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The Hungarian Radical Right and Holocaust Memory

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“[It is] probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the history of the world.”

- Winston Churchill after learning of the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz.

Preface

While an academic work may not include every piece of evidence the author found, the reader should have faith that the author omitted evidence because it was unnecessary, not because he or she missed it. I do not speak Hungarian, nor have I ever been to Hungary, so I cannot make that promise. I found plenty of sources in English (some of which were translated from Hungarian), but it is only a fraction of what exists. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán once opined: “in order to understand a country one not only needs knowledge of the language, but one must also be familiar with the culture... Those who don’t have such a cultural insight will hardly be able to give a reliable and serious opinion on the political debates in another country.”¹ While this is a perfectly reasonable statement there are a few caveats.

First, the Hungarian radical right’s historiography is part of a transnational movement that whitewashes memory of historical oppressors. In Russia, a majority believes that Stalin was a better leader than Gorbachev, and the government glorifies him for his leadership during World War II.² In Poland the government has moved to criminalize scholarly discussion of Polish complicity in the Holocaust. Orbán’s Hungary is a particular version of a wider phenomenon that I have sought to understand. In the United States a portrait of Andrew Jackson—the architect of the Trail of Tears—sat in President Trump’s oval office. The Trump administration also sought to rewrite the history of North American slavery and instill young Americans with a “patriotic education.” The populist radical right is flourishing not only across Europe and North America

¹ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme “Good Morning Hungary,” The Prime Minister, Website of the Hungarian Government, May 8 2020, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-15/>.

² David Masci, “In Russia, nostalgia for Soviet Union and positive feelings about Stalin,” Fact Tank, Pew Research Center, June 29, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/29/in-russia-nostalgia-for-soviet-union-and-positive-feelings-about-stalin/>.

but across the globe—in Modi’s India, Bolsonaro’s Brazil, and Erdogan’s Turkey, to name just a few places. Although I do not bring personal experience with Hungarian public history to the table, I am a student of the radical right phenomenon more generally, particularly how it has manifested itself here in the United States.

The second caveat is that although the Hungarian government claims to be turning inward—allegedly to focus on its own heritage and culture for political inspiration—it is seeking at the same time to be emblematic; its political model and historical revisionism are for export. In Hungary, monuments which revive the right-wing interwar regime and its beliefs tower over tourist sites. The House of Terror, Hungary’s national museum devoted to the victims of fascism and communism, sees hundreds of thousands of visitors yearly, many of them international. The museum rejects the common perception that while fascism was evil in conception, communism was only a miscalculation to serve its message on the insidious nature of leftism. In the words of Dovid Katz, an expert on “double-genocide” historiography, “As the number of Holocaust survivors and children of survivors dwindles each year, the new paradigm is ever more easily transferred to the West by the many thousands who have been exposed to these Eastern European museums... to those of non-Jewish background, visits often lead to the idea that Soviet crimes represented the bulk of what is called genocide in the area.”³ Hungary’s historical revisionism is significant internationally regardless of an individual’s familiarity with Hungarian history, culture, and politics because it seeks to alter assumptions about twentieth-century atrocity across the world.

³ Dovid Katz, “Is Eastern European ‘Double Genocide’ Revisionism Reaching Museums?” *Dapim: Studies in Holocaust* (2016), 12-13.

Finally, we should push back against the Prime Minister's assertion that one must be geographically and culturally embedded in the issues they debate. The historical discipline by its nature removes evidence from its context, and while political actors are motivated by their interests, it is the role of the historian to take a more bird's-eye view of a matter. This is not to say that I approach the debate without biases, but that I can be open about how they impact my arguments. Indeed, while I consider myself a liberal, the fact that I have no personal stake in Hungarian politics helps me to frame the radical right's views in a way that is fair to them, rather than rejecting them outright.

Definition of Terms

I define the radical right as the space on the political spectrum between the moderate right—such as Angela Merkel and Mitt Romney, and the extreme right—for example, neo-Nazis. The extreme right believes in an openly racist state and rejects “the essence of democracy.”⁴ But the radical right—the focus of this thesis— “accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers.”⁵ For example, the radical right in Germany and Hungary often call for popular referendums to protest immigration. According to the radical right, majority rule should be strong enough to overrule the civil liberties of minorities. While the extreme right is often violent, the radical right aspires to gain power by democratic means. However, through its populism the radical right can erode the underpinnings of democracy.

⁴ Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 7.

⁵ Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, 7.

To understand populism, we can contrast it against pluralism which holds that disagreement is healthy and politicians should tolerate opposing views. The 2008 presidential race in which Barak Obama and John McCain treated each other as political adversaries as opposed to hated enemies is an example of pluralism. Populism, on the other hand, “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.”⁶ The radical right is populist because it holds that liberals are not only misguided but morally corrupt. Donald Trump’s descriptions of a liberal “deep-state” or “swamp” are populist, as are the Hungarian radical right’s accusations that George Soros wants to destroy Hungary’s independence for his financial gain. Populists argue that they channel a national will which all true members of the nation endorse. Parties that disagree are illegitimate. While populists claim to be democratic, they attack the pluralistic underpinnings of liberal democracy, such as the independence of constitutional courts, higher education, and the media.

The Hungarian populist radical right’s main policies and actions include:

1. Expansion of government power into the media
2. Anti-separation of powers through constitutional changes
3. Anti-independence of higher education
4. Anti-immigration/Islamophobia
5. Fostering diplomatic and trade relations with authoritarian states

⁶ Cas Mudde, *On Extremism and Democracy in Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 68.

6. Promoting an ethnic understanding of Hungarian national membership through historiography and policy.
7. Euroscepticism

Introduction: The Sixth Coffin

1989 was an eruption rivaled in hope and turmoil in contemporary history only by the Arab Spring of 2011. From Tiananmen Square to the graves of the Ceaușescu in Romania, and the crumbling Berlin Wall, communist subjects chanted for the end of dictators.

In that year, a young Viktor Orbán spoke before a crowd gathered in Budapest's Hero's Square to memorialize the murder of Hungary's most prominent dissidents and rebury their remains. Among those to be honored was Imre Nagy, a liberal-minded communist who had been executed by the Soviet-backed Kádár regime in the aftermath of the 1956 revolution. Though the regime that executed him remained in power, in 1989 it was unwilling to stamp out the coming revolution without Soviet military backing. Hungary's prominent dissidents shifted uncomfortably when the young and largely unknown Orbán approached the phalanx of microphones. They were on the cusp of a revolution without violence or Soviet intervention, but Orbán's Fidesz party had spent the night before taunting the Soviet embassy: "Your visa has expired! Russians go home!"⁷

Long-haired, Orbán wore no necktie to emphasize the party's youth. Although there were five dead dissidents at the ceremony, there were six coffins: the final one was symbolically reserved for the nameless young people tyrannized by the communists after 1956. "It was in fact then, in 1956," Orbán declared, when our youth was taken away from us "by the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party."⁸ While the liberal dissidents had cooperated with the communist party to affect a transition, Orbán mocked the aged party-men for attending the reburial of the men

⁷ "Hungary Twenty Years Ago: The Rise of Viktor Orbán," Hungarian Spectrum, June 21, 2009. <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2009/06/21/hungary-twenty-years-ago-the-rise-of-viktor-orban/>.

⁸ "1989 - Orbán Viktor Nagy Imre újratemetésén - Viktor Orbán's Speech at the Reburial of Imre Nagy," GeneralForgeron, April 24, 2020, Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g91-OTiXVkw>.

they had murdered: “we do not understand that those leaders of the party and the state, who have ordered our education from the books that have falsified the revolution, are almost stampeding each other to touch these caskets as a lucky talisman of sorts.”⁹ To Orbán, the smooth transition threatened his goal for Hungary’s complete break with the old regime and repudiation of the communist system, and he sought to enrage the crowd before the revolution’s tension subsided completely into the work of forming a new government.



*Viktor Orbán speaking in Hero's Square 16 June 1989.*¹⁰

It wasn't until 2010 that Hungary finally experienced its “revolution at the ballot box” when, following the left-wing government’s failure to ameliorate the effects of the 2008 Financial Crisis, Fidesz was voted into executive and legislative power with a two-thirds supermajority.¹¹ Hungary’s Prime Minister since 2010, Viktor Orbán ensured Fidesz’ longevity by stacking Hungary’s constitutional court with loyalists, modifying the constitution, attacking the independence of higher education, and using crony tactics to starve out and purchase opposition media. In the words of political scientist Michael Ignatieff, it is one of history’s

⁹ “Viktor Orbán's Speech at the Reburial of Imre Nagy.”

¹⁰ <http://budapestbeacon.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/orban.png>.

¹¹ Rosa Schwartzburg and Imre Szijarto, “When Orbán was a Liberal,” *Jacobin*, July 24, 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/07/viktor-orban-fidesz-party-youth-activism>.

greatest “curveballs” that right wing authoritarianism emerged from liberal anti-communism.¹²

However, in hindsight perhaps we should have seen the seeds of Orbán’s authoritarianism in his desire to manipulate the past at the end of the Cold War.

Unlike Donald Trump’s murky allusion to a time when America was “great,” the Hungarian radical right’s construction of the past is crystal clear, prominent, and sophisticated. It exists in museums and statues; politicians refer to specific dates and historical figures. The government’s historiography articulates and distorts the past to serve political ends; its presentation of the Holocaust serves its nationalist narrative in which foreign empires robbed Hungary of its sovereignty, taking away its historical agency and threatening to destroy its identity. Fidesz’ historiography finds support in public intellectuals, including PhD historians such as Mária Schmidt and Sándor Szakály. Fidesz’s government spokesman, Zoltán Kovács, is a former historian and Prime Minister Orbán has studied law, Political Science, and holds a Master’s Degree. The misguided nature but internal coherence of the radical right demands that we engage with its views seriously rather than dismissing them out of hand. The main goals of my thesis are to contextualize the government’s presentation of twentieth-century Hungarian history against academic findings and to understand how the government’s framing serves to justify its radical-right wing positions, namely its nationalism, Euroscepticism, and Islamophobia.

In Chapter 1, I examine the 2002 House of Terror Museum in Budapest which focuses on the impact of Hungary’s “double-occupation” in 1944-1945 by Nazi Germany and the Red Army. The House of Terror uses the historical authenticity of its building as a center for both

¹² “Orban in Hungary: The Rise of Populism,” VPRO Documentary, September 21, 2018, Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBvDrJQfi50>.

fascist and communist forces at different times to metaphorically convey their similarity. In doing so, it served the government's 2002 portrayal of the past in which fascism and communism posed a twin threat to Hungary's independence and internal unity, depriving Hungary of its agency during the Holocaust. The House of Terror emphasizes that the communist government indoctrinated Hungarians with the Marxist ideal that nationality and culture are impediments to social progress. It therefore portrays Hungarians as victims of totalitarianism and internationalism, and frames Christian nationalism as the antidote to Hungary's twentieth-century ills.

Chapter 2 examines two government projects during its proclaimed Holocaust Memorial Year of 2014: a sculpture memorializing the victims of German occupation, and a new Holocaust museum, "The House of Fates." Right wing historians used the events to claim that Hungary had reconciled with its Jews and, by accepting the Jews into the Hungarian national community, had completed the "love-story" between Jews and Magyars which began with their legal emancipation in 1867. In doing so, the radical right's narrative overlooked the role of Hungarian nationalism in ostracizing the Jewish community prior to the German invasion of 1944, which was a pre-condition for the horrific scale of the Hungarian Holocaust. While claiming to extend its welcoming hand to the contemporary Jewish community, the government neglects to confront the underpinnings of the interwar right which fueled anti-Semitism.

Chapter 3 analyzes the government's 2020 commemoration of the Treaty of Trianon's centenary, in which the victorious allies of World War I divided the Austro-Hungarian Empire into independent nation-states and stripped the Hungarian Kingdom of much of its traditional lands. Fidesz interprets Trianon as evidence that Western Europe viewed and continues to view Hungary with colonial condescension as a territory whose borders and demography it has the

right to redraw. Naming 2020 the Year of National Unity, Fidesz leaders often described a continuity with the Trianon past by claiming to defend Hungary from Western European imperialism's new manifestations: liberalism and multiculturalism. The radical right maintains that in the face of territorial dismemberment followed by half a century of Nazi and Soviet domination, Hungarian national unity must remain indestructible, and to that end Hungarians must take pride in their heritage and culture. The radical right pedestalizes nationalism as the invisible fabric which holds Hungarians together, even when they reside across borders. Acknowledgement of collective guilt for the Holocaust is impossible because it requires Fidesz to interrogate the historic cost of Hungarian nationalism.

This thesis studies how the radical right instrumentalizes—indeed weaponizes—historiography in service of its nationalism. In the words of Holocaust historian Timothy Snyder, “It is easy to sanctify policies or identities by the deaths of the victims. It is less appealing, but more morally urgent, to understand the actions of the perpetrators. The moral danger, after all, is never that one might become a victim but that one might be a perpetrator or bystander.”¹³ The radical right frames twentieth-century perpetrators as a small cadre of villainous Nazis whose perspectives are so unlike ours that they are only worthy of study insofar as they reveal the scale of Hungarian trauma. It also claims that there is an inherent danger in studying collective guilt for the Holocaust because it subverts national pride. By focusing on the moral evil of perpetrators and the purity of victims, who it construes as almost all Hungarians, the radical right precludes debate about the consequences of prejudice in Hungarian society today. This historiography manifests in policy, creating real-world consequences for the thousands of refugees fleeing to Europe from Middle Eastern conflicts.

¹³ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York, Basic Books, 2010), 400.

Chapter 1 - *Terror Háza*: Leftism as Terror

In 2002 Fidesz funded *Terror Háza*, or “The House of Terror” museum, designed by a government ally and historian, Mária Schmidt, which documents and memorializes the Hungarian experience of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Its building, 60 Andrassy, looms over the historic Andrassy Boulevard in Budapest. As the museum describes, the building cast a shadow in the minds of Hungarians during the fascist and communist periods, notorious as a base for the Arrow Cross in the interwar period, and eventually for the communist secret police.¹⁴ Today, a black eave etched with cutouts casts the word “Terror,” alongside the Soviet star and Hungarian Nazi cross onto an artificial shadow. The display preserves the building’s historical infamy and prevents its nineteenth-century architecture—ubiquitous along Andrassy Boulevard—from melting into its charming surroundings.¹⁵ Within the House of Terror visitors walk through dark rooms with dramatic lighting, music, and atmospheric scenery designed to produce a guttural response.¹⁶

The instruments on display within the House of Terror are words and propaganda posters. The museum claims that physical violence is not the sole essence of terror, though there was plenty of that to be had during the communist years: “I never imagined that a man of 56 could be so severely beaten, kicked, tortured with all sorts of instruments, drugged by injections so that he

¹⁴ “Reconstructed Prison Cells,” House of Terror Museum, Accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/allando-kiallitas/basement/reconstructed-prison-cells>.

¹⁵ The museum’s director, Maria Schmidt, writes: “We made the building reminding us of state-perpetrated crimes in two totalitarian regimes conspicuous in its environment by architectural means so that it become visible for all that this had been the house of fear. We cut the symbols of both of the dictatorships and the word “terror” into the wide cornice so that the sun cast a shadow forming these marks on the gray walls of the house. A shadow that once darkened our everyday lives.” (https://schmidtmaria.hu/eloadasok-beszedekek/v/eloadasok_the_democratization_of_kn/)

¹⁶ Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 68.

could be deprived of his will-power.” However, the museum devotes the most space to the abstract terror of the twentieth century which laid siege to Hungarian identity:

Whether at work or during free time, people were required to show their belief in the system. Before work, joint half-hour readings of the Party’s central newspaper, ‘Free People’ were held to deepen ideological identity... The Hungarian coat of arms was also modified. Instead of the Hungarian national anthem, people had to sing the Socialist Internationale... Those citizens who did not show enough enthusiasm risked being reported by the ever-present informer. Everyone learned how to whisper since they feared being overheard or bugged. Terror overshadowed daily life.¹⁷

Violence, the museum claims, was only one mean of instilling Hungarians with terror. Against the context of 9/11, it claims that “terror” is not only the domain of Muslim extremists, but European politicians and bureaucrats who proclaimed the benefits of socialism.



*Exterior of the House of Terror.*¹⁸

¹⁷ “Everyday Life,” House of Terror Museum, Accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/allando-kiallitas/first_floor/everyday-life.

¹⁸ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a9/Budapest_Haus_des_Terrors.jpg.

The Museum's Political Context

When Viktor Orbán's Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) rose to power in 1998, Hungary was suffering economically from its transition to democratic capitalism eight years earlier. The center-right Magyar Democratic Forum (MDF) had governed from 1990-1994 and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) from 1994 to 1998. József Antall, the Prime Minister of the MDF government and his MSZP successor, Gyula Horn, were both born in 1932. By contrast, Viktor Orbán was born in 1963. Seeing youth as symbolic of a departure from Hungary's past, the rural and largely working class Fidesz had once placed an age limit of thirty-five years on party membership. In its rhetoric, although Hungarians had defeated communism in 1990, Fidesz's 1998 victory marked a second revolution: a new government not implicated by the immense wealth inequality of the post-communist 1990s would lead Hungary. László Kövér, a Fidesz parliamentarian has described the first free parliament in 1990 not as a revolution, but a "great scam."¹⁹

During the communist years, many Hungarians saw independence and political liberty as the keys to a better future. However, after the fall of Hungarian communism in 1990 the state re-privatized industry, agriculture, and finance just as the post-communist world more generally was undergoing economic depression. Many of the powerful were former regime insiders who were well positioned in 1990 to grab state assets for themselves as they were privatized.²⁰ Hungarians continued to feel victimized, though their victimizers were now bankers and financial oligarchs rather than communist bureaucrats. The unemployment rate rose from zero to

¹⁹ "House Speaker Kövér: "This opposition is not part of the Hungarian nation but a servant to that world elite," Hungary Today, April 29, 2020, <https://hungarytoday.hu/kover-interview-opposition-eu-third-reich/>.

²⁰ Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019), 65.

fourteen percent. With the ability to travel freely and access Western media, many Hungarians took out loans from West European banks, many in Swiss francs, to buy new houses which reflected Western living standards. As the Hungarian economy worsened, the Hungarian forint lost its value worldwide and Hungarians' loans in foreign currencies skyrocketed relative to their own; countless Hungarians plummeted into debt.²¹ Under Antall's leadership, many grew to resent the democratic capitalism they had once heralded to solve the Eastern Bloc's problems and had instead brought upheaval and economic disruption.²²

Fidesz campaigned by explaining Hungary's problems in post-communism as endemic to its incomplete transition. In a 2014 speech Orbán described those years: "We constantly felt that the weaker were stepped upon... It was always the stronger party, the bank, which dictated how much interest you pay on your mortgage, changing it as they liked over time."²³ As Hungarian sociologist András Bozóki argues, in response to the short-fallings of the previous two governments Fidesz asserted that citizens should advance the public good by acknowledging "that the government can have a creed in moral, religious and social questions."²⁴ In other words, the best way to transition from communism was not to eliminate government presence in the economy—thus giving free license to oligarchs—but to empower a Hungarian government that represented the authentic people and embraced Hungarian national identity. Bozóki concludes that "This ideology was the 'spiritual revival' of the country... Fidesz – MPP in power not only wanted to address first and foremost the naturally divided political community but aimed at

²¹ Krastev and Holmes, *The Light that Failed*, 65-66.

