

Gábor Oláh

e-mail: [olah@fss.muni.cz](mailto:olah@fss.muni.cz)

Tento text byl přednesen na Konstanzer Meisterklasse 2011: Performativity v Kostnici.

Title:

**Constructing the evil memorial. Trauma based performance and the conflict of iconic meanings.**



(The memorial of the fallen Soviet Soldiers. Photo by author)

## **Evil memorial**

On 17th of September 2006, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, confessed that the voice on the tape published on the news channels belonged to him. On this tape recording, he admits the lies he made for publicity in the 2006 parliamentary elections campaign. The speech was addressed only to insiders of the Hungarian Socialist Party but on 17th of September, an unknown person delivered the recorded speech to the Hungarian Radio, news channels and newspapers.

The consequences of this confession of the Prime Minister were series of protests, public violence and brutal conflicts between angry demonstrators and the police forces. The demonstrations started at the Kossuth square in front of the House of Parliament, than the demonstrators moved to Liberty square – where the building that houses the Hungarian Television’s headquarter is. The demonstrators’ wish was to read their protesting document on the television but the security service did not let them into the building. On the evening news, a moderator for the Hungarian television station informed that there were hundreds of people at the square. In fact there were significantly more. Cutting off their number by the media made the demonstrators disappointed and even angrier. The result was that the mass attacked the Television building as well as the memorial of fallen Soviet soldiers (from now on only Memorial). More than hundred people were injured including policemen. Lots of members of Hungarian radical right wing parties were also in the mass and tried to present themselves in leading position of the demonstration. The strongest opposite party in the parliament, Fidesz also supported the demonstrations but was not actively engaged in the street protest.

Very briefly, these were the events of the 18th of September in Budapest. Other demonstrations followed, and people took to the streets to voice their opinions. The demonstrators wanted nothing less than the abdication of the Prime Minister and the Socialist-Liberal Government.

Time to time we can read news from Eastern European, former communist countries reporting about conflicting situations connected to soviet statues and memorials. These are reports about people who want to remove (Tallin 2007) or replace (Budapest 2006), or spray the statues with color or just repaint (Sofia 2011) the memorial or statue during the night. After this kind of events and conflicts the memorials and statues are in the focus of media interest,

but there are just few sociological interpretations of these events, attacks and conflicts. I would like to try to fill that gap using the perspective of cultural sociology, particularly with the help of the analytical model of social pragmatics (Alexander 2006) to look at different meanings of the Memorial, how these meanings are constructed and how do these cultural meanings effect collective action. For this reason I will examine a case study, the riots and the attack of the Memorial of the fallen Soviet soldiers in Budapest in 2006. I argue that this attack was a trauma based performance. It was a social drama that in their consequences confirmed the imagined communities (Anderson 2006) of the Hungarian radical right-wing sympathizers and the conservative party sympathizers by bringing up the deep traumas from different levels of memory that are represented by the memorial's iconic meanings for different carrier groups (Alexander 2004) who are the collective agents of trauma process. The indicator for the riots and the emergence of different trauma experiences and different levels of the past (Assmann 1997) was the confession of the prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, that the government lied during the four years and the re-election campaign when they were in power. This confession provoked people to go out to the streets and be there almost four months.

In the following pages I will introduce how is possible that the memorial of fallen soviet soldiers in Budapest became an evil icon for carrier groups of trauma process. Interesting in the iconicity of the memorial is, that according to different levels of memory and trauma the memorial's meanings also differ from each other. I will shortly introduce the context of the hungarian national trauma of the Trianon treaty and show the relation between this trauma and the Liberty square with the memorial.

### **National trauma behind the scene**

After the first world war the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was divided by the Trianon treaty in 1918. New "national" states were founded from the former lands of Hungarian kingdom. Hungary lost 2/3 of its land and approximately 5 million people with Hungarian mother tongue found themselves in one of the newly established nation-state as members of national minority. This event is seen as a national trauma which teared apart the Hungarian nation. There is a narrative about the unjust of the decision of the Triple Entente which decided and influenced the after-war life of Hungary. The narrative about the unjust is more focused on the states of the Little Entente: Romania, Czechoslovakia (Slovakia as political inheritor) and Yugoslavia (Serbia with hungarian minority), the states were Hungarian minority lives. The

Trianon treaty is seen as the biggest trauma in the history of Hungary. It is the origin of other traumas, as a chain of trauma. Being on the loser's side in the WW II., almost fifty years of communism and the oppression of the 1956 revolution is often seen as a direct consequence of the Trianon treaty. During the riots on the Liberty square these traumas came up to the surface because the memorial in that particular moment represented the evil in the sacred space for the people of different narratives of trauma.

