHISZ, the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities, boycotted the state commemorations from February to October 2014. It demanded the termination of the House of Fates project; the removal of the Memorial of the Victims of German Occupation; and the rescinding of the appointment of Sándor Szakály, the director of the government funded Veritas Historical Research Institute.

### THE RESULTS OF THE CHANGE OF PARADIGM

Was there a new, particularly Hungarian memory politics created during the Memorial Year? The premises were unique: the second largest community of Jewish survivors in Europe; the lack of Hungarian Holocaust researchers in the international research community; the invisibilizing effect of communist memory politics; and the construction of the illiberal state. Poland started the nationalization of the Holocaust narrative much earlier, with the establishment of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. It is no surprise that since it came to government the PiS focuses on the Second World War and the remembrance of communism in the battles around memory politics and prevents conferences and exhibits that would tackle the issue of Polish collaboration or anti-Semitism.

The Hungarian government canonized the narrative of “double occupation,” thus relegating all responsibility to



the occupying forces. It is not simple to place the dark patches of the past into the ethnocentric memory politics, especially when there are competing remembrances. There is no narrative that could harmonize national historiography and the memories of the various groups of survivors. Memory has multiple levels, and the local, regional, national and transnational memories together create a multi-coloured patchwork. However, all this is embedded in political processes, therefore some memories stand a better chance of becoming dominant. The new polypore states supported a very particular narrative, but its success was also due to the weakness of those who were supposed to represent antifascist logic.

Currently the Memorial of the Victims of German Occupation is still erect. The obelisk commemorating the victims of Soviet occupation was placed in Óbuda, possibly due to Russian state pressure, although originally the two were meant to symbolize the "double occupation" narrative in harmony with the current government's historical interpretation. The Veritas Institution is still active under the leadership of its government-appointed director, Sándor Szakály. On August 27, 2015, Szakály together with the representatives of the MAZSIHISZ placed a wreath on the memorial at Kamianets-Podilskyi, to the event, which a few months before, he had termed a "police action against aliens" instead of deportation and mass murder.

The House of Fates, a state museum for child victims of the Holocaust, which was also a subject of discussion during the boycott, is scheduled to open in 2019, without any public or professional discussion about its contents. The House of Dialogues, which was designed as its alternative, seems to be another stalled project. The Jewish Communal Roundtable, which was to handle the conflicts that emerged during the Memorial Year, has held no meetings since. Nevertheless, the reconstruction of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries has picked up steam (there are close to 1 600 Jewish cemeteries in Hungary), even though this is hardly in concordance with the government claims to reach out to the youth so that they can experience their Jewish identity as a positive feature.

There are some positive results: Ferenc Koszorus (1899-1974) had his statue unveiled in the Military History Institute, but he did not enter historiography as the saviour of Budapest Jewry – this fictitious narrative remained within the confines of right-wing militarist subculture. The version that Horthy saved the greatest number of Hungarian Jews also failed to become part of the mainstream. Bálint Hóman (1885-1951), a historian and politician convicted for war crimes has no sculpture yet, although his rehabilitation was the major demand of revisionist historians. During the Memorial Year there were many lectures, screenings and other events about the Holocaust, books, films and exhibits. The exact amount spent by the state for organizing the Memorial Year has never been disclosed.

Everyone eagerly expected the end of the Memorial Year.

The government achieved its goals, which could have been put at risk by any further publicity. Jewish organizations were content with the government support that steadily arrived for preserving synagogues and cemeteries. The civil organizations were also content because it had become clear that government resources can be tapped only through institutionalised Jewish organizations, which had a strong agenda setting effect; the international research community stepped up against the Hungarian government's successful intervention into the consensus in memory politics. Fresh, thought provoking artistic projects or commemorative forms were painfully missing from the Memorial Year which was focusing on documenting the loss and confine the memory of the Holocaust to the gone past. And we have not heard about the "lost and found library" since. /

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