²² Krastev and Holmes, *The Light that Failed*, 65.

²³ Krastev and Holmes, *The Light that Failed*, 65.

²⁴ Andras Bozoki, "Consolidation or Second Revolution? The Emergence of the New Right in Hungary," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24, Issue No. 2 (April 28, 2008), 197.

reconstructing the cultural – moral community – according to its own values – that existed in the imagination of Hungarians.”²⁵

Viktor Orbán’s youth signified a new beginning for Hungary, and a future in which Hungarian civic responsibility would neither be enforced by a communist dictatorship nor neglected by a weak government but encouraged by young anti-elitists who were proud of Hungary’s national and Christian identity. Fidesz built relationships with conservative and revisionist intellectuals, such as the historian Mária Schmidt, to commemorate this Hungarian renaissance.

Double Occupation

The House of Terror, designed by Prime Minister Orbán’s advisor, Mária Schmidt, is a departure from the quaint history museums that many Americans are familiar with, characterized by well-lit historical artifacts and written text within glass cases. As sociologist Amy Sodaro points out in her book, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, the House of Terror is less concerned with displaying comprehensive information than it is with creating a visceral and emotional experience through art and symbolism.²⁶ It is less important to give a lengthy history lesson, the museum seems to say, than it is that its experience impact the visitor with the terror Hungarians experienced and inflicted on each other in the twentieth century. Merely preserving the instruments of totalitarianism—uniforms, party badges, old telephones etc.—seemed insufficient to convey the sensation of dread produced by the men

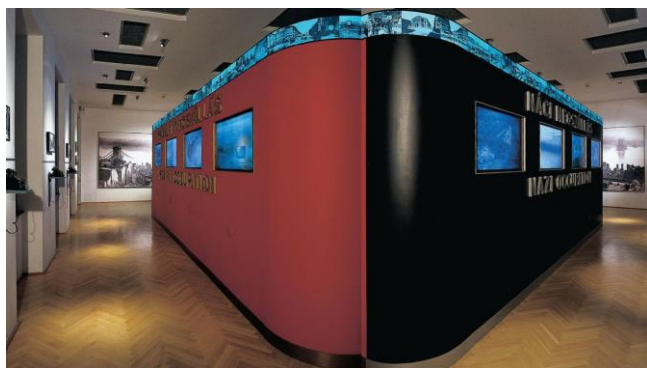
²⁵ Bozoki, “Consolidation or Second Revolution?” 213.

²⁶ Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 70.

who lurked in the building's halls. Visitors to the House of Terror are greeted with black walls, real dungeons, and a booming soundtrack of historical political speeches.

However, when the artifacts no longer speak for themselves, there is potential for a museum to express a director or politician's historiography. Randolph L. Braham, a Holocaust survivor and historian has referred to Fidesz and its intellectual supporters as "history-cleansers" for relativizing the Holocaust to communist oppression. Indeed, the museum's focus on the communist years at the expense of detail on the Holocaust implicitly conveys that communist trauma is more significant in Hungary's historical narrative.

The permanent exhibition of the House of Terror begins with the "Wall of Double Occupation," which is painted black on one side and red on the other. Its design symbolizes that Nazism and communism are two sides of the same coin. The black side of the wall displays footage of Hitler's rallies and images of concentration camps while the red side shows military parades outside the Kremlin in Moscow. Both display dictators with cult-like personalities speaking before seas of soldiers poised to invade Hungary. The exhibit also features footage of Germany and the USSR's foreign ministers, Molotov, and Ribbentrop, signing the 1939 non-aggression pact which included secret plans to divide Poland between them.



*The Wall of Double Occupation.*²⁷

²⁷ https://www.terrorhaza.hu/files/lead_image/image/407/7a98f3124b8c6a422c3e9fd5b205fa95.jpg.

The museum's choice to compare rather than contrast fascism to Soviet communism is not uncommon in Eastern Europe where many argue that Nazism gets disproportionate attention in Western memory. While many Americans learn of the horrors of the twentieth century from a West European perspective, through stories such as Anne Frank, relatively few learn from school or film about the violence the Red Army committed against East European civilians, the deportations of hundreds of thousands to gulags, or the Soviets' violent suppression of resistance in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968). One of the museum's main attractions is a Soviet tank—a symbol of anti-fascist resistance—sitting in a pool of oil before the photographs of Hungarians the Soviets murdered in 1956, reversing the narrative that the Red Army was Europe's liberator.²⁸ The museum argues that historical memory which portrays the Red Army as heroes of the Second World War serves to whitewash the Soviet Union's own attempt to colonize Eastern Europe. From the Hungarian perspective on the battlegrounds of World War II, and the site of brutal occupations by both fascist and communist regimes, for West European liberals to intellectualize the ideologies or to take Marxism-Leninism at its word misses the point of their overall similarities in totalitarianism and violence.

²⁸ Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 70.



Soviet Tank before wall of victims in the House of Terror.²⁹

A quote on the wall from a Hungarian left-wing politician, Imre Kovács, reads: “Last night I dreamt the Germans left and no one stepped in their shoes.”³⁰ By showcasing the Hungarian left’s distrust of Soviet communism, the museum demonstrates that Hungarians almost universally rejected it. It then mirrors that theme in its description of the German invasion of Hungary: “We have clearly stated the date when a foreign super-power provided the circumstances for the creation of a totalitarian dictatorship: March 19th, 1944, the day of Nazi occupation, the day when Hungary lost its independence.”³¹ Without disagreeing with the museum’s assessment of fascism and communism, we should ask why it chooses to foreground that comparison. By emphasizing the foreign and totalitarian nature of fascism and communism, the museum disguises the extent to which the Hungarian government in the interwar era, and its radical right allies, willingly cooperated with Hitler. According to this logic, because

²⁹ https://www.terrorhaza.hu/files/lead_image/image/424/b480086e41c5c4fee392d53de56b795e.jpg.

³⁰ Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 70-71.

³¹ “Second Floor,” House of Terror Museum, Accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/permanent-exhibition/second_floor.

communism and fascism are fundamentally similar—if Hungarians rejected communism, then they must have rejected fascism as well.

Indeed, the museum claims that Hungary lost its sovereignty in spring 1944 with the German invasion which established a “puppet government” under Prime Minister Döme Sztójay. This description belies the fact that the Nazis allowed Hungary’s right-wing leader, Regent Miklós Horthy, to remain in power after the invasion, and that although under German pressure, he constitutionally appointed Hungary’s new fascist ministers. Leading a legally appointed cabinet as a familiar ruler, Regent Miklós Horthy legitimized the far right’s subsequent complicity in the Holocaust. As Randolph L. Braham contends: “Without the unequivocal support of the new, constitutionally appointed government that enjoyed the blessing of Miklós Horthy... the Nazis... would have been severely hampered if not helpless... With Horthy still at the helm and providing the symbol of national sovereignty, the Hungarian police, gendarmerie, and civil service collaborated with the SS in the anti-Jewish drive with a routine and efficiency that impressed even the Germans.”³²

The House of Terror also ignores Hungary’s foreign policy in the 1930s and 1940s which led to its economic vassalage to the Third Reich. Just as Hitler’s Germany emerged from the Great Depression with a booming economy and miniscule unemployment by gearing its workforce towards armament, the Hungarian economy revitalized itself by manufacturing materials for the Nazi war machine. Hungary also aligned itself with Hitler’s belligerent aims by signing the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1939 and lending its railway infrastructure for the German invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941. Eventually, Hungary committed the 2nd Army to the ranks of

³² Randolph L. Braham, “Assault on Historical Memory: Hungarian Nationalists and the Holocaust,” In “Hungary and the Holocaust: Confrontation with the Past,” (Washington DC: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, 2001), 48.

Germany's Army Group South which invaded the Soviet Union. During this period Hungary was indebted to Germany for its arbitration of the 2nd Vienna Award in which Romania returned Transylvania to Hungary. The museum never asks: if the values and governance of Horthy's Hungary were so diametrically opposed to the Nazi totalitarian system, then why was Germany content to allow Horthy to lead Hungary after the occupation? Why was Horthy content to lead



Horthy with Hitler 1938.

under the thumb of Nazi Germany without resisting?

Interwar and World War II Hungary³³

Contradictions and countless what-ifs complicate the narrative of Hungary's international politics in the 1930s and 1940s. One such paradox is that Jews in nations allied with Nazi Germany, like Italy, Romania, and Bulgaria, were more likely to survive than those that resisted it and fell to total occupation. Before spring of 1944, ninety-five percent of Hungary's Jews, Hungary being an axis power at the time, were still alive. Meanwhile over two million Jews in Poland, which had resisted Nazi Germany, were dead.³⁴ Randolph L. Braham has suggested that if the Miklós Kállay administration (1942-1944) had remained a vocal ally of Nazi Germany instead of trying to defect to the Allies, "the Jews of Hungary might possibly have survived the war

³³ Image left:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikl%C3%B3s_Horthy#/media/File:Mikl%C3%B3s_Horthy_and_Adolf_Hitler_1938.jpg.

³⁴ Istvan Deak, "A Fatal Compromise? The Debate over Collaboration and Resistance in Hungary," In *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath*, ed. Istvan Deak, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 54.

relatively unscathed.”³⁵ Indeed, by trying—and failing—to negotiate with the Allies behind Hitler’s back Hungary provided Germany with the pretext to invade it. However, once Germany controlled Hungary, the government’s complicity convinced Hitler and Eichmann that they could carry out the Final Solution without diverting military resources from the battlefield against the USSR. Historians are faced with a contradiction: by showing dissent to German authority, Hungary invited its own occupation. Simultaneously, its apparent willingness to collaborate with the occupying German forces following the invasion convinced Hitler that deporting Hungary’s Jews to the death camps would not be a logistical debacle. So, did resistance or collaboration cause the large scale of the Hungarian Holocaust? At different times, they both played a role.

Hungary’s contradictory foreign policy indicates the fractures between the indecisive Horthy, his moderate ministers such as Teleki and Kállay, and the Germanophile militaristic radical right. At varying points before March 1944 Hungarian Prime Ministers resisted German attempts to dominate its Jewish policy and organically passed racialized anti-Semitic legislation. Hungarian officials engaged in or supported the Germans in massacring Jews from occupied Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, and, at other times, committed themselves to bringing those military leaders responsible to justice. Horthy himself vacillated between a policy of economic and military commitment to Germany and possible defection to the allies. To this day it is unclear whether Horthy hoped that abandoning Germany was a feasible option to save Hungary from destruction, or if he merely wanted to establish Hungary’s alibi to the Allies once the Third Reich was destroyed.

Hungarian policy pre-March 1944 is a grey area in equal parts because Hungary’s leaders made miscalculations and because, wedged in the Carpathians, Hungary was so geographically

³⁵ Deak, “A Fatal Compromise?” 61.

distanced from the allied armies. Historian István Deák asks how Hungary could have resisted Germany effectively when “arms for resisting the Germans could only have been had from Germany; when most of the army officers were Nazi sympathizers; and when the population generally expected its economic betterment from Germany?”³⁶ While this dilemma explains why there was no armed resistance, it does not explain the lack of widespread civil disobedience that might have hindered the Germans during the spring 1944 Jewish deportations.

Further complicating analysis of the Horthy era is that, although his leadership as regent was uninterrupted between 1920-1944, he did not act as a dictator; he appointed Prime Ministers and pushed for their dismissal but did not control them. Although there were elements of authoritarianism in place during Horthy’s regency, particularly for the Jews, the communist party was the only party that was banned and Hungarians enjoyed freedom of the press and independence of the courts for much of the duration of World War II.³⁷ In an act of defiance to Nazi Germany, a Hungarian court convicted and sentenced several Hungarian army officers who were complicit in a Jewish massacre. The perpetrators were only saved by a Nazi German rescue operation. Furthermore, by 1944 the seventy-eight-year-old regent’s intellectual abilities were declining.³⁸ Deák writes that while the Horthy regime failed,

It is unlikely, however, that any other regime would have done better; some others in Hitler’s Europe did definitely worse. It should be understood that the extent of material and human losses suffered by European states during the war, and their postwar treatment, depended on luck, geography, and great power politics... Miklós Horthy

³⁶ Deak, “A Fatal Compromise?” 58-59.

³⁷ Deak, “A Fatal Compromise?” 50.

³⁸ Krisztián Ungváry, “Master Plan? The Decision-Making Process behind the Deportations,” In *The Holocaust in Hungary: Seventy Years Later* ed. Randolph L. Braham and András Kovács (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2016), 107.

himself was neither better nor worse than most other military men who emerged as political leaders in the interwar years. He was neither a fascist nor a liberal; he was not a monster, but he was not a humanitarian either. He was no democrat but never tried to be a dictator.

He concludes, “Like so many other statesmen of the period, Miklós Horthy might merit a little sympathy, but he does not deserve admiration.”³⁹

The Hungarian government’s openly pro-fascist foreign policy in conjunction with its internal anti-Semitic policies (the topic of Chapter 2) eroded its ability to resist Germany’s eliminationist goals by creating exceptions to the liberty and rule of law. “The counterrevolutionary regime of Admiral Horthy,” István Deák concludes, “had taught the population to discriminate against some of its fellow citizens and to take for granted the redistribution of property on the basis of denominational membership and race. It had also taught the population to accept gifts of land from another power in exchange for at least a partial surrender of national sovereignty.”⁴⁰ The landscape of Hungary’s interwar regime is difficult to navigate. In its Jewish policy it was authoritarian, but it kept the nation’s media and courts free long after most European states had restricted them. It fought alongside Germany and Italy while never fully relinquishing hope of joining the allies. It supported Hitler while keeping its domestic fascist movements out of the government. And it supported Nazi Germany in the hopes of regaining territory lost from World War I. Thus, the German occupation of Hungary is far more complicated than merely a story about its military invasion and the imposition of a system that

³⁹ Deak, “A Fatal Compromise?” 55-56.

⁴⁰ Deak, “A Fatal Compromise?” 68-69.

Hungarians rejected entirely. These factors influenced how the government responded to the German invasion and its reasons for cooperating with the SS.

The House of Terror on Totalitarianism and Christianity

Instead of analyzing Horthy's foreign policy and the government's alienation of the Jews from civil society and the economy, the museum devotes nearly all its attention to the fringe Hungarian fascist party: The Arrow Cross. The "Passage of the Hungarian Nazis," features a wall-to-wall engraving of a speech by Ferenc Szálasi, the Hungarian fascist leader, which he gave soon after the October 16, 1944 putsch that toppled the Horthy regime and brought the fascist Arrow Cross to power for three months.⁴¹ In the next room a uniformed mannequin, the "ghostly figure of Ferenc Szálasi," stands at the head of a table while Hungarian fascist and German SS uniforms line the walls.⁴²



*Room of the Hungarian Nazis.*⁴³

⁴¹ Passage of the Hungarian Nazis (Arrow Cross Party), House of Terror Museum, Accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/allando-kiallitas/second_floor/passage-of-the-hungarian-nazis-arrowcross-party.

⁴² Hungarian Nazis, House of Terror Museum.

⁴³ https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/allando-kiallitas/second_floor/hungarian-nazis-arrowcross-party.

Monitors show footage of ice floating down a river, evoking the winter 1944-45 massacres in which Hungarian fascists massacred Budapest Jews on the bank of the Danube. Although an event worth mentioning in any museum about the Hungarian Holocaust, its placement as one of the permanent exhibition's first displays creates the impression that the persecution of Jews was entirely the action of German and Hungarian Nazis. By foregrounding the Arrow Cross, the museum argues that Hungarian Nazis, although few in number, were the primary agents of terror in 1944-1945, even though most of the Hungarian Jews who died were killed during Horthy's leadership.

The museum then adds detail to its comparison between Nazism and communism: "On the basis of collective criteria, these totalitarian dictatorships persecuted and killed those who they ruled under their might. However, religion... approached the question of sin and forgiveness on the basis of personal responsibility. The Nazis and the Communists replaced God with their leaders and claimed that it was they who were omniscient and infallible."⁴⁴ With its mention of "personal responsibility" the museum portrays a totalitarian worldview which is the opposite of the Christian worldview. Because the House of Terror sees a high traffic of young people and tourists—not just highly educated Hungarians—it mobilizes a visitor's prior knowledge about Nazism to fill in the gaps of their understanding of communism.

The museum's framing of European fascism as universally atheistic is also inaccurate: Ferenc Szálasi of the Arrow Cross considered himself a devoted Christian and added racial elements to Christian anti-Semitic stereotypes that the mainstream Hungarian right already

⁴⁴ "Churches," House of Terror Museum, Accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/allando-kiallitas/first_floor/churches.

embraced.⁴⁵ Szálasi once wrote that it was the duty of every Magyar Priest to be “the priest and brother of every Magyar and, according to the commands of his faith, should bring his Magyar brothers closer to God...”⁴⁶ As Paul Hanebrink argues, “Like many adherents of national socialism in Germany, Hungary's fascists easily blended Christian symbolism and visions of blood and race.”⁴⁷ Although many fascists built cults of personality around their leaders, some even claiming to be infallible, it is too large a leap that this necessarily entailed the persecution of the Churches. To do this is to take Hitler’s specific anti-Christian version of fascism and project it onto East European fascist movements which had completely different views of Christianity.

By focusing on Nazi and communist persecution of Hungary’s churches, the House of Terror portrays Hungarian Christianity as the antithesis of foreign totalitarianism: The Nazis and the Communists “announced that a new type of man was needed to create a new world and a paradise on Earth, thus, they had the right to destroy anything or anyone who stood in the way of their highest goal.”⁴⁸ It adds: “The Communist dictatorship that was laid down in the footsteps of the Soviet invaders considered churches as enemies from the very beginning and a target for destruction due to their *moral and spiritual respect* in addition to financial power and internationally organized structure.”⁴⁹ It is logical that the Soviets attacked churches in Hungary because of their wealth and because they anchored Hungarians to institutions which persisted in democratic Western Europe. It is also true that Marxism, the state ideology of the Soviet Union,

⁴⁵ Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 247.

⁴⁶ Paul A. Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Anti-Semitism, 1890-1944* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 141.

⁴⁷ Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary*, 143.

⁴⁸ Churches, https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/allando-kiallitas/first_floor/churches.

⁴⁹ Italics Mine. Churches, https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/allando-kiallitas/first_floor/churches.

perceived organized religion as part of the superstructure that held up the unequal system of industrial capitalism. The museum, however, embeds in these verifiable claims the clause that the Soviets targeted Christian institutions because they were moral and spiritual authorities. Rather than understanding the causal relationship between organized Hungarian Christianity, the nationalist government, and anti-Semitism, the museum decouples religion from authoritarianism and frames it as a rallying point of Hungarian resistance to foreign invaders.

The House of Terror expands on this theme in the Room of Churches, which displays a blaring white crucifix on the floor symbolizing how totalitarians attempted to stamp Hungarian Christianity into the ground. The room's central historical artefact is the cape of Archbishop Mindszenty who led the Hungarian Catholic Church in the immediate post-war years, having been a vocal opponent of fascism and communism. The museum's website describes the contrast between these Christian relics and the ideological "hate speech" blaring from its speakers: the room contains "Mindszenty's cape and the relics of religious orders which have been trampled upon [to] symbolize the war of materialism with religion, inhumanity with humanity."⁵⁰ Materialism is inhumanity and religion is humanity. This statement embodies the museum's thesis that we should see Hungary's twentieth century as a conflict between foreign totalitarian and materialistic ideologies and Hungarian Christian nationalism.

The museum acknowledges that some Hungarians willingly sided with these foreign dictatorships by exploring Ferenc Szálasi and the Arrow Cross in detail. However, in its room of "Changing Clothes" the museum emphasizes that in 1945, the Hungarian communist movement was so small that it scoured Arrow Cross membership records it had captured and recruited the

⁵⁰ First Floor, House of Terror Museum, Accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/permanent-exhibition/first_floor.

former fascists into the Communist Party.⁵¹ Thus the museum's focus on the Arrow Cross serves two purposes beyond merely acknowledging the existence of Hungarian Nazis: 1) It allows the museum to exaggerate the scarcity of extremists in interwar Hungary and 2) it supports the museum's argument that fascism and communism are more alike than different. After all, how different could they really be if fascists were willing to serve in the Communist Party?

Communism and the House of Terror

“Our ancestors learned that the essence of communist rule is impassioned anti-Christianity, a fierce hatred for the nation paired with eager internationalism, artificial mass indoctrination that comes with a conscious destruction of communities as well as the economic robbery of people concealed by deceitful philanthropic buzzwords.”⁵²

- Hungarian House Speaker, László Kövér

The House of Terror continues its comparison between Nazism and communism in its room on Hungarian churches: “While the Nazis declared war based on race, the Communists declared war based on the classes. Both, however, regarded religion as an enemy.”⁵³ The description's use of “Communists” does not specify Stalinism, which the Red Army brought to Hungary by force in 1945, the liberal communism of Imre Nagy, or the “Goulash communism” of János Kádár in the post-1956 era. Thus, it frames East-European communism as a monolithic and represented by 1940s Stalinism.

During the late 1940s, Stalin implemented communism at the highest executive level atop a Hungarian Parliament and, indeed, a nation where communism held little sway. When the communist executive nationalized Hungary's education system, the Catholic Cardinal

⁵¹ Changing Clothes, House of Terror Museum, Accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/allando-kiallitas/second_floor/changing-clothes.

⁵² “House Speaker Kövér: Fight against Godless and Inhumane Authoritarian Aspirations,” Hungary Today, September 5, 2020, <https://hungarytoday.hu/authoritarian-aspirations-communism-open-society/>.

⁵³ Churches, https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/allando-kiallitas/first_floor/churches.

Mindszenty began to excommunicate governmental officers who cooperated with the program.⁵⁴ With Hungary seemingly spinning out of control in 1948-1949, Stalin clamped down by banning opposition parties and purging the bureaucracy of non-communists, as well as the clergy of opposition figures, leading to several years of hardline Stalinist rule.⁵⁵

The death of Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev's ascendance to General Secretary of the Soviet Union, which coincided with the worsening economic fallout of ham-fisted collectivization across Eastern Europe, helped to create the conditions for Hungary's 1956 revolution. In 1955-1956 Khrushchev publicly denounced Stalin's oppressive style of governance which for Hungarians only served to underscore the injustice of being led by the Stalinist Mátyás Rákosi. To prevent a political crisis the Soviets ordered Rákosi to resign but, rather than replacing him with the popular Imre Nagy, chose another hardliner named Ernő Gerő.⁵⁶ In October of 1956 the Soviet Union returned the popular reformer Władysław Gomułka to power in Hungary's neighbor, Poland. Foreseeing similar changes in Hungary, Budapest college students gathered by the thousands on October 23, 1956 to demand leadership under the liberal-communist Imre Nagy. They also demanded the punishment of Stalinist oppressors, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press.⁵⁷ After initial police violence, the educated and the lower classes became unified in their outrage at the brutality of the security forces and soon thousands of people from all social backgrounds gathered on the streets of Budapest. Nagy then proclaimed that under his leadership, Hungary would no longer be a Soviet satellite state.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Joseph Rothschild, *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe Since World War II* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 102.

⁵⁵ Rothschild, *Return to Diversity*, 99-101.

⁵⁶ Rothschild, *Return to Diversity*, 157.

⁵⁷ Rothschild, *Return to Diversity*, 157.

⁵⁸ Rothschild, *Return to Diversity*, 158.

Although Nagy emerged merely as an anti-Stalinist, which Khrushchev was not necessarily opposed to, he became disillusioned with the very idea that Hungary's journey to socialism was best served beneath the thumb of the Soviet Union.

Nagy announced that under his leadership Hungary would withdraw from the Warsaw Pact (the Soviet Bloc's NATO) and that Hungary would become a neutral country in the Cold War.⁵⁹ On November 4 the Soviets and neighboring Warsaw Pact nations invaded Hungary and crushed the revolution militarily. The crackdown killed roughly 2,500 Hungarians and, in 1958, the counter-revolutionary government under János Kádár tried and executed Nagy. Through one lens, we can see that the Hungarian Revolution was the result of a combination of the Hungarian government's authoritarianism and the political missteps of Khrushchev who promised de-Stalinization but was unwilling to upset the communist system in Hungary. When the Hungarians fought to make the change themselves, Khrushchev saw the revolution as a blight to the Soviets' political prestige and as a risk to the strategic security of the Eastern Bloc.



March of Hungarian protestors, October 25, 1956.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Rothschild, *Return to Diversity*, 159.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_Revolution_of_1956#/media/File:Kossuth_Lajos_utca_a_Ferenciek_tere_fel%C5%91l_n%C3%A9zve,_1956._okt%C3%B3ber_25-e_d%C3%A9lut%C3%A1n,_-Fortepan_24652.jpg.

In Hungarian public memory, however, 1956 is not a story about politics but another example of Hungary's national identity being suppressed by Russians for asserting itself. Indeed, it was with the help of a Russian army that the Habsburg monarchy crushed the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. Commemorating the 1956 revolution in a 2018 speech, Mária Schmidt reminisced: "What happened to us then here in Hungary still provides hope and strength today. Hundreds of thousands of people stood hand-in-hand on the main squares of our cities; hundreds of thousands of total strangers hugged each other. There were those who shed tears of joy, because the communal heartbeat of the nation was so strong that it was sensed even by those who did not want to sense it."⁶¹ Beyond politics, in Hungarian memory 1956 signified that in the face of adversity, indeed a force of over two thousand Soviet tanks, they would not allow their unique culture and identity to be swept from the map of Europe and incorporated into a Soviet-communist empire.

Ironically, Viktor Orbán rose to fame in the 1980s by extolling the Hungarian 1956 revolutionary, Imre Nagy, who was himself a communist. Thus, the museum exemplifies a shift in the attitudes of Fidesz and its loyalists to Hungary's 1956 heroes. While the museum mentions Nagy briefly in its room on "Justice" under authoritarian communism, it focuses more on the violence and terror of the regime's reprisals against the revolutionaries rather than the revolutionaries' beliefs. Indeed, the "Resistance" room makes little mention of the liberal-minded communist resistance to Stalinism, but instead devotes itself largely to resistance by military officers, such as the Community of Fellow Hungarian Fighters (MBHK) and the Colonel Pál Hadváry group.

⁶¹ "Director-General Mária Schmidt's speech on the 62nd anniversary of the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight," About Hungary, October 25, 2018, <http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/director-general-maria-schmidts-speech-on-the-62nd-anniversary-of-the-1956-revolution-and-freedom-fight/>.

Conclusion

To clarify, I am not criticizing the museum for comparing Nazism to Soviet communism, or for giving attention to the horrific crimes that communists committed against non-Jewish Hungarians. Double Occupation posed Hungarians with unique horrors and challenges. Timothy Snyder wrote of the civilian experience on the Eastern Front of World War II: “A single occupation can fracture a society for generations; double occupation is even more painful and divisive... The departure of one foreign ruler meant nothing more than the arrival of another... They had to deal with the consequences of their own previous commitments under one occupier when the next one came...”⁶² While Snyder was describing the Western USSR in 1941, his description can also apply to Hungary in 1944-1945. The trap of double occupation presented the Hungarian government with a scenario in which there was no way out, only ways forward that in hindsight may have been less horrific than the one Horthy and his ministers chose. The story of Hungarians tyrannized under communism is worth telling.

However, by purporting to be a museum devoted broadly to the experience of “terror,” the museum obligates itself to be comprehensive to an extent. Indeed, it describes itself as neither a Holocaust nor Stalinism museum, but a memorial to the experience of terror in Hungary more broadly. However, the minimal space which the House of Terror allocates to Nazi death camps as opposed to Soviet gulags is striking. In the English translation of the text in the room of Double Occupation, the museum devotes eighty-seven words to the spring and summer 1944 Jewish deportations. It spends an additional thirty-one words on the topic in the Passage of the Hungarian Nazis. By contrast, the museum’s room on gulags devotes five-hundred-sixty-four

⁶² Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 190.

words to the fate of Hungarians who the communists imprisoned and deported. The museum's room, "Resettlement and Deportation," spends another six-hundred-fifty-six words on the subject. This discrepancy begs the question of whether we should approach the House of Terror as a Holocaust museum, or if in the 2002 political moment the government merely saw the Holocaust as useful to contextualize and influence its depiction of communism.

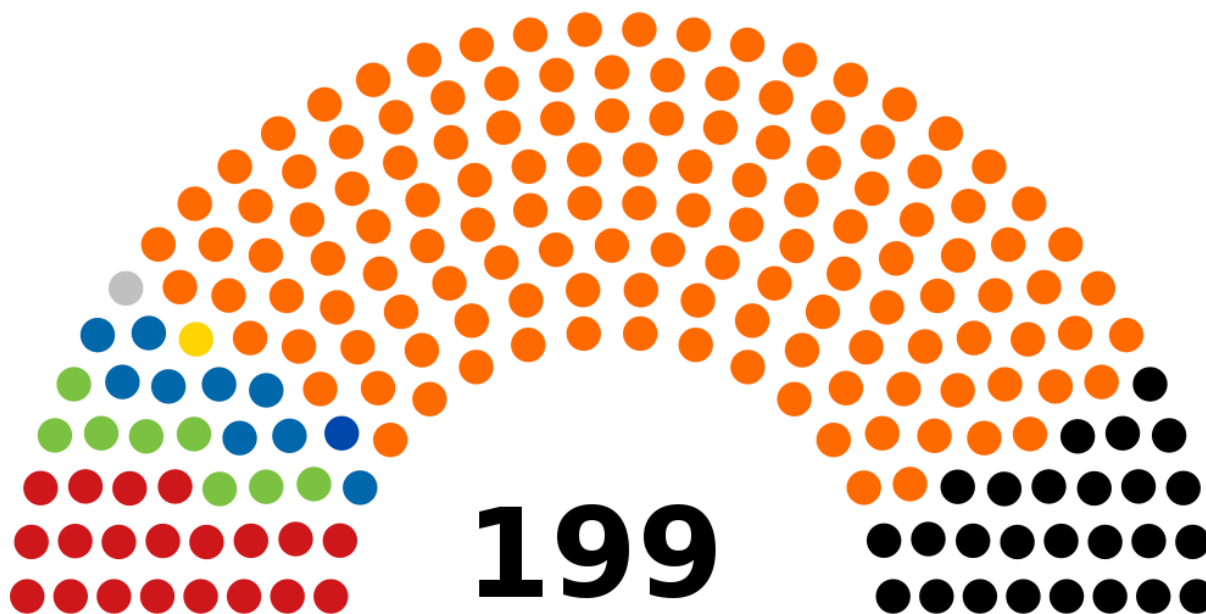
How does the House of Terror contribute to the radical right's framing of liberalism in post-communist Europe? "Terror" means the same thing in English and Hungarian. Therefore, the museum's logo, with the title of the museum written in Hungarian, reads, "*Terror Háza.*" The word "terror" also appears in the Hungarian name for the Red Terror of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, "*vörösteror.*" So, what does "terror" mean to the museum's director, Mária Schmidt? In addition to using the word to describe acts of political violence by Muslim extremists, Schmidt has described attacks on the East European right by West European liberals as a form of "intellectual terrorism." By this she means that "Not one segment of our lives is being spared. Hatred bombs are being thrown at our faith, while a frontal offensive has been launched against our system of values. Nation states and Christianity are in the crosshairs."⁶³ According to Schmidt the terrorizers of the Christian world in the twenty-first century are not only mass murderers from Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan, but leftists sheltering in ivory towers in Brussels and Berlin.

Although Schmidt wrote this piece in 2017, fifteen years after the museum's inauguration, it sheds light on her conception of terrorism: it is not merely political violence. In communist Hungary and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the government cowed

⁶³ Maria Schmidt, "At the Crossroads – Europe 2017," Schmidt Maria, July 28, 2017, <https://schmidtmaria.hu/publikaciok/v/at-the-crossroads--europe-2017/>.

millions into submission with the threat of exposure as a dissident, disenfranchisement, and social alienation and ignominy. In the radical right's ideology, the "Goulash communism" of János Kádár and "Real existing Socialism" of Erich Honecker's GDR terrorized the people by indoctrinating them into believing that national identity held no spiritual bond, and therefore no value in the international socialist utopia. They terrorized their citizens by ceaselessly repeating that Hungarians' unique cultures and traditions, as well as their borders were obstacles to be overcome. According to Schmidt and Fidesz, that threat is still out there. In this way, the House of Terror is highly political. It serves as a monument to the Fidesz regime: the first Hungarian government since the Kingdom of Hungary under Horthy's regency to name the spiritual unity of ethnic Hungarians as its goal, and a pre-condition for good Hungarian government. In the following chapter I discuss Fidesz's Holocaust commemoration events in 2014, but first I fill in the political history between 2002 to Fidesz's re-election in 2010.

Right Wing Politics Interlude



■ Democratic Coalition: 9 seats
 ■ MSZP-Dialogue: 20 seats
 ■ Politics Can Be Different: 8 seats
 ■ Together 2014: 1 seat
 ■ German minority: 1 seat
 ■ Others Independent: 1 seat
 ■ Fidesz-KDNP: 133 seats
 ■ Jobbik: 26 seats⁶⁴

The above image represents the distribution of the Hungarian National Assembly between 2018-2022. With Fidesz holding two thirds of the seats and the historically extreme-right Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary) holding an additional twenty-six, the absence of a center-right is striking considering that the MDF under József Antall emerged as the most popular party in Hungary after the fall of communism.

⁶⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Assembly_\(Hungary\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Assembly_(Hungary)).

Throughout the 2000s Fidesz grew increasingly populist, arguing that the left-wing MSZP government was communist-era economic malpractice incarnate. On 17 September 2006, a political “nuclear bomb” exploded in Hungary when internet users broadcast a secretly recorded speech by left-wing Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány to his MSZP party members.⁶⁵ The Prime Minister excoriated his bloc: “We had almost no other choice [than the package of cuts] because we fucked up. Not just a little bit but totally... Obviously, we have been lying our heads off for the last one-and-a-half, two years.”⁶⁶ He then turned to his party’s failure to cope with Fidesz: “I’ve only been able to keep going the last one-and-a-half years because one thing has spurred me on: to give back to the left the belief that it could accomplish something and win! That you don’t have to bow your head in this motherfucking country. That you don’t have to shit yourself when you go face-to-face with Viktor Orbán and the right...”⁶⁷ To this day we do not know how the speech was leaked.

Its viral spread was catastrophic for the left. Viktor Orbán declared that “For the first time since 1989 Hungary has become the victim of an open, organized political lie.”⁶⁸ Thousands of protestors descended on the Parliament building and Kossuth Square to protest the MSZP’s leadership, chanting “Gyurcsány must go!”⁶⁹ Viktor Orbán declared the protests a plebiscite on the government and the opposition won overwhelmingly in the municipal elections of that fall.⁷⁰ Police officers clashed violently against protestors on the symbolic day of October 23, 2006, the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. Orbán successfully framed Fidesz as the

⁶⁵ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán, Hungary’s Strongman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) Retrieved from https://www.amazon.com/Orb%C3%A1n-Hungarys-Strongman-Paul-Lendvai-ebook-dp-B079Z9WXST/dp/B079Z9WXST/ref=mt_other?_encoding=UTF8&me=&qid=1619189042, location 941.

⁶⁶ *Orbán, Hungary’s Strongman*, location 946.

⁶⁷ *Orbán, Hungary’s Strongman*, locations 946-955.

⁶⁸ *Orbán, Hungary’s Strongman*, location 986.

⁶⁹ *Orbán, Hungary’s Strongman*, location 1018.

⁷⁰ *Orbán, Hungary’s Strongman*, location 1026.

leaders of a desperately needed opposition, a claim which would only be bolstered when the Financial Crisis came to Europe.

What of the center right MDF? There were many factors that led to the fracturing of the old center right. Perhaps the most important reasons were its failure to regain power from the left in the 2000s and the increasing faith of center-right Parliamentarians that the more radical Fidesz held the answer to the left's electoral strength. Indeed, in the 2000s Fidesz had yet to embrace Islamophobia and authoritarianism, and instead juxtaposed its relatively clean record against the allegations of cronyism and corruption that haunted the MSZP. In a speech from that era, Orbán declared his intention to form a “central political forcefield” that would advance conservative policies while safely locking the left out of government.⁷¹ In short, the center right did not disappear or get voted out of existence. Rather, it pooled its resources together under Fidesz and has radicalized within it.

In 2021 Fidesz holds two thirds (133) of Hungary's 199 Parliamentary seats. Its greatest rival is Jobbik (26 seats), followed by the MSZP (20 seats), the Democratic Coalition, a breakaway left-wing party founded by former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány (9 seats), and Politics Can be Different, Hungary's green party (8 seats). Because the opposition parties are polarized on the left and right it is difficult for them to cooperate. The opposition continues to lack a center right party because Fidesz has thus far been successful in marketing itself as radical and conservative simultaneously, thereby monopolizing a wide breadth of the political spectrum. Indeed, while Fidesz's radicalism generates the most headlines internationally, much of its legislation is essentially conservative.

⁷¹ Orbán, *Hungary's Strongman*, location 1199.

Chapter 2 – The Hungarian Holocaust: Forgetting by Remembering?

In 2014 the Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Center received a package from a man the government likely despised. It contained the Medium Cross of the Order of the Republic of Hungary, the nation’s highest honor, and a letter requesting that the name Randolph L. Braham, be stricken from its Library and Information Center. The letter was signed: “Randolph L. Braham Graduate Center of the City University of New York.”⁷²

Professor Braham was a Hungarian Jew and survivor of the Jewish Labor Service Battalions on the Eastern Front of World War II. After the war he moved to the U.S where he published his 1981 history of the Hungarian Holocaust: *The Politics of Genocide*. Braham’s piece on the Labor Service System is one of the most horrific. Braham points out that the blueprint for the Jewish battalions and their legal justification dates to Admiral Horthy’s seizure of Budapest in 1920 and the subsequent White Terror against Hungarian communists and Jews.⁷³ After the German invasion of the USSR in 1941, Hungarian-Jewish laborers conscripted into the system chipped out fortifications in the frozen Ukrainian soil. In the spring they tugged horse-carts through mud and cleared mine fields.⁷⁴ The contemporary right’s historical narrative holds the Horthy regency and its policies far apart from the Holocaust. Today, a recreation of the Horthy-era Monument to the Victims of the Red Terror stands in Budapest, despite the role of Red Terror mythology in fomenting the subsequent White Terror in which nationalist forces purged Hungarian Jews and leftists.

⁷² “Randolph L. Braham’s Open Letter,” Hungarian Spectrum, January 26, 2014, <https://hungarianspectrum.wordpress.com/2014/01/26/randolph-l-brahams-open-letter/>.

⁷³ Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 285.

⁷⁴ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 313.

Retelling the story of the Holocaust in Hungary is important because after 1945 the nation had no time to come to terms with it; Soviet and Hungarian communists instead banished the Holocaust to the “Orwellian black hole of history.”⁷⁵ In the Soviet narrative, the Nazis had not invaded Eastern Europe to eliminate Europe’s Jews but to destroy the socialist worker’s utopia. In this narrative, the primary victims were not Jews but Soviet and Hungarian communist martyrs. In 2014 Professor Braham’s fight for recognition of the Hungarian Holocaust seemed to have triumphed when Fidesz announced a year of Holocaust remembrance on the seventieth anniversary of the German occupation of Hungary. After reading the government’s plan Professor Braham returned his Medium Cross in protest. The historians behind the year’s events framed it as a conclusion of a centuries-old story of the Hungarian struggle against outside forces to accept Hungarian Jews into the Hungarian national community. The resounding emotions would be loss, but also acceptance and conclusion as Hungarians supposedly triumphed over the divisiveness of Nazism and completed Hungary’s nationalistic arc in its demonstration of solidarity between Hungarian Jews and Christians.

While this final element seems unobjectionable, it shifts blame for the Holocaust entirely onto Nazism and precludes discussion about the role of mainstream Hungarian nationalism in the Hungarian Holocaust. Paradoxically, inasmuch as governments invest in museums and monuments to preserve memory, their existence risks lulling a nation into believing that its memory work is complete.

⁷⁵ Braham, “Assault on Historical Memory,” 50-51.

The Holocaust Memorial Year of 2014

In 2014, the seventieth anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust, the government announced a monument to “The Victims of German Occupation” and a new museum called “The House of Fates.” The Monument to the Victims of German Occupation, which stands in Budapest’s Liberty Square, has generated criticism for transferring blame for the Holocaust entirely onto the German occupiers and, in the spirit of national unity and reconciliation, not distinguishing between Jewish and Christian Hungarians who died following the occupation. The sculpture depicts a raptor with a band around one claw reading 1944, swooping menacingly towards the archangel Gabriel who clings to the crown of St. Stephen, a symbol of Hungarian national sovereignty. The statue illustrates that Hungary lost its sovereignty entirely in 1944 because the German eagle pried it from its grasp. By depicting the archangel Gabriel rather than a Jewish symbol the memorial casts the German occupation as a Hungarian national tragedy, rather than a Jewish tragedy. A counter monument sits across from it which specifically memorializes Hungary’s murdered Jews. Fidesz had announced the second event in 2013, a museum directed by Mária Schmidt titled the “House of Fates.” Unlike the House of Terror, the House of Fates was to be entirely devoted to Holocaust history and would focus on the stories of

Jewish children deported by rail to Auschwitz.



Monument to the Victims of German Occupation in Budapest's Liberty Square.⁷⁶

Why did Fidesz so suddenly foreground the Holocaust in Hungary's historical narrative, and thereby call attention to one of the most controversial and seemingly damning periods in its history? There are two currents in Hungarian politics that may be related. The first is its use as a mechanism for its "anti-anti-Semitism." By expressing support for the Jewish community through Holocaust remembrance, the government could openly condemn anti-Semitism while appropriating anti-Semitic stereotypes to frame its politics. As Ivan Kalmar points out, "One of the aspects of anti-anti-Semitism is that it may reverse 'the dictums of anti-Semitism without problematizing' its underpinnings, and 'thereby end up duplicating aspects of the problem that

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial_for_Victims_of_the_German_Occupation#/media/File:Monument_to_the_victims_of_the_German_occupation_\(2\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial_for_Victims_of_the_German_Occupation#/media/File:Monument_to_the_victims_of_the_German_occupation_(2).jpg).

anti-anti-Semites seek to resist.”⁷⁷ In response to any accusations of anti-Semitism the government could point to its multitude of museums and memorials which educate people about the Holocaust as evidence otherwise. Simultaneously, government backed newspapers and advertising agencies could plaster the walls of public transportation with a grinning George Soros conspiring Hungary’s demise.

For the Hungarian radical right, George Soros cuts a similar figure to the American right’s portrayal of Hillary Clinton during Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign as a member of “the swamp.” Just as the American right attacked Clinton as a member of the coastal and urban elite, which is cosmopolitan and sacrifices the wellbeing of authentic Americans to overseas interests, Fidesz accuses George Soros of planning to tear down Europe’s borders by undermining national solidarity and flooding the continent with Muslim migrants. Orbán has termed this conspiracy the “Soros Plan.”⁷⁸ According to Mária Schmidt, George Soros will use the liberal elites’ delusions of an open-borders utopia to expand his “philanthropic” media empire. Once Soros controls the politicians, intellectuals, and media in a country, so the argument goes, he will be free to exploit the country’s financial resources.⁷⁹ Until 2014 Fidesz could have denied charges of anti-Semitism by pointing to the government’s highest award sitting in Professor Braham’s office.

Another reason for the government’s focus on the Holocaust is, as Mónika Kovács describes, “The Holocaust became a global icon and a symbol of radical evil and recognizing it

⁷⁷ Ivan Kalmar, “Islamophobia and Anti-Anti-Semitism: The Case of Hungary and the ‘Soros plot’.” *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 60, No. 1, 3.

⁷⁸ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the 27th Congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union,” The Prime Minister, Website of the Hungarian Government, November 12, 2017, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-27th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union/>.

⁷⁹ Maria Schmidt, “The Gravedigger of the Left,” About Hungary, April 25, 2017, <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/the-gravedigger-of-the-left>.

as such appeared to Central European societies as a moral obligation and a condition for accession to Europe. Either freely or due to Western pressure, they realized that ‘if a nation actively participates in the community of Holocaust remembrance, its moral standing will improve at the international level.’⁸⁰ Memorializing the Holocaust demonstrates that a nation has come to terms with its past by no longer downplaying its scale or significance. However, by framing the Hungarian Holocaust as entirely the work of German Nazis, beyond influence by Hungarians themselves—in a word, fated—the radical right can claim to cleanse the national conscience of collective guilt and reassure people that its nationalistic policies in the twenty-first century in no way reflect interwar policies which influenced the Holocaust.

Before analyzing the nationalist narrative in-depth, it is necessary to explain the chronology of the Hungarian Holocaust and the pre-conditions for its brutality that Hungarians laid down before the German occupation of 1944. By detailing Hungarian anti-Semitism before 1944, and the role it played in isolating Hungarian Jews, we can analyze how the radical right’s near-exclusive focus on 1944 neglects some of the most important causal elements of the story.

Historical Context⁸¹

The radical right’s historiography fails to interrogate why Hungary was different from other fascist or occupied nations that succeeded in protecting significant numbers of their Jews such as Italy, Denmark, and Bulgaria. In part, the answer lies in the politics of the Second World

⁸⁰ Mónika Kovács, “Global and Local Holocaust Remembrance,” In *The Holocaust in Hungary: Seventy Years Later* ed. Randolph L. Braham and András Kovács (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2016), 232.

⁸¹ After the bibliography, see Appendix 1 for a detailed timeline of the Hungarian Holocaust. See Appendix 2 for links to information about the Hungarian Holocaust provided by the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum.

War: in Hungary, the Nazis did not fear igniting rebellion because for much of the spring of 1944 the Jewish deportations occurred under the auspices of the constitutional Hungarian government. While the Wehrmacht invaded Hungary in force, Adolf Eichmann arrived in Hungary with no more than three hundred German authorities to transport over 400,000 Jews to Auschwitz.⁸² Edmund Veessenmayer, the SS-Brigadeführer who oversaw occupied Hungary wrote that Hungarian authorities carried out the deportations in a praiseworthy fashion.⁸³ According to András Kovács, the Nazis carried out the deportations with the assistance of around 200,000 members of the Hungarian government: “In addition to the gendarmerie, the required collaborators included a wide range of state employees from the staff of county orphan agencies to female body-friskers.”⁸⁴

The radical right’s historiography alleviates responsibility for the Holocaust from the shoulders of ordinary Hungarians and the Christian-nationalist leaders of the Horthy regency. While it is debatable that Horthy knew for certain before summer of 1944 that the Nazis were sending his citizens to gas chambers, the fact remains that Hitler had expressed his eliminationist anti-Semitism in the past to Horthy.⁸⁵ In 1941, Hungarian troops annexed Carpathian Ruthenia from former Czechoslovakia and deported its Jews to Soviet Ukraine, directly into the path of German Army Group South and the *Einsatzgruppen*. Hungarians witnessed the Germans

⁸² Deborah S. Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II: Caught in the Cauldron* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 292.

⁸³ Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, 292.

⁸⁴ András Kovács, “Hungarian Intentionalism: New Directions in the Historiography of the Hungarian Holocaust,” In *The Holocaust in Hungary: Seventy Years Later* ed. Randolph L. Braham and András Kovács (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2016), 12.

⁸⁵ Joanna Kakissis, “Hungary’s New Holocaust Museum Isn’t Open Yet, But It’s Already Causing Concern,” NPR, February 8, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/08/690647054/hungarys-new-holocaust-museum-isn-t-open-yet-but-it-s-already-causing-worry>.

massacre 18,000 of these Jews in Kaminets Podolsk. If Horthy remained ignorant in 1944 it was willfully.⁸⁶

The story of the Hungarian Holocaust begins, at the latest, with the end of World War I. The democratic government of the Aster Revolution, which had overthrown the Habsburgs in 1918, had fallen to a communist coup in March of 1919. Besieged by a Romanian army and the counter-revolutionary Hungarian White Army, the new Hungarian Soviet Republic collapsed in August of that same year, leaving control of a now truncated Hungary to an un-sturdy coalition of conservative aristocratic politicians and radical rightists. Amidst the chaos of civil war, the counter revolutionaries unleashed the White Terror which targeted and murdered Jews for their alleged support of communism. The new government decided against instating the former Habsburg monarch, Charles I, leaving Horthy as the de-facto head of state. Many of the policies of Hungary's conservative Prime-Ministers who ruled under the regency of Admiral Miklós Horthy, a conservative aristocrat, can be seen through the lens of its tension with the radical right.

The conservatives' political promise was to restore Hungary to normalcy through a functioning government and rule of law. This promise included the legal protection of Jews (indeed in Germany, a problem for Hitler was that thuggish anti-Semitism appeared to undermine the orderly Nazi state). However, for many Hungarians any return to normalcy required that Hungary recapture the territory the Entente had taken from it after World War I, through military force if necessary. The militarist radical right staked its claim to this goal and in doing so undercut the conservative aristocratic right. While Horthy and his conservative Prime Minister, Count István Bethlen, could not retrieve Transylvania in the 1920s, they could appease

⁸⁶ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 205.

the militarist right by discriminating against Hungary's Jews. In 1920 Hungary passed the Numerus Clausus law which limited Jewish participation in higher education to six percent. The law stemmed from the common perception that Hungary's Jews had infiltrated its intelligentsia and bourgeois, taking positions that should be held by Hungarians. The date of 1920 is key because it contradicts the notion that Hungarian anti-Semitism relied on Adolf Hitler. In 1920, Germany was a democracy and Hitler was largely unknown; he would not become the German chancellor until 1933. Horthy once wrote a letter to Hitler boasting that anti-Semitism ranked as an official state policy and that Hitler should not presume to lecture Hungarians about how to solve the Jewish problem.⁸⁷

The radical right also applied pressure on the government to revise the Treaty of Trianon. In addition to breaking up imperial holdings in Eastern Europe, France had hoped to empower Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia as buffers against the encroaching Soviet Union, at the expense of Hungarian territory. However, the Hungarian radical right was convinced that Trianon reflected the work of a foreign Judeo-Bolshevik spirit, and that only through its extirpation from Hungarian political, economic, and intellectual life could Hungary regain its former status as a regional power. To appease the radical right, the Hungarian state approved restrictions of Jewish participation in finance, the intelligentsia, and skilled professions. Between 1932 and 1942 Regent Horthy appointed four different radical right and openly anti-Semitic Prime Ministers: Gyula Gömbös (1932-1936), Kálmán Darányi (1936-1938), Béla Imrédy (1938-1939), and László Bárdossy (1941-1942). These leaders pursued increasingly pro-German foreign policy, exporting raw materials to the Nazi war-machine, and eventually committing the

⁸⁷ Éva Nagy, "Rewriting the History of the Hungarian Holocaust," The Budapest Beacon, April 25, 2014, <https://budapestbeacon.com/rewriting-the-history-of-the-hungarian-holocaust/>.

Hungarian Second Army to fight alongside Germany on the Eastern Front. In Ukraine, Hungarian soldiers witnessed firsthand the Germans' attempted genocide of Jews and Slavs.

In partaking of Hitler's spoils—by 1941 Hungary occupied Transylvania and portions of Yugoslavia—Hungary ingratiated itself to Nazi Germany while making itself economically dependent. Long before Germany invaded it in 1944, Hungary had begun to cede its independence piecemeal. With a closer relationship to Nazi Germany came greater pressure to conform to Hitler's violent anti-Semitism. In his book, *The Jews in Hungary*, Gyula Gömbös claimed "The thesis is simple: the Jews must not be allowed to succeed in any field beyond the level of their ratio in the population."⁸⁸ In 1934, now Hungary's Prime Minister, Gömbös signed the German-Hungarian Economic Agreement, in which Hungary exported grain, livestock, and most of its bauxite in return for German imports of industrial goods and raw materials.⁸⁹ Despite this worrying erosion of independence, many Hungarians supported the partnership because the jolt to industrial production increased employment.⁹⁰ While German agents made inroads into institutions such as the Hungarian gendarmerie and General Staff under the smokescreen of economic cooperation, Gömbös himself increased government funding of anti-Semitic newspapers.⁹¹

In 1938, Prime Minister Darányi announced his support for a popular memorandum backed by Germanophile officers and right-wingers in the civilian government, Béla Imrédy among them, that described the Jewish "problem" as a dire threat to Hungary's pro-Nazi armament. On March 5 Darányi announced the Győr plan before the nation: "The planned and

⁸⁸ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 45.

⁸⁹ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 54.

⁹⁰ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 55.

⁹¹ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 56.

legal solution of the [Jewish] question is the basic condition for the establishment of a just situation—a just situation that will either correct or eliminate the aforementioned social disproportions and will diminish Jewry’s influence in the nation’s cultural life and other fields to its proper level.”⁹² On May 28 Darányi and Imrédy pushed their anti-Semitic law through Parliament which introduced a limit of twenty percent Jewish participation in financial and industrial enterprises.⁹³ Although Hungarian liberals publicly protested the legislation, their voices were overruled when Hungary’s Christian leaders, including Bishop Sándor Raffay of the Lutheran Church and Bishop László Ravasz of the Calvinist Church favored the bill, arguing that it would quell frustration about Jewish overrepresentation.⁹⁴ Hungary’s second broad anti-Semitic bill was adopted on May 4, 1939, which defined Jewishness on racial grounds by documenting family history. The laws prohibited Jews from holding any government positions and from working as teachers or editors in periodicals, and it planned to withdraw licenses from Jewish businesses until they drastically lowered the number of Jews they employed.⁹⁵

The anti-Semitic laws solidified and popularized the right’s view that Jews were not Hungarians of a different faith, but a different racial community altogether: that they were imposters who had lived amongst Hungarians all while supporting the Bolsheviks and conspiring to control Hungary in secret. The imperative that the laws placed on carving Jews out of Hungarian society reveals the extent of their prior assimilation—Hungarian Jews were Hungarians, and it took decades of government legislation, and the tolerance of radical-right prejudice by the conservative establishment to isolate and pauperize the Jewish community. For

⁹² Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 120-121.

⁹³ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 125.

⁹⁴ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 123-124.

⁹⁵ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 154-155.

the Jews to appear separate from the Hungarian Christian community in 1944 was a precondition for the speed and ferocity of the Hungarian Holocaust.

Within three weeks of the German invasion of Hungary in March 1944, Interior Minister László Endre, under Prime Minister Döme Sztójay, began preparing to ghettoize the Hungarian Jewish community of the now heavily bombed Budapest. It ordered the municipal office to take inventory of Jewish residences and published its findings in the anti-Semitic press, emphasizing that the Jews who constituted twenty percent of the population occupied 47,978 rooms while the rest of the population occupied only 70,197 rooms.⁹⁶ The German Nazi Otto Winkelman testified at the post-war trial of the Hungarian collaborators, Endre, Jaross, and Baky, that Germany was unlikely to have carried out its anti-Semitic policy in Hungary if the Hungarian government had opposed it. While certainly a questionable source, Winkelman explained it with the German strategic imperative on the Eastern Front of maintaining Hungarian cooperation.⁹⁷

Although Budapest's Jewish community was spared in the summer of 1944 by Regent Horthy, Hungary's rural Jews were largely annihilated: roughly eighty percent of the 434,351 Jews led onto train cars by Hungarian gendarmes to Auschwitz died between May 15 and July 8, 1944.⁹⁸ In Germany, historian Karl Schleunes wrote of a "Twisted Road to Auschwitz," cautioning against using the eventual "Final Solution" to assume that the Holocaust's perpetrators had possessed a "master plan" from the beginning.⁹⁹ Similarly, in Hungary scholars have debated whether one can draw a straight line of intention from the first anti-Jewish laws in

⁹⁶ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 734.

⁹⁷ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 927.

⁹⁸ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 673-674.

⁹⁹ Karl A. Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy Towards German Jews, 1933-1939* (United States: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 5.

1920 to the genocide of 1944. One consensus is that, though the line is not straight, it is still there. While some scholars downplay the significance of the Numerus Clausus, pointing out that its limitations on Jewish freedom were mild, Mária Kovács explains that it elevated the Jewish Question—a mere conspiracy theory until 1920—to the plain of government recognition and action.¹⁰⁰ She then responds to the notion that Hungary’s renewed anti-Semitic policy in 1938 reflected only German pressure by quoting Pál Teleki, a Prime Minister most famous for resisting Germany’s attempts to dominate Hungary. Speaking before the Upper House of Parliament in 1928—five years before Hitler rose to power in Germany—Teleki declared, “We must see sincerely and clearly... that... we are in the midst of a war of races... Full equality [for the Jews] would create an impossible situation.”¹⁰¹

In Hungarian Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész’ novel, *Fatelessness*, Hungarian Jews awaiting deportation to Auschwitz took orders not from a Nazi barking out commands, but an amiable and slightly anxious policeman. As the day wore on and the policeman awaited instructions, “He urged us to make ourselves comfortable. He even asked if we knew any party games... For a while he swapped jokes with us, though meanwhile I had the feeling that he was striving at all costs to keep us amused somehow.”¹⁰² While Kertész’ policeman likely did not see himself as a murderer, he participated in genocide. As Hannah Arendt reminds us in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, we should not mistake a lack of individual malice for the absence of evil. A journalist at the Adolf Eichmann trial, Arendt was troubled by Eichmann’s psychological normality and lack of personal prejudice against Jews, for

¹⁰⁰ Mária Kovács, “Disenfranchised by Law: The ‘Numerus Clausus’ in Hungary 1920–1945,” *Shoah: Intervention, Methods, Documentation* (December 2013), 1.

¹⁰¹ Kovács, “Disenfranchised by Law,” 4.

¹⁰² Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 45.

he had done more than nearly anyone to organize the Final Solution.¹⁰³ The horrifyingly ordinary figure of Eichmann caused her to question whether one must be insane or hold hateful ideas to participate in evil. In Israeli author Amos Elon's words, Arendt "insisted that only good had any depth. Good can be radical; evil can only be extreme, for it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension... Evil comes from a failure to think."¹⁰⁴ Studying Hungarian guilt in the Holocaust does not require ascribing personal blame, but it does require that we study the pre-conditions that allowed hundreds of thousands of Hungarians to fail to understand or grapple with their role in mass murder.

What I have laid out is far from a comprehensive chronology of the Hungarian Holocaust. In addition to numerous examples of Hungarian heroism in the face of the Nazi occupation, it has left out the history of reluctance of Hungarian conservatives to be pulled too deeply into Axis allegiance. For example, in the 1930s Hungarian courts defied Hitler by convicting as war criminals several Hungarian officers complicit in Jewish massacres. And in 1941 Prime Minister Pál Teleki, quoted as an anti-Semite two paragraphs ago, committed suicide, presumably after he saw his policy of non-intervention overruled when Hungary allowed Germany to use Hungarian railways to invade Yugoslavia. My point is not to condemn all Hungarians as guilty or to claim that nothing is morally salvageable from the 1930s, but to emphasize that a useful explanation of the Hungarian Holocaust must begin before 1944, lest one is to believe the government's skewed perspective that Hungarian Christian nationalism was blameless and honorable.

¹⁰³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 26.

¹⁰⁴ Elon, "Introduction by Amos Elon," in *The Banality of Evil*, xiii-xiv.

The Long Nineteenth Century

At the center of many of these debates is Hungary's conservative regent, Miklós Horthy. A common factor through Hungary's interwar and World War II history, Horthy's name has become a shorthand for the "respectable" interwar conservative right. Through the legacy of Horthy, we can glean some insight into why Orbán's government is reluctant to let go of interwar Hungary as a proud period.

The admiral-turned-regent Miklós Horthy is a moral grey area in Hungarian history, not unlike Paul von Hindenburg in Germany. Although not Nazis themselves, both leaders demonstrated extreme right-wing sympathies; Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor and Horthy appointed the anti-Semitic Gyula Gömbös as Prime Minister. Although there is little evidence that Horthy desired the genocide of Europe's Jews as Hitler envisioned, historians have suggested that his actions contributed to the Hungarian Holocaust. Horthy and Hindenburg are significant because they bridged the gap of two historical eras. Many remember the German nineteenth century proudly as the era of Prussian triumphalism and nearly pan-German unification under Bismarck. However, within decades this golden era was supplanted by the rise of Nazism.

Similarly, Hungarians remember the nineteenth century by commemorating Kossuth, the hero of the 1848 Revolution against the Austrians, which was crushed only with the help of a Russian army. Revolutionaries such as Kossuth represent to Hungarians the resilience of Hungarian liberal nationalism under the yoke of Habsburg rule. Hungarians also commemorate the 1867 legal emancipation of the Jews which granted them equal rights. The figure of Miklós Horthy, a World War I admiral and aged aristocrat by the interwar period, stands with a foot in both worlds. He simultaneously represents the proud liberal nationalism of the pre-World War I

years and the crumbling interwar aristocracy which, motivated by political expediency and its own anti-Semitism, aided Hitler in the mass murder of Hungarian citizens. By lionizing Horthy, Fidesz has capitalized on the myth of Hungary's golden century and pushed its boundary to the spring of 1944.

The Hungarian Holocaust in the 1990s and Beyond

Honoring Horthy is neither new in Hungary nor exclusive to the extreme right. In 2017 for instance Viktor Orbán drew criticism from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for referring to Horthy as a “statesman.” This was not a radical claim, however, within Hungary. After World War II Horthy lived in Portugal until his death in 1957, where he was buried. In September 1993, the center right Antall government ceremonially reburied the regent's body in his Hungarian hometown, Kenderes. Several Hungarian cabinet members and tens of thousands of spectators witnessed the ceremony, welcoming the regent back into the canon of Hungarian history after the communists had exiled his person and his legacy.¹⁰⁵

The event sparked protests and was accompanied by several other moves by the government to place a lid on crimes of the Horthy era. In 1994 Hungary's Constitutional Court reversed the convictions of several Hungarian war criminals and Nazi-collaborators who had been convicted under the post-war People's Tribunal Act. The court ruled that these collaborators were not punishable for their actions, which included ghettoization, expropriation, and deportation, because they were not illegal at the time of their commission.¹⁰⁶ For

¹⁰⁵ Jane Perlez, “Reburial Is Both a Ceremony and a Test for Today's Hungary,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/05/world/reburial-is-both-a-ceremony-and-a-test-for-today-s-hungary.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Braham, “Assault on Historical Memory,” 52.

comparison, this is the argument that prosecutors at the post-war Nuremberg trials nullified by accusing Nazis of universal crimes against humanity. Throughout the 1990s Hungarian courts passed data protection laws making it difficult for historians to access many archival materials from the interwar period which might have incriminated Nazi-collaborators.¹⁰⁷ Professor Braham also points out that the Hungarian government's pre-occupation with unearthing the crimes of communism caused it to be neglectful of surviving Jewish families whose property the Hungarian government had stolen in 1944. In 1998 Viktor Orbán's attention on the issue amounted to an offer to pay 150 dollars to Jewish families for each family member who was a victim of the Holocaust, presuming they could prove it.¹⁰⁸

Hungary never experienced a 1968 moment like in Germany where college aged youths, the first generation to be born after the Second World War, pulled back the collective amnesia around The Holocaust. Hungary spent 1968 firmly within the Soviet bloc and following a state-supported narrative that communists had been the victims and martyrs of World War II, and that the racial anti-Semitism of fascism was less significant than its function as an imperialist death-throe against socialism. In the 1990s, Hungarian public memory was pre-occupied with trying to define a new post-communist identity that also exposed the psychological scars of living under communism.

This is not to say that the Holocaust was ignored completely—far from it. The first Orbán regime contributed to an exhibit at the Auschwitz museum and the 1990s and the 2000s saw the construction of two major Holocaust memorials in Budapest: The Tree of Life Memorial and the Shoes on the Danube. In 2004 the left-wing government commissioned the Holocaust Memorial

¹⁰⁷ Braham, "Assault on Historical Memory," 53.

¹⁰⁸ Braham, "Assault on Historical Memory," 53.

Center in Budapest which contains an archive and research center within a renovated Synagogue. However, the publicity and volume of visitors to these sites pales in comparison to the House of Terror which saw one thousand visitors per day before Covid-19. Although a robust academic Holocaust historiography has persisted in Hungary since the late Cold War era, Hungary's reckoning with the Holocaust on the scale of government commemoration is just getting started. The events of 2014 were intended to elevate Hungary's Holocaust historiography to the same level of attention as the House of Terror.

The House of Fates

*“The identification with the victim affirms a radical separation from the perpetrator. The Treblinka guard who starts the engine or the NKVD officer who pulls the trigger is not me, he is the person who kills someone like myself. Yet it is unclear whether this identification with the victim brings much knowledge...”*¹⁰⁹

– Timothy Snyder.

The façade of the House of Fates is sleek and modern, constructed from concrete and glass.¹¹⁰ A giant silver star of David perches in midair, suspended by two towers. Inside, the museum is nearly vacant save for some benches and tables coated in saran wrap.¹¹¹

Since 2014 the House of Fates has not seen a single visitor. So long as Mária Schmidt directs the project, MAZSIHISZ (the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities) will not endorse it. Without the support of Hungary's Jews or the international Holocaust museum community the government has hesitated to complete the project. Although the building's shell is now a time capsule to 2014, Mária Schmidt had planned for it to be a museum of the future. The House of Fates was to incorporate visual and interactive storytelling through iPads, cinematic

¹⁰⁹ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 399.

¹¹⁰ Sheena McKenzie, “This Holocaust museum cost millions and still hasn't opened. But that's not what worries historians,” CNN, Accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2018/11/world/holocaust-museum-hungary-cnnphotos/>.

¹¹¹ McKenzie, “This Holocaust museum cost millions and still hasn't opened.”

displays, and personalized journeys through the museum's artefacts and historical actors. Schmidt designed the House of Fates to induct a new generation, fourteen to twenty-four-year-olds, into the field of Holocaust History.¹¹² Why have so many turned against the project?



*Exterior of the House of Fates.*¹¹³

One reason is that Schmidt's support for the controversial Memorial to the Victims of German Occupation demonstrated that she had not abandoned Double Genocide historiography which refuses to differentiate between the Holocaust and Christian suffering under communism. Mária Schmidt has even criticized the Hungarian Jewish community for monopolizing memory of historical suffering: [The descendants of Holocaust victims] "still want to tell us who we can grieve for and who we cannot, and who we can shed a tear for and who we cannot. They demand

¹¹² Maria Schmidt, "A Love Story," *Mandiner, Hungarian Globe*, October 3, 2014, https://hungarianglobe.mandiner.hu/cikk/20141003_schmidt_maria_a_love_story.

¹¹³ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1442121/world>.

empathy from us every single day of the year while they are closing their hearts and remain blind and deaf to others' misery.”¹¹⁴

Unlike the House of Terror, the House of Fates is exclusively a Holocaust museum. With its chosen premise being an Auschwitz-bound railway line in 1944, it places its narrative firmly before the Soviet occupation. Schmidt planned for the museum to foreground several heroic figures: Raoul Wallenberg, Hannah Szenes, Margit Slachta, and Sára Salkaház. While all these stories are worth telling, by focusing almost exclusively on the Holocaust's innocent victims and heroes The House of Fates shines its spotlight on a minority while failing to reckon with the passivity of the vast majority of Hungarians during the Holocaust. With its “wall of perpetrators” it directs blame for the Holocaust to a relatively small cadre of Nazis and Quislings which it holds apart from the otherwise pure-intentioned Hungarian population. As Mónika Kovács argues of global Holocaust remembrance in the twenty-first century, “The moral security of standing with the victim (‘standing on the good side’) leaves no urge for understanding the motives of perpetrators and bystanders.”¹¹⁵

While a memorial preserves memory of an event and its surrounding emotions across generations and is the interpretation of a politician, artist, or organization, a museum should seek to educate visitors, using artifacts as its tools. Through both the House of Terror and the House of Fates, Schmidt has blended the two methods of memory together. Indeed, what makes the House of Terror so troubling is how it uses the building of 60 Andrassy—which was occupied by both Nazis and communists—to tell a story with a political slant. The House of Fates is similar in that it distorts our perception of the past not by falsifying information but through its selection of

¹¹⁴ McKenzie, “This Holocaust museum cost millions and still hasn’t opened.”

¹¹⁵ Kovács, “Global and Local Holocaust Remembrance,” 233.

stories. Mária Schmidt hoped the museum would “make a contribution to reconciliation, to a discussion of the tragedies of the past to settle issues and to at least alleviate, if not bring to an end, all of the evil and purposeless accusations constantly experienced even today.” Thereby, she would be “neutralizing or at least weakening the forces continuously calling Hungary an anti-Semitic and fascist country, using these unfounded stigmata as a political weapon to discredit the Hungarian nation as a whole.”¹¹⁶ Without explicitly denying the existence of Hungarian collaboration in the Holocaust on a large scale, by foregrounding stories of innocent actors and heroes the radical right directs the conversation away from the culpability of historic Hungarian nationalism.

Conclusion

“To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them.”¹¹⁷

- James Young

“In our view, the fact that we are allowed to display this part of the past in a museum can feed our hope that we have overcome this past, and that it does not affect our lives today anymore.”¹¹⁸

- Mária Schmidt.

One of the most troubling themes in Schmidt’s historiography is the claim that under the Orbán administration the Jewish and Christian populations have reconciled. Although an admirable goal, it is disingenuous to proclaim its completion when the government refuses to acknowledge the extent to which the Christian population at large benefited from anti-Semitism. For thousands of Christian Hungarians who were admitted to a university in the interwar era there were Jews who had been denied entry by law. For so many Hungarian families given

¹¹⁶ Schmidt, “A Love Story.”

¹¹⁷ James E. Young, “The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning,” In *Theories of Memory: A Reader*, ed. Michael Rossington et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 181.

¹¹⁸ Schmidt, “The Democratization of Knowledge.”

shelter after a bombing raid in 1944 there was a Jewish family evicted to a ghetto. The frequent criticism the Orbán administration draws from Yad Vashem, the USHMM and MAZSIHISZ casts further doubt on its so-called reconciliation. Nevertheless, Mária Schmidt has referred to Hungary's relationship with its Jews as a "love story."¹¹⁹ To the Hungarian radical right the process of atoning for the Holocaust is complete: "We are at a point where some groups would like to consider their ancestors' tragic fate an inheritable and advantageous privilege. They would like this 'victim status' to bleed to generations of those who suffered no harm."¹²⁰

James Young, an expert on Holocaust memorials, has outlined the dangers of so-called atonement and reconciliation. In contrast to The House of Fates or Memorial to the Victims of German Occupation, Young describes a memorial proposed by Horst Hoheisel in 1995 to destroy the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Instead of building a new monument, the empty space where the Gate once stood would symbolize Germany's absent Jewish community.¹²¹ James Young suggests that Hoheisel knew the memorial committee would reject his design and that this rejection was itself a part of the art piece: "Here he seemed to suggest that the surest engagement with Holocaust memory in Germany may actually lie in its perpetual irresolution, that only an unfinished memorial process, can guarantee the life of memory."¹²² A complete memorial can symbolize that a people has placed a cap on an event; it puts people's consciences at ease because the event is no longer current, but history, and because the monument preserves the history people are free to forget it in their everyday lives. Oblivion in the place of a monument

¹¹⁹ Schmidt, "A Love Story."

¹²⁰ Maria Schmidt, "Captive of the Past," Schmidt Maria, July 10, 2014, https://schmidtmaria.hu/publikaciok/v/cikkek/publikaciok/captive_of_the_past/.

¹²¹ James E. Young, "Memorial Arts by Horst Hoheisel and Andreas Knitz: Negative Spaces and Memorial Spielerei," *The Massachusetts Review* Vol. 60, No. 4 (Winter 2019), 619.

¹²² Young, "Memorial Arts by Horst Hoheisel and Andreas Knitz," 619.

symbolizes that the Holocaust cannot be undone and requires a nation's active attention to keep the memory alive.

Hoheisel's design was too radical and esoteric to be put into practice, and we should not expect governments to subscribe to his vision. However, there are several Holocaust memorials in Germany which adhere to a similar philosophy, such as the Grunewald Station "Memorial to the Jews Deported from Berlin," which displays several human-like silhouettes carved into a wall in negative space.¹²³ The popularity of this style of memorial helps to contrast the interests behind the House of Fates and the Memorial to the Victims of German Occupation.



*Grunewald Station Holocaust Memorial.*¹²⁴

¹²³ Simon Sleight, "Memory and the City," In *History, Memory, and Public Life: The Past in the Present*, ed. Anna Maerker et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 132.

¹²⁴ <https://fotoeins.com/2016/02/01/berlin-grunewald-mahnmal-gleis17-track17-memorial/>.

Chapter 3 – Immigration and National Survival: The Radical Right’s Historiography of Trianon

*“Today there is no Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, or Soviet Union. There is no British or French Empire. And what’s left of them is now twisting in the multicultural grip of their vindictive colonies... Even the greatest cannot avoid the justice of history.”*¹²⁵

- Viktor Orbán.

Sirens flashed in the darkness illuminating the faces of hundreds of Syrian refugees, many carrying children, as they corralled themselves along a highway shoulder. Stranded in Budapest by the Hungarian government, they had elected to walk to the Austrian border on foot in a caravan which kept them within the protective view of the public and media. But as the busses sent by the Hungarian government slowed alongside them, they feared they would be taken not west but to detainment camp. A voice lamented, “I swear to God if they take us to a camp, or treat us badly again... Where is the guarantee? Where is the UN? Don’t trust them now.”¹²⁶

Although the Hungarian government frames Syrians as invaders who intend to settle Hungary, most only want to pass through it on their way west. Since the Syrian refugee crisis began in 2015, fewer refugees have settled in Hungary and Poland than nearly anywhere else in the European Union. Yet Hungary has militarized the migration issue: its fence along the Serbian border is electrified and armed with cameras and heat sensors.¹²⁷ In May 2020 an EU court ordered Hungary to take down its so-called “transit zones,” which were cages where the government detained refugees illegally.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s commemoration speech,” About Hungary, June 6, 2020,

<http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/primeminister-viktor-orbans-commemoration-speech-trianon/>.

¹²⁶ “We Walk Together: a Syrian refugee family’s journey to the heart of Europe,” The Guardian, September 10, 2015, Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubGhzVdnhQw&t=97s>.

¹²⁷ Marton Dunai, “Hungary Builds a New High-Tech Border Fence -- With Few Migrants in Sight,” *Reuters*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-hungary-fence/hungary-builds-new-high-tech-border-fence-with-few-migrants-in-sight-idUSKBN1692MH>.

¹²⁸ Benjamin Novak, “Hungary Moves to Close Border Camps After E.U Court Ruling,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/22/world/europe/hungary-migrant-camps.html>.

Immigration and the Radical Right's Historical Narrative

Hungary has framed its immigration policy as a reaction to the so-called disaster of German *Willkommenskultur* (Welcome Culture). In 2015 news footage displayed thousands of German volunteers gathering outside train stations to distribute water and fresh clothes to Syrian refugees. Conscious of the Nazi past, and that the eyes of the world were upon them, Germans demonstrated their willingness to become a multi-ethnic society. Meanwhile the Hungarian radical right warned that in the coming decades mass immigration would erode the cultural integrity of welcoming nations. In her essay, “Without Knocking: Long Live Mentally Globalized, Internationalist Germany,” Mária Schmidt quoted the Iranian revolutionary and cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini: “If Islam is not politics, Islam is nothing.” She then opined, “Yes, Islam is politics and religion at the same time.”¹²⁹ The radical right often argues that Islam is both a religion and an oppressive ideology, and so anti-Islam does not contradict Europe’s traditions of religious tolerance any more than anti-fascism. West European radical rightists have even engaged in “homo-nationalism” in which they point to Islamist intolerance of homosexuality to frame anti-Islam as a civic responsibility.

The Hungarian radical right maintains that it is not racist but is concerned by Middle Eastern immigration because culture is primordial to a geographic location. On its face, this “ethnopluralism” does not ascribe value to cultures and ethnicities. Instead, its followers argue that because one cannot unlearn their culture, and culture provides the foundation upon which

¹²⁹ Mária Schmidt, “Without Knocking – Long Live Mentally Globalised, Internationalist Germany! – An Essay By Top Hungarian Historian Mária Schmidt,” Hungary Today, September 28, 2015, <https://hungarytoday.hu/without-knocking-long-live-mentally-globalised-internationalist-germany-essay-top-hungarian-historian-maria-schmidt-29320/>.

societal and governmental values stand, the spread of foreign cultures erodes the supports of a tolerant and unified society. One can see how this argument borders and perhaps overlaps biological racism. Specifically, the radical right holds that Muslims subscribe to backwards and authoritarian values, and desire to subjugate Europeans under Sharia Law, or “dhimmitude.” By contrast, the radical right often maintains that European toleration stems from Christian secularism.

The radical right therefore rejects the claim that those fleeing poverty and violence have a universal right to cross borders. While it is unfortunate that there is a war in Syria, the sovereign nation’s desire to remain homogenous outweighs the plight of the refugee. In the words of Orbán, “I am convinced that Hungary has the right—and every nation has the right—to say that it does not want its country to change.”¹³⁰ In the radical right’s view, nationality and culture are not artificial constructs to be overcome, but inherent in the unconscious memory of a nation which is irrevocably tethered to its forbears, national heritage, and geography. To the radical right the Carpathians and the Danube are not just geographic features but a fortress which defended Christian Hungary for a thousand years against Mongols and Ottomans.

In the words of some Hungarians, this framing of immigration and the right of a nation to remain homogenous draws on Hungary’s history of external domination. In 2018 VPRO interviewed two Hungarian college students about why the government was so popular. The first student claimed that the government made itself popular by instilling Hungarians with the fear that dark-skinned people would take away their jobs.¹³¹ Thus Fidesz could define itself in

¹³⁰ “Viktor Orbán’s speech at the 14th Kötöcske civil picnic,” The Prime Minister, September 17, 2015, http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_article/viktor_orban_s_speech_at_the_14th_kotcse_civil_picnic.

¹³¹ “Orban in Hungary: The Rise of Populism,” VPRO Documentary, September 21, 2018 Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBvDrJQfi50>.

contrast to the mainstream left which is silent on the apparent threat of immigration. The interviewer turned to the second man, a law student who said he wanted stay in Hungary in part to counteract the Hungarian brain drain which began in 1990. He explained that while fear of outside forces galvanized government support, the government had not invented that fear; instead, he attributed it to Hungary's historical memory and narrative: "Hungarian history was totally different from Western history... We were under the oppression of the Turkish empire... then under the oppression of the Austrian kings. So, the Hungarian soul, at least my soul, is totally different from a Western—like from a French person's."¹³² Another way of framing it is that the Hungarian experience is in some ways similar to those of nations which European empires colonized.

In Hungary's historical narrative, its suspicion is a hard-learned lesson from its history. According to István Rév, a Hungarian scholar and archivist, what makes this narrative so compelling is that "although it seems that we Hungarians have always been victims, in fact we have always been martyrs and heroes. And to a certain extent, even today we are heroes."¹³³ Like the Serbian nationalist narrative of its defeat against the Ottomans at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, the story of a defeat can be inspiring by coloring the nation's historical perseverance with the language of redemption. Australians, for example, celebrate ANZAC Day every spring to commemorate the Australian volunteers who died in Britain's disastrous invasion of Ottoman Gallipoli during World War I. Frank Bongiorno writes that in Australian memory April 25th, 1915, the day of the ANZAC landing in the Dardanelles, was the day that the modern Australian

¹³² "Orban in Hungary," VPRO.

¹³³ "Orban in Hungary," VPRO.

nation was born out of the British Empire in a “baptism of fire.”¹³⁴ In Hungary’s narrative, on Europe’s eastern frontier against the Ottoman Empire and Eurasian steppe, Hungarians were Christian Europe’s guardians from Asiatic hordes who sought to destroy it. Although Hungary spent much of its history dominated by foreign empires and the Soviet Union it has outlasted those institutions. Viktor Orbán mobilized this narrative before the European Parliament in 2018 when its members accused the Fidesz regime of violating the rule of law.¹³⁵ In response Orbán framed the Parliament’s accusations against the Hungarian government as an attack on the Hungarian people who had chosen the government. Orbán then warned the Parliament, “You’re going to denounce Hungary that rebelled and took up arms against the biggest army of the world, the Soviet army, and shed its blood for freedom and democracy... I stand here today and see those accusing Hungary are the ones who inherited democracy, who did not have to take personal risks in order to obtain liberty.”¹³⁶

Fidesz and its supporters have innovated by mobilizing Hungary’s historical resentment towards Ottomans, Austrians, and Russians to accuse the European Union, particularly Germany and the Western European member states, of seeking to vassalize Hungary. In his 2016 speech commemorating Hungary’s 1848 Revolution, Orbán declared

Europe is not free, because freedom starts with the statement of the truth... It is forbidden to state that in Brussels they are currently scheming to transport foreigners here as quickly as possible and to settle them among us. It is forbidden to say that the objective

¹³⁴ Frank Bongiorno, “Remembering ANZAC,” in *History, Memory, and Public Life: The Past in the Present*, ed. Anna Maerker et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 184.

¹³⁵ “Rule of law in Hungary: Parliament calls on the EU to act,” News, European Parliament, December 9, 2018, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180906IPR12104/rule-of-law-in-hungary-parliament-calls-on-the-eu-to-act>.

¹³⁶ “Viktor Orbán: “You are condemning Hungary,” EURACTIV, September 11, 2018, Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oqhwwPj5mo>.

of this settlement is to redraw the religious and cultural patterns of Europe, to rebuild its ethnic footings, thereby eliminating the nation-states that represent the last impediment to the Internationale.¹³⁷

With his reference to the “Internationale” or First Communist International, Orbán alluded to the historical precedent for the West and East colluding against Hungary. In Hungarian history, perhaps no other event serves as so compelling a metaphor for this supposed siege than the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Between 1918 to 1920, Hungary fell from its stature as the eastern half of the great Austro-Hungarian Empire to a small and weak state surrounded by potentially aggressive neighbors. Romanian Transylvanians, Czechs, Slovaks, and South Slavs who had lived beneath the Habsburg monarchy seized the post-war moment and President Woodrow Wilson’s doctrine of national self determination to gain independence. In the contemporary radical right’s framing Trianon was not a mutual agreement with the Entente, but a crime committed against Hungary. As Gábor Gyáni argues, in Hungarian memory there is a “Trianon syndrome” which has managed to “monopolize and reserve for itself the national claim for the ‘true’ traumatic past.”¹³⁸ This narrative has gone hand in hand with the nationalization, or “Magyarization” of twentieth-century Hungarian victimhood.¹³⁹

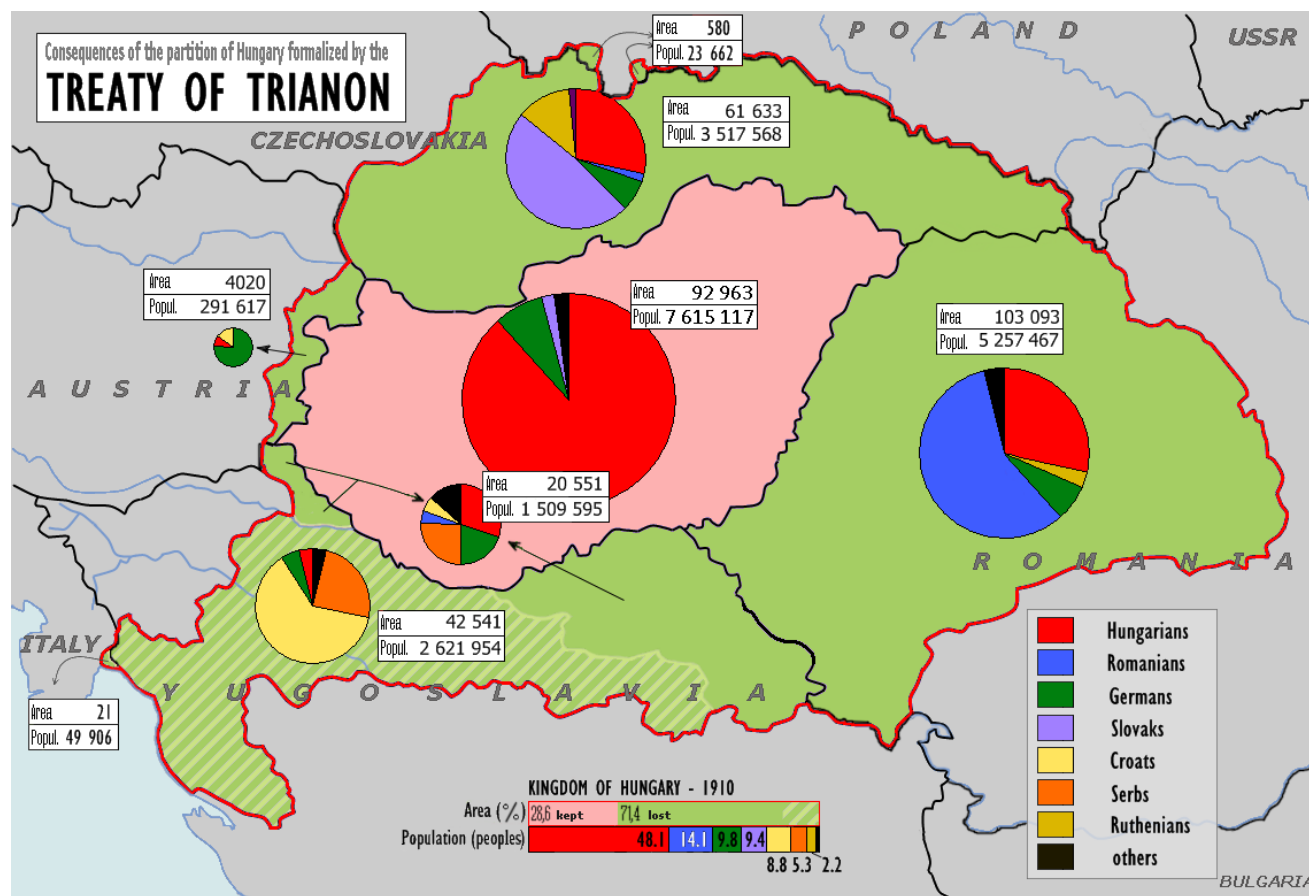
In 2020 the Hungarian government commemorated the one hundredth anniversary of Trianon with a new memorial. Before analyzing the language of 1920/2020 and connecting it to both immigration and Holocaust remembrance, I will briefly sketch the details of the Treaty of

¹³⁷ “Prime Minister Orbán’s March 15 Speech,” The Orange Files, Accessed April 25, 2021, <https://theorangefiles.hu/prime-minister-orbans-march-15-speech/>.

¹³⁸ Gábor Gyáni, “Hungarian Memory of the Holocaust in Hungary,” In *The Holocaust in Hungary: Seventy Years Later* ed. Randolph L. Brahm and András Kovács (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2016), 230.

¹³⁹ Gyáni, “Hungarian Memory of the Holocaust in Hungary,” 216.

Trianon and its cultural impact on Hungary.



Map of the Treaty of Trianon 1920.¹⁴⁰

“No! No! Never!”

“The diktat [Trianon] saw two thirds of the country’s territory and 63 per cent of its population shorn from us; thus, one in three Hungarians found themselves outside our borders. The verdict was obviously a death sentence. History has not recorded a nation that could survive such a loss of blood. Those responsible for the decision were versed in history and delivered their verdict in the light of that knowledge.”¹⁴¹

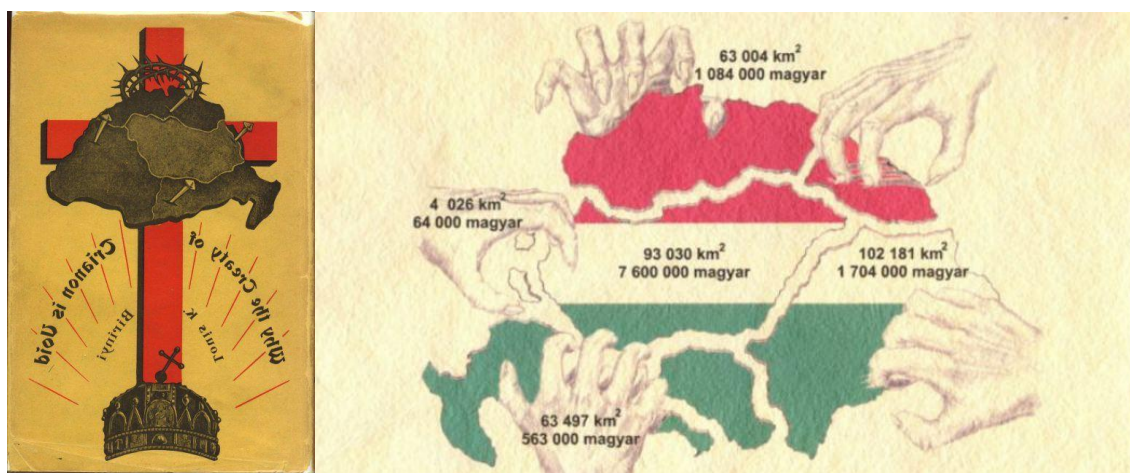
- Viktor Orbán.

The Treaty of Trianon signed June 4, 1920, was one of several post-World War I treaties which broke up the imperial holdings of the Central Powers, the most famous of which is

¹⁴⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikl%C3%B3s_Horthy#/media/File:Magyarország_1920.png.

¹⁴¹ “Full “State of the Nation” speech of Viktor Orbán, 2020,” Visegrad Post, February 19, 2020, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2020/02/19/full-state-of-the-nation-speech-of-viktor-orban-2020/>.

Versailles which many understand as an unnecessarily punitive treaty intended to punish Germany. Post-war Hungary would have been envious of Germany's deal. In 1920 the Kingdom of Hungary lost two thirds of its territory and three fifths of its population.¹⁴² To many, what they knew as Hungary had ceased to exist and what was left was unrecognizable. Maps of the new Hungary lined the streets with the words, "No! No! Never!"¹⁴³ At a 1934 diocesan conference to discuss Hungarian birth-rates a Calvinist priest, Geza Kiss, asked, "What is happening here? The ancient and pure Hungarian race (az ostizta magyarfaj), the Reformed community, is on the verge of extinction, and an ugly (szornyu) mix of peoples is coming for their place... I know of one village in the Ormanysag, where the gypsies at the edge of the village already have more children than the entire village."¹⁴⁴ The similarity between how some interwar Hungarians and the contemporary radical right frame population replacement by minorities is striking.



*Interwar Hungarian propaganda papers advocating territorial revisionism.*¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 26.

¹⁴³ "The Trianon-code: How a nation copes with trauma," Index.hu, June 4, 2020, Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFgzIxAEA8c>.

¹⁴⁴ Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary*, 132.

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/508484614150179918/> and <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2019/06/09/revisionist-poster-causes-quite-a-stir-among-hungarys-neighbors/>.

The beginning of the interwar period was a bloody time in Eastern Europe: after the Great War Hungarians clashed with Romania for control of Transylvania, and Poland struggled for independence against Stalin and the Red army amidst the Russian Civil War. From Hungary's perspective, tectonic forces were shifting that threatened to destroy the isolated nation. The Treaty of Trianon breached Hungary's natural defenses of the Carpathians in the East, and Hungarian politicians feared that they would soon be invaded by communists. Earlier in the chapter I mentioned the importance of historical defeats in nationalist narratives. The following description by historian Paul Hanebrink illustrates this tradition in the interwar period:

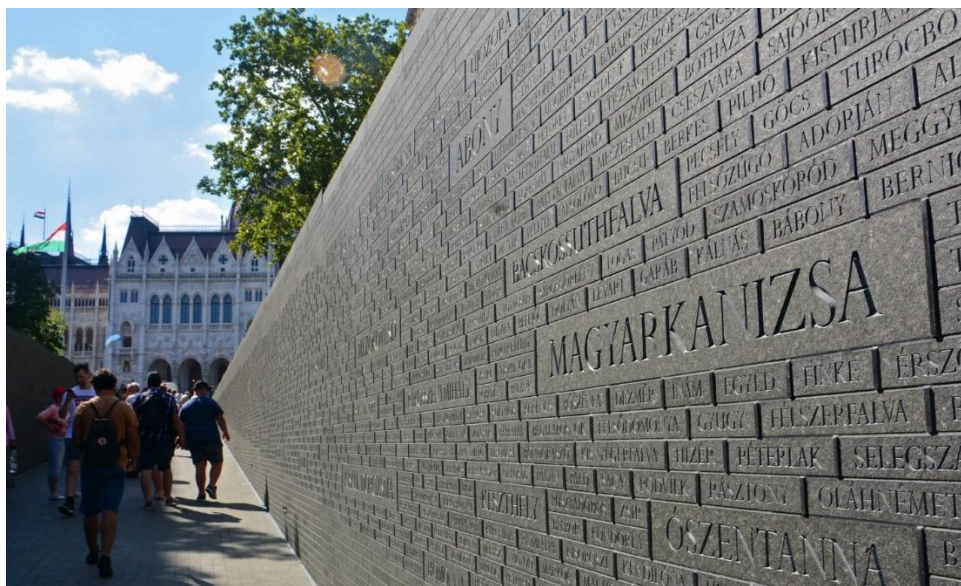
[Responses] to the Treaty of Trianon... placed the state at the center of a national cult of martyrdom, in which Hungary was a crucified Christ whose resurrection would come with the revision of the unjust borders. Numerous commemorative albums, written and translated into other European languages to publicize the injustice done to Hungary, depicted the nation, represented pictorially as all the historic crownlands of St. Istvan before partition, on a cross or with a crown of thorns.¹⁴⁶

But Trianon is more complicated. Maps which show Hungary's old and new borders without overlays of the region's demography obscure the fact that while it held no overseas colonies, the Kingdom of Hungary was nevertheless an empire. Through Trianon millions of people who were Serbian, Slovakian, and Romanian were repatriated to their nation-states of choice. Each nation impacted by the treaty has its own Trianon narrative, and Hungary's is only one of several.

¹⁴⁶ Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary*, 111.

Trianon 2020: The Year of National Unity

At 4:30 PM on June 4th, 2020, thousands of church bells rang across Hungary to commemorate the exact moment, one hundred years before, when Hungary signed the Treaty of Trianon. Then, delayed due to Covid-19, the government inaugurated its new Trianon Memorial in Budapest on August 20. The monument is a 100-meter by 4-meter ramp near the Parliament building with dark walls rising on either side. As visitors walk down the ramp, they can read the names of Hungary's twelve thousand municipalities etched into the surrounding walls. Symbolizing national unity, the names of the regions lost in 1920 are displayed alongside those still within Hungary's borders. So that there would be no pattern or separation between the annexed territories and the land Hungary retained, the order of the names of the municipalities was chosen randomly by an algorithm.¹⁴⁷



Trianon Memorial in Budapest nearby the Parliament building.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Ábrahám Vass, "Plan for New Trianon Memorial Revealed – with Pictures!" Hungary Today, April 13, 2019, <https://hungarytoday.hu/plan-for-new-trianon-memorial-revealed-with-pictures/>.

¹⁴⁸ https://external-preview.redd.it/YFFo9dh_ulzr6KvVhGbOgy2X5tFbNpxeV6J_dcrB5c.jpg?auto=webp&s=8cf1f79147a7488b192e9a151624a53cddd949f.

At the monument's inauguration Viktor Orbán declared, "One hundred years after defeat in the First World War and the Trianon diktat, today we stand on the stage of European history as champions of survival... We are sailing in uncharted waters. In our eyes the West has lost its attraction, and in their eyes the world of Central Europe does not seem to be a desirable one."¹⁴⁹ To Orbán, Hungary's survival through its political fragmentation in the twentieth century proved that it could be independent from the vassalage of foreign institutions. In the radical right's narrative, during the Cold War Hungarians looked West to liberalism and capitalism, but in the 2000s and 2010s, adopting Western norms came at the cost of ceding sovereignty to the European Union, as well as adopting multiculturalism which threatened to denationalize Eastern Europe. In 2020 the Hungarian House Speaker, László Kövér, declared that "Trianon is not merely an unfinished piece of history but also a present and future European issue... Because today each and every European nation has to confront the anti-national sentiments threatening their existence, and in the future all of them will have to fight for the preservation of their own identity in order to survive."¹⁵⁰ Trianon teaches that Hungary should not trust the promises of foreign powers, particularly the promise that nationalism is the antithesis of modern European values, rather than their guardian.

Trianon trauma is pervasive throughout Hungarian society in large part because it has become divorced from the militarism attached to it in the interwar era. Ignoring calls from the extreme right, Orbán is satisfied with the current borders of Central-Eastern Europe and has pursued alternative means to overturn Trianon. In essence, if he cannot regain Hungarian land,

¹⁴⁹ "Address by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the inauguration of the Memorial to National Cohesion," The Prime Minister, August 20, 2020, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/address-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-inauguration-of-the-memorial-to-national-cohesion/>.

¹⁵⁰ "Trianon Centenary Exhibition Opens at National Museum," Hungary Today, September 30, 2020, <https://hungarytoday.hu/trianon-treaty-centenary-exhibition-open-national-museum/>.

he can regain its people. In 2010 Fidesz passed a law offering citizenship, voting rights, and participation in Hungarian social programs to ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring Romania. Around one million Hungarian Romanians accepted the offer and ninety-five percent of them vote for Fidesz.¹⁵¹ While dual citizens in Romania, Ukraine, and Serbia can vote by mail, Hungarian expatriates who the government fears will vote against Fidesz cannot.¹⁵² Aside from Fidesz's strategic goal in gaining roughly one million extra votes in a country with a population smaller than ten million, the law also fits into Orbán's stated vision of a nationalist, illiberal, albeit quasi-democratic government. Another example of Orbán's policy of cross-border national unity was his support in 2020 for VMSZ, a Hungarian political party running in the upcoming Serbian elections. Interviewer Zoltán Kozma asked Orbán why it was important for Hungarians to seek national representation in countries where they are a minority. Orbán responded that "we Hungarians... [are] a cultural and linguistic island here in the middle of Europe... If our communities are absorbed, assimilated and merged, they will lose their Hungarian culture and the Hungarian language: we will simply disappear."¹⁵³

The Hungarian National Museum echoed these sentiments in its 2020 temporary exhibit on Trianon trauma and culture, writing that "The exhibition renders the talent and creativity of Hungarian people visible, and makes us aware that preserving the Hungarian spiritual unity takes active effort, and that the living cultural heritage of the community shall be passed on."¹⁵⁴ Similar to 2014's theme of Holocaust remembrance and subsequent reconciliation between

¹⁵¹ Zack Beauchamp, "It Happened There: How Democracy Died in Hungary," Vox, September 13, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/13/17823488/hungary-democracy-authoritarianism-trump>.

¹⁵² Viktória Serdült, "Fidesz refuses to allow Hungarian expats to vote by mail," Budapest Beacon, August 8, 2016, <https://budapestbeacon.com/fidesz-refuses-to-allow-hungarian-expats-to-vote-by-mail/>.

¹⁵³ "Interview with Viktor Orbán on the Pannon RTV programme "Public Affairs," The Prime Minister, June 16, 2020, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/interview-with-viktor-orban-on-the-pannon-rtv-programme-public-affairs/>.

¹⁵⁴ "The Year of National Unity: Garden Gallery," Hungarian National Museum, Accessed April 25, 2021, <https://mnm.hu/en/exhibitions/temporary/year-national-unity-garden-gallery>.

Hungary and the Jewish community, the government declared 2020 to be a year of national unity. Although Hungary no longer covets its lost land, the map of its old borders—chosen by the Hungarian National Museum to advertise its exhibit—is not merely a far-right symbol but a mainstream image which represents the resilience of the Hungarian spirit across borders. And because, according to the government, one does not cease to be a Hungarian when he or she no longer lives within the state—even if they have never visited post-Trianon Hungary—it is the government’s duty to represent them all.

The radical right did not so much create Trianon trauma has harness its symbolism and emotional gravity. As Jan-Werner Müller has pointed out, in Hungary it is extremely common to see license plates imprinted with maps of the Hungarian crownlands.¹⁵⁵ A documentary about Trianon by the Hungarian magazine, *Index*, explained how after the fall of communism the repressed feelings about Trianon “broke free,” and suddenly cars became plastered with greater-Hungary bumper-stickers. Notably, however, the left-wing MSZP chose not to employ Trianon symbolism due to its nationalistic overtones.¹⁵⁶ Anna Menyhert, a scholar of Hungary, includes an anecdote in her article, “The Image of the ‘Maimed Hungary’ in the 20th Century,” in which her eleven-year-old son returned from school on a Trianon memorial-day, shaken, and explained that the teacher had played the class a song about Trianon with the lines: “There is no place for me on earth / where I could lay my head. / A border separates me from my / sweetheart (...) / Borders won’t separate us, we speak the same language, for god’s sake! / Hungarians suffer from Trianon, / Tell me, why did we allow this to happen, / why?”¹⁵⁷ In class her son had seen posters

¹⁵⁵ Jan-Werner Müller, “The Hungarian Tragedy,” *Dissent*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Spring 2011), 7.

¹⁵⁶ “The Trianon-code: How a nation copes with trauma,” *Index.hu*.

¹⁵⁷ Anna Menyhért, “The Image of the ‘Maimed Hungary’ in 20th-Century: Cultural Memory and the 21st Century Consequences of an Unresolved Collective Trauma,” *Environment, Space, Place*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Fall 2016), 89.

showing bloody hands tearing out pieces of Hungary from its map, and he wanted to know what he could do to stop them.¹⁵⁸

While Trianon is a poignant national symbol regardless of one's political orientation, the Hungarian radical right mobilizes it by claiming to identify and combat the figurative bloody hands which claw at Hungary. To Mária Schmidt, Trianon represents Western Europe's historical condescension to the East: The West has "always communicated with the Eastern part of Europe from the altitude of a podium, the way they always had with their colonies..."¹⁵⁹ In the twenty-first century, the radical right mobilizes Trianon trauma to help it frame the European Union. In his June 2020 Trianon commemoration speech Prime Minister Orbán accused:

The West raped the thousand-year-old borders and history of Central Europe. They forced us to live between indefensible borders, deprived us of our natural treasures, separated us from our resources, and made a death row out of our country. Central Europe was redrawn without moral concerns, just as the borders of Africa and the Middle East were redrawn. We will never forget that they did this.¹⁶⁰

By mentioning Africa and the Middle East, Orbán framed Trianon as Hungary's own Sykes-Picot agreement, in which imperialists supposedly drew lines haphazardly across a map of the Middle East without regard for the communities they were destroying or geopolitical conflicts they were brewing. Ultimately, to the radical right the Treaty of Trianon is a symbol of uncertainty in Central-Eastern Europe. Therefore, Hungarians should not allow politics to divide them. This is the core of Viktor Orbán's populism: true Hungarians choose to support Fidesz

¹⁵⁸ Menyhért, "The Image of the "Maimed Hungary" in 20th-Century," 87-88.

¹⁵⁹ Maria Schmidt, "On The Way To Self-Destruction – Historian Mária Schmidt On Europe's Real Troubles – Part I," Hungary Today, December 10, 2015, <https://hungarytoday.hu/way-self-destruction-historian-maria-schmidt-europes-real-troubles-part-35577/>.

¹⁶⁰ "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's commemoration speech."

because to oppose it is to sow division which, in the face of the dual threat of the European Union and mass immigration, could prove deadly to Hungarian independence.

In the Hungarian radical right's framing, society is divided between Hungarians who are proud of their history and want their civilization to survive and Hungarians who are ashamed of their past and see internationalism as the future. Mária Schmidt maintains that one only needs to look to Germany to see a nation well "On the road to self-destruction." Schmidt argues, "It is becoming increasingly evident that the reason for the European community's lack of a common army or border control force, indeed for the lack of will or any effort to set up one, is the absence of commonly held values that its members would see as worthy of protection."¹⁶¹ Schmidt's last clause, "worthy of protection," is significant because the problem Europe faces is not only a lack of values, but the delusion that its values are not worth fighting for.

Schmidt's argument exemplifies British journalist David Goodhart's theory of twenty-first century politics that it is divided between "people from somewhere and people from anywhere."¹⁶² The "anywheres," according to Goodhart, tend to be highly educated, mobile people who value openness and are wary of group attachments. By contrast, the "somewheres" are generally rooted in local communities and value their group attachments. Another way of looking at this division is Ivan Krastev's analysis that the East European right mistrusts bureaucrats with "convertible competencies." These kinds of people are often highly educated, multi-lingual and, as Krastev phrases it, equally capable of running a bank in Bulgaria or Bangladesh.¹⁶³ The Eastern European right—the "somewheres"—mistrust these elites because

¹⁶¹ Maria Schmidt, "On The Way To Self-Destruction."

¹⁶² "The Populist Revolt with David Goodhart," RSA, April 11, 2017, Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ynbbTGEqqc>.

¹⁶³ Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 89-90.

they suspect that if their country was to suffer an economic crisis, the “anywheres” would abandon them.

In contrast to modern Germany which is dominated by “anywheres,” Orban explains that “... we should first of all declare that our political notions have both intellectual and spiritual foundations. Secondly, we should declare that the past thousand years of Hungarian politics has always stood on such foundations.”¹⁶⁴ To the radical right, the culmination of Hungary’s historical narrative has been to establish a government of “somewheres,” who are not only driven by personal gain, or vague liberal-internationalist ideals, but grounded in Hungary by their loyalty to their ethnicity and Christian faith. To the radical right, shame over the Holocaust and the notion that the nationalist sentiments which have historically unified Hungarians were necessary to ostracize interwar Jews, threatens this project. According to Mária Schmidt, “[Angela] Merkel cannot stand either Germans or Europeans. She is particularly disdainful of Germans, who will forever remain Nazis and collectively guilty.”¹⁶⁵ Schmidt goes on to describe the recent guilty verdict of a low level Auschwitz administrator in Germany to warn that the danger of collective guilt is not only that it condemns the innocent, but that it relieves guilt from the Holocaust’s true perpetrators by placing them on the same plain of culpability as guards and paper-pushers.¹⁶⁶ Although Schmidt does not explicitly reference the Hungarian past in this section of her essay, we can transpose its argument onto the right’s historiography of Hungary, which claims that the court of international opinion has laid the crimes of Hitler and Eichmann wrongly at the feet of Miklos Horthy.

¹⁶⁴ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the 27th Congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union.”

¹⁶⁵ Maria Schmidt, “On The Way To Self-Destruction – Historian Mária Schmidt On Europe’s Real Troubles – Part II,” Hungary Today, December 11, 2015, <https://hungarytoday.hu/way-self-destruction-historian-maria-schmidt-europes-real-troubles-part-32897/>.

¹⁶⁶ Maria Schmidt, “On The Way To Self-Destruction, Part II.”

Maintaining National Unity

“Germany, Europe’s strongest country wears sackcloth and ashes day and night in atonement for the Holocaust, while the rest of the West is doing so in repentance for its colonial past. As far as we are concerned, we don’t intend to join that rivalry about whose sins are greater. We believe that the future doesn’t require continuous atonement from us.”¹⁶⁷

- Mária Schmidt.

Although the radical right often frames liberal critiques of Fidesz as foreign and directed by sinister corporate interests, there is a robust Hungarian scholarly community which challenges the government’s policies and historiography. One prominent liberal institution was the Central European University (CEU), which employed István Rév, László Karsai and András Bozóki. Originally founded by Hungarian born Jewish financier George Soros in 1991, the CEU was intended to instill Hungarians with liberal-democratic values that would guide a new elite to democratic governance following the transition from communism. As its rector, Michael Ignatieff has explained, the intention for the university was not to condescendingly explain democracy to Eastern-Europeans, but to ensure that the young and essentially rootless Hungarian democracy was not exploited.¹⁶⁸ Pointing to its liberal political leanings, and the image of its émigré founder Soros and Canadian Rector Ignatieff, Fidesz has painted the university as a globalist-socialist colony on Hungarian soil. Indeed, a favorite saying of Orbán is that “a liberal is nothing more than a communist with a university degree.”¹⁶⁹ Throughout the 2010s the CEU published papers about Orbán’s authoritarianism and educated young people about feminism and gender theory. Although this liberal education often came from Hungarian professors, the fact that it was a foreign institution helped Fidesz to portray it as a Western colonial enclave which brainwashed Hungarians into abandoning their nationalist and socially conservative values.

¹⁶⁷ Maria Schmidt, “At the Crossroads.”

¹⁶⁸ VPRO, “Orban in Hungary: The Rise of Populism.”

¹⁶⁹ “Full ‘State of the Nation’ Speech of Viktor Orban, 2020.”

In 2017 the Central European University came under legal attacks from the government when the National Assembly drafted a bill on higher education declaring that foreign universities accredited in Hungary must have a campus in their home country. Although the law did not refer to the CEU explicitly, it was clearly the law's target as it was based in New York state, but did not have a campus there. The CEU arrived at a deal with New York Governor Cuomo to set up a small fifteen-student campus in Bard College, but the Hungarian government refused to back down and the CEU relocated its primary campus to Vienna.¹⁷⁰ The CEU affair demonstrates that a powerful illiberal democracy can take tangible steps to instate what it vaunts as national unity. It symbolizes how the government, in its apparent struggle to break free of the chains of leftist and liberal ideals, is willing to dictate Hungarian patriotism from above.

Fidesz also claims to defend the Hungarian nation from the threat of Muslim invasion. In 2018 Viktor Orbán warned that “everyone should be wary of the idea of Islam being part of any European country. If Islam is part of Germany, for instance, in Muslim terms this means that Germany is part of Islam.”¹⁷¹ According to the radical right, Muslim immigration is nothing short of the pre-cursor to the destruction of Hungary. First, Muslims will vote their own parties into parliament. Then, according to Mária Schmidt, once they have surpassed the Christian population in number through their higher birthrates, they will deprive “us indigenous Christian-Jewish populations of our land as early as in the near future. All this is underway in front of our eyes and with precious support by our political and media elites consisting of left-wing, sixty-

¹⁷⁰ Franklin Foer, “Viktor Orbán’s War on Intellect,” *The Atlantic* June 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/george-soros-viktor-orban-ceu/588070/>.

¹⁷¹ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at a conference held in memory of Helmut Kohl,” The Prime Minister, June 16, 2018, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-a-conference-held-in-memory-of-helmut-kohl/>.

eighter ‘useful idiots.’¹⁷² But the Muslims are only pawns in the cosmic plot of George Soros. Having used his wealth and political influence to indoctrinate Hungarian politicians with Holocaust guilt and multi-culturalism, the Jewish financier will supposedly capitalize on the destruction and Islamization of European institutions to steal for himself the wealth of European nations.¹⁷³ In 2018 Fidesz plastered Hungarian public spaces with posters of a cackling George Soros. It named its 2018 anti-immigration legislation the “Stop Soros Package.”



Anti-Soros campaign poster. “99 percent reject illegal migration. Don’t let Soros get the last laugh.”¹⁷⁴

Ironically, while Mária Schmidt criticizes liberals for holding people accountable for the crimes of their fathers she also asks, “Does Chancellor Merkel know, when she talks, as usual, about the sins of Europe and those of the Germans, that in the 17th and the 18th centuries

¹⁷² Mária Schmidt, “Without Knocking – Long Live Mentally Globalised, Internationalist Germany!”

¹⁷³ Mária Schmidt, “The Gravedigger of the Left.”

¹⁷⁴ <https://www.voanews.com/europe/hungarys-anti-soros-posters-draw-ire>.

Saracens (Muslims) took masses of Christians into slavery from Italy? Does she know that they were sold, in chains, on slave markets in Algiers, Tunis, Tangier and Constantinople?”¹⁷⁵ At the heart of the radical right’s ideology is its unwillingness to see Muslims as individuals and to comprehend their predicaments. Islamist states and the Muslims who live within them are indivisible to the radical right, and so Muslim immigrants will necessarily create a Europe in which minarets replace church towers and women will wear burkas to be safe in public.¹⁷⁶ This conspiracy theory manifests in policies that prevent refugees from war-torn Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan from reaching safety. Hungary’s location on the south-eastern border of the EU with Serbia makes it the first EU member state migrants encounter that is attached by land to wealthier nations such as Austria. Reports emerged in 2018 that Hungary was only admitting two asylum seekers per day.¹⁷⁷ Hundreds of thousands remain trapped in Turkish jails, or in camps off the coast of Greece in places like Lesbos with little medical attention where they are vulnerable to sweeping wildfires.¹⁷⁸

Conclusion

“... what are we getting from the left?... Pure sanctimony. Pure judgement. You are not good enough. You’re guilty, not only for your own sins, but the sins of your fathers. The crimes of slavery and colonialism are on your head... Tear down those statues and bend the fucking knee.”

- Sam Harris on the rise of Donald Trump.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Maria Schmidt, “On The Way To Self-Destruction, Part I.”

¹⁷⁶ Maria Schmidt, “An Orphaned Legacy: Masterplan – Merkelplan? A Critique Of De-Christianisation Through Migration In Germany,” Hungary Today, May 17, 2016, <https://hungarytoday.hu/orphaned-legacy-masterplan-merkelplan-critique-de-christianisation-migration-germany-62484/>.

¹⁷⁷ Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, “Hungary Reduces Number of Asylum-Seekers It Will Admit to 2 Per Day,” NPR, February 3, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/02/03/582800740/hungary-reduces-number-of-asylum-seekers-it-will-admit-to-2-per-day>.

¹⁷⁸ “Moria migrants: Fire destroys Greek camp leaving 13,000 without shelter,” BBC News, BBC, September 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54082201>.

¹⁷⁹ “The Key to Trump’s Appeal: A Selection from Sam Harris’s Making Sense Podcast (November 3, 2020),” Likeville, November 6, 2020, <https://www.likevillepodcast.com/articles/2020/11/12/the-key-to-trumps-appeal-a-selection-from-sam-harriss-making-sense-podcast-november-3-2020>.

Ivan Krastev has argued that the policies of Fidesz mark the end of an Age of Imitation in which post-communist Eastern Europe sought to model itself economically and politically after the liberal-democratic and capitalist West. This process, he explains, generated latent resentment that was inherent due to its implications of Eastern European backwardness: “the project of adopting a Western model under Western supervision feels like a confession of having failed to escape Central Europe’s historical vassalage to foreign instructors and inquisitors.”¹⁸⁰ Despite the West’s promises of a better world the 1990s saw income inequality and poverty skyrocket across the post-communist world, while average life expectancy plummeted. For many Hungarians, poverty and corruption were the experiences that accompanied the political rhetoric of Western liberalism and Orbán has since identified higher education as a center from which this supposed elitism emanates from.

According to the Hungarian government’s ideology, survival in a post-Trianon, post-Cold War world requires national unity. For the nation to be unified it must root out political dissent— if possible, by framing it as a disingenuous beachhead for foreign interests. It also means disputing historiography which holds that Hungarian nationalism historically led to the political exclusion of the Hungarian Jewish community, which was a pre-condition for the ferocity of the Hungarian Holocaust on the scale it occurred.

¹⁸⁰ Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy* (Pegasus Books: London and New York, 2019), 9.

Conclusion: Memory

While many other details and paradoxes of Hungarian communism have faded with time in the twenty-first century, the legacy of Imre Nagy, the 1956 revolutionary, complicates the radical right's narrative of leftism as foreign and anti-Hungarian. Speaking before the nation for the first time in 1989, Viktor Orbán praised Nagy for fighting to liberate Hungary from Soviet domination; his legacy lent weight and symbolism to Hungary's second anti-communist moment. However, as Fidesz radicalized on the right during the 2010s, it identified Nagy's story as contradictory to Hungary's nationalistic message. In 1956 Hungarians resisted Stalinist terror and Soviet domination by rallying behind a left-wing leader, contradicting the radical right's narrative that liberalism and Soviet communism are in essence the same idea. In the pre-morning darkness of December 28, 2018 Fidesz silently removed Nagy's statue from its prominent home in Kossuth Square, near the Parliament building.¹⁸¹

According to the radical right European liberals have taken on the mantle of Soviet communism and threaten to erode Hungarian national identity and independence. In the words of Mária Schmidt, "Those [leftist] elites consider the end of World War Two as year zero, because they reject all the preceding two thousand years..."¹⁸² In other words, Holocaust guilt has convinced liberals that nothing is worth salvaging from European history before 1945, thus paving the way for them to adopt utopian and internationalist ideals borrowed from Soviet communism. We can see this as a reaction to the left's post-communist politics of inevitability: that there is no alternative to liberalism.¹⁸³ To the radical right there is an alternative: states

¹⁸¹ György Lázár, "Imre Nagy statue removed predawn from Budapest square," Hungarian Free Press, December 28, 2018, <https://hungarianfreepress.com/2018/12/28/imre-nagy-statue-removed-predawn-from-budapest-square/>.

¹⁸² Schmidt, "Europe at the Crossroads."

¹⁸³ "Timothy Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom," Politics and Prose, April 9, 2018, Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9urTazzgGAc&t=1354s>.

should embrace national divisions rather than overcome them because the principles of a national government are derived from its history and cultural traditions, which are unique to geographic location; nationalism is the antidote to internationalist, atheistic totalitarianism which caused twentieth century atrocity.

Lending credence to the claim that fascism and communism are fundamentally similar due to their totalitarianism, Mária Schmidt has quoted the Hungarian Holocaust survivor and author Imre Kertész: “deportation from human existence; misery, hunger, slavery and death in Reck are the same as in Dachau; nor is there any difference between Kolima and Mauthausen in this respect... There is no way of measuring suffering, no degrees for injustice. Both the Gulag and the network of Nazi camps were set up for the same purpose, and the millions of victims bear evidence of its fulfillment.”¹⁸⁴ While we can agree that to the people who suffered there was no moral distinction between fascism and Stalinism, we should remember that they mobilized people based on extremes of very different ideological sentiments. In the words of Tony Judt, “we must keep in view a crucial analytical contrast: there is a difference between regimes that exterminate people in the inhuman pursuit of an arbitrary objective and those whose objective is extermination itself.”¹⁸⁵

In the House of Terror, right-wing historians claimed that Nazism and communism were both, at their core, atheistic. The antithesis of totalitarianism, the museum claimed, was the Christian idea of individual responsibility. Also implicit in the museum’s presentation is the parallel that both the Nazis and the communists destroyed Hungarian sovereignty. And by

¹⁸⁴ Maria Schmidt, “On the Nature of Dictatorships,” Schmidt Maria, August 15, 2014, https://schmidtmaria.hu/publikaciok/v/cikkek/publikaciok_on_the_nature_of_dictator/.

¹⁸⁵ Tony Judt, “The Longest Road to Hell,” The New York Times, December 22, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/22/opinion/the-longest-road-to-hell.html>.

parsing a small cadre of fascist and communist collaborators from Hungarian society at large, it completely ignored Hungary's voluntary cooperation with Hitler in the Second World War.

During the Holocaust Memorial Year of 2014, the radical right nationalized the narrative of the Holocaust by framing the Hungarian nation and its sovereignty as the victims of German occupation, rather than Jews in particular. It thereby shifted responsibility for the Hungarian Holocaust entirely onto Nazi Germany. The year's second event, the House of Fates, sought to symbolize that Hungary's reconciliation and acceptance of its Jewish community was complete, and that anti-Semitism was an ugly chapter that Hungary should leave behind, despite the government's continuing anti-Semitism—George Soros as a case in point. The danger of claiming this victim status is that it frees the Hungarian radical right from analyzing the fact that through nationalism many Hungarian victims were also perpetrators during the Holocaust.

The radical right's 2020 commemoration of the Treaty of Trianon blamed Hungary's interwar predicament on "western minds," thereby mobilizing Trianon trauma as evidence that contemporary liberalism is the intellectual vanguard of Western imperialism. And against the fabricated crisis of population replacement by Muslims, the radical right has insisted that Hungarians should not interrogate historical prejudice, much less speak of collective guilt for the Holocaust, because it is merely a leftist shame-tactic. Historical self-criticism is dangerous, according to the radical right's conspiracy theory, because only a nation that is subservient and wracked with guilt—like Germany—can open its borders to foreigners. We should see this as a racist view because it assumes that only a Hungary degraded in its self-esteem would be willing to accept immigrants from a different racial and cultural background.

The radical right's Holocaust historiography is deeply interconnected with its Islamophobia. The same principle of Hungarian unconscious memory and unity across borders

that echoes throughout Orbán's nationalist rhetoric also informs the radical right's racist view that a Muslim cannot make their home in Hungary. Rather than cautiously studying the parallels between Islamophobia and the historic right's framing of Jews as an alien spirit or race, the radical right defines the historic Hungarian right in contrast to and as a victim of Nazism. It thereby refuses to approach the historical question of how the Holocaust was carried out so *quickly and brutally* amidst the chaos of 1944 on the Eastern Front, and while the Nazis were cautious of igniting a Hungarian rebellion. Christian conservatives and militaristic radical rightists began isolating Hungarian Jews from the national community twenty-four years before the Germans invaded. Whether we interpret this as proof of Hungarian collective guilt is another conversation and beyond my overall point; we should not view twentieth century right-wing totalitarianism as wholly separate from the "respectable" Hungarian political establishment that fascists eventually overthrew. Interwar mainstream nationalism influenced the Hungarian Holocaust even if it did not directly cause it.

In my preface I mentioned that my experience as an American makes my perspective valuable. As an American I have tried to balance national pride and respect for the framers of the Constitution with the knowledge that they horrifically contradicted their ideals. Nobody wants to be told that their ancestors were slave-owners or complicit in the Holocaust. But to understand the role of legislation and prejudice in the Holocaust first demands that Hungarians acknowledge that its governing institutions were largely complicit. As in so much Holocaust literature—much of it centered around Arendt's thesis of the Banality of Evil and Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*—the question is not only "why did bad people plan atrocity," but "why did ordinary people go along with it?" My purpose is not to make people feel ashamed—to do so only fuels the resentment behind the radical right. Instead, I hoped to demonstrate that the

Hungarian government's public history, which it has made mainstream, is a politically motivated right-wing revision. For the Hungarian opposition to succeed, it must articulate both a self-image and a vision of Hungary's past that is not anathema to the Hungarian radical right's emphasis on national pride, but nonetheless studies the past critically. The radical right's historiography is an extreme, but it need not be met with an opposite extreme. We can both combat the radical right's historiography which is destructive and at the same time maintain that being proud of one's nation is not a crime in and of itself.

Afterward

By inventing the threat of the EUSSR and the dangers of European integration and Muslim immigration, Orbán fabricates the necessity of his own leadership, all while accepting significant EU funding for Hungarian government projects. How can Hungarians weaken his hold on power? The 1989 revolution offers us some lessons. First, when the communists lessened restrictions on free speech, the ability of the opposition to communicate with the like-minded and articulate their dissenting views was instrumental. In Hungary today, upwards of seventy percent of the press is loyal to the government.¹⁸⁶ For the opposition to succeed it must find ways to support independent media. In 2006 and 2008, Orbán outflanked the conservative right by capitalizing on the left-wing government's corruption scandals and claiming that it was not only an ineffective government but an illegitimate one. These circumstances demanded radical solutions which Fidesz claimed the sole ability to provide. Ironically, Fidesz today is horrifically corrupt. Bálint Magyar has written two books about Orbán's connections to

¹⁸⁶ Staff, "State of Hungary's Independent Media Uncertain After Election," *The Budapest Beacon*, April 13, 2018, <https://budapestbeacon.com/state-of-hungarys-independent-media-uncertain-after-election/>.

Hungarian oligarchs, many of whom are his personal friends: *The Hungarian Octopus* and *The Post-Communist Mafia State*. One does not need an entire book, however, to offer a sample of the government's corruption, only a newspaper article, radio show, or podcast.

Another lesson from 1989 is that Hungarian political parties from both the left and right should cooperate if they are to stand a chance. In 1989 social democrats, conservatives, and radical rightists such as István Csurka collaborated and accepted the results of the 1990 election. Conversely, it was the inability of the social democrats and the communists in the Weimar Republic to overcome their differences that provided the Nazi Party with the strength to enter government in 1933. In 2021 there is a glimmer of hope that the Hungarian opposition will unite as the historically extreme right Jobbik and the liberal Democratic Coalition, as well as four other parties, have announced their backing of a single candidate to oust Orbán in the 2022 election.¹⁸⁷

Another way that the Fidesz state could collapse is beneath the weight of its own promises of prosperity. While Fidesz has taken the Covid-19 pandemic seriously, offering generous stimulus to the population and implementing lockdowns, the economic fallout has nonetheless damaged the government's popularity. Between May of 2020 and April of 2021, Fidesz sank from fifty-two percent popularity to forty-six percent, now beneath the united opposition whose combined popularity is projected at forty-nine percent.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, in its Islamophobic rhetoric Fidesz overlooks the economic incentives of immigration. With declining birthrates across the EU, economists project that the continent will soon suffer from labor

¹⁸⁷ Lili Bayer, "Hungarian opposition unites in bid to unseat Viktor Orbán," Politico, December 20, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-opposition-unites-in-bid-to-unseat-orban/>.

¹⁸⁸ "Hungary – National Parliament Voting Intention," Poll of Polls, Politico, Accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/hungary/>.

shortages and that younger generations will bear the economic burden of a growing elderly population that is no longer in the work force. In 2019 Fidesz sparked significant anti-government protests towards a “slave law” enabling employers to request up to four hundred hours of overtime per-year.¹⁸⁹ In addition to the labor unions, Fidesz must now also face the Momentum party, a growing group of young, educated parliamentarians who reject the labels of “liberal” and “left.” In the words of Hungarian author Stephan Ozsvath, Momentum claims, “We don’t want to leave Hungary. We want a future here.”¹⁹⁰ Only one in three Hungarians aged 18-29 support Fidesz, indicating that, all things constant, Fidesz’s popularity will fade with time.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Paul Hockenos, “Hungary Finally Has an Opposition Worth a Damn,” Foreign Policy, January 17, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/17/hungary-finally-has-an-opposition-worth-a-damn/>.

¹⁹⁰ Hockenos, “Hungary Finally Has an Opposition Worth a Damn.”

¹⁹¹ Gergely Szakacs, “Analysis: As polls tighten, Hungary's Orban steps up pre-election spending,” Reuters, February 4, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-analysis/analysis-as-polls-tighten-hungarys-orban-steps-up-pre-election-spending-idUSKBN2A41EQ>.

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Appendix 1: Holocaust Timeline

1918-1920: Collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

June 4, 1920: Treaty of Trianon is signed at Versailles, France.

1920: Numerus Clausus laws pass in Hungary

January 30, 1933: Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany.

1934: Hungary signs economic agreement with Germany.

September 15, 1935: Nazi Germany passes the Nuremberg Laws.

1938-1941: Hungary expands territorially through its alliance with Nazi Germany, acquires portions of Czechoslovakia (1938), Romania (1940), and Yugoslavia (1941).

March 5, 1938: Hungarian government announces the Győr Program, which is followed by the anti-Semitic laws of 1938-1939.

1939: Hungary joins the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany and Japan.

August 23, 1939: Germany and the USSR sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

September 1, 1939: Nazi Germany invades Poland.

April 6, 1941: Nazi Germany invades Greece and Yugoslavia.

June 22, 1941: Axis forces invade the Soviet Union. German mobile killing units begin massacring Jews, around 1.25 million by September 1943.

July 31, 1941: Reinhard Heydrich announces plans for the “Final Solution of the Jewish Problem in Europe.”

August 27-28, 1941: *Einsatzgruppen* massacre Carpathian Ruthenian Jews deported by Hungary to Kamianets-Podilskyi, Ukrainian SSR.

January 20, 1942: The Wannsee Conference. Nazi leaders discuss details to implement the “Final Solution.”

January 23, 1942: Occupying Hungarian troops massacre around 1,000 Jews at Novi Sad, Serbia.

January 1943: Axis forces are defeated at the Battle of Stalingrad which is the turning point on the Eastern Front.

March 1944: German forces invade Hungary. The Hungarian government orders its troops not to resist.

March 31, 1944: Hungary orders all Jews to wear yellow stars.

May-July 1944: Adolf Eichmann leads the deportations of rural Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz.

June 6, 1944: Allied invasion of Western Europe begins.

October 6, 1944: Soviet troops enter Hungarian borders.

October 15, 1944: Horthy announces Hungarian defection to the USSR. Hitler supports an Arrow Cross coup which topples the Horthy regime and rules what remains of Hungary.

October 16, 1944: The Arrow Cross regime begins the mass shooting of Budapest Jews on the banks of the Danube river.

January 18, 1945: The Soviet Red Army captures Budapest.

Appendix 2: USHMM Hungarian Holocaust Resources and Responses:

The Holocaust in Hungary: Frequently Asked Questions:

<https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/special-focus/the-holocaust-in-hungary/the-holocaust-in-hungary-frequently-asked-questions>.

The Holocaust in Hungary: An Introduction:

<https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/special-focus/the-holocaust-in-hungary/the-holocaust-in-hungary-an-introduction>.

USHMM Response to the House of Fates: <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-calls-on-hungarian-government-to-honor-commitments-made-on-holocaust>.

USHMM Response to Fidesz's Rehabilitation of Regent Horthy:

<https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-condemns-attempts-to-rehabilitate-hungarian-fascist-leader>.

USHMM on Statue of Hungarian Anti-Semite Balint Homan:

<https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-warns-of-danger-in-hungarian-plan-to-honor-antisemitic-holocaust-era>.