In 1993 Czechoslovakia was divided into two states and Yugoslavia fell into pieces. Except the states of former Yugoslavia (except Slovenia) and Moldavia the other states are members of the European Union - the narrative of the Trianon trauma is recently rising and is getting more and more visible in particular forms of nationalism, anti-semitism and radical right-wing activism. According to Alexander (2004: 9-10) traumatic status is attributed to events people believe that it influenced collective identity. The belief in the trauma is so strong, that it is unthinkable to interpret it differently. This belief creates infallibility of master narrative and because of the belief of infallibility it has the potential to get into conflict with other narratives of the same event.

### **Genealogy of the meaning of the Liberty Square**

In the place of Liberty Square originally there was the so-called „Hungarian Bastille“ between 1786 and 1898, which functioned as a barracks for soldiers and as a prison. The square got its name in 1900, after demolishing the prison building which was a symbol of oppression. The rest of the square became a part of the Széchenyi Promenade walking and shopping street. After World War I, there was a memorial of statues, the so called Irredentist statues, that symbolized the lost parts of Historical Hungary<sup>1</sup>. In the middle of the square there was a big map of Historical Hungary with the Hungarian version of its credo made from flowers, grass and stones. Also on the square was the Hungarian flag at the dip and crest with the text, “This is how it was - how it will be.” At the bottom of the flagpole was a turul bird, which is the mythical bird of Hungarians and one of the national symbols which refers to the genesis of Hungarians.

(The Irredentist statues, <http://www.fn.hu>, 20.7.2011)

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<sup>1</sup> Historical Hungary is linked to the size of Hungary before World War I. That means the locality of present Slovakia, Southern part of present Ukraine, eastern part of present Austria, Northern part of present Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia and Romania.



The Irredentist statues were located by one at each corner of the square. On the one which symbolized East, Transylvania (on the picture the first from left) was the tortured transylvanian liberated by the great ancestor Csaba leader. The second on the picture symbolized the lost northern parts presented by the crucified great mother Hungária with Slovak boy and with a protecting soldier from the Rákóczi civil war (18.th century) remembering that Slovaks and Hungarians were fighting on the same side. The third statue is presenting South by a Hungarian soldier, who protects the German (Sváb) woman by his crest. The fourth statue is symbolizing the lost parts from the West. There is one boy who is holding the heralds of western counties and the Hungarian herald also protected by a Hungarian soldier.

In 1945, the Irredentist statues were removed and replaced in 1946 by the Memorial of fallen Soviet Soldiers by Károly Antal. Under the Memorial Soviet soldiers were buried and the square was used by the communist party for propaganda actions. The Memorial was attacked by revolutionists in 1956 revolution. The emblem of Soviet Union and the red star were removed during these events. In 1989, there was a huge demonstration in front of the building of the Hungarian Television, and in 2006, there was the demonstration following the confession of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. During the demonstrations, some of the protesters climbed up onto the Memorial and removed the red star from the top of the obelisk

and put a so-called Árpád dynasty's<sup>2</sup> red and white flag upon it. In 2010 on the square an interactive fountain was build.

What is important in this case, from a cultural sociological perspective, is the square with the Memorial of fallen Soviet soldiers, because it has at least four symbolic meanings for the contemporary Hungarian society. Those meanings that the Memorial embodies have changed fundamentally over the last 100 years. The square has witnessed the changes of three regimes, which has transformed its meaning through the building and the replacement of buildings, as well as the construction of memorials with strong symbolical power. During communism, until recently, there has been the memorial for the fallen Soviet soldiers.

### **Construction on iconic meanings**

In post communist countries large number of Soviet statues, memorials were removed or destroyed, names of streets, squares and even towns were changed. The political elite after 1989 had to decide what to restore or what to build as a new one. The aim was to restore not only the old democratic objects, but also to renovate the deep meanings of statues (Foote, Tóth, Árvay 2000:307) from pre-communist years. In Budapest for example many of Soviet statues and memorials were removed and transported into the so called Statue park. But still lots of Soviet memorials remain in the public sphere. The one at the Liberty square is from the 90's a strongly debated and conflicting memorial. There were efforts of its replacing or removing but these initiatives were always refused by the city hall. Spraying attacks against the memorial during the night became usual. Those soviet statues and memorials which remained are often targets of conflict in contemporary Hungarian society.

On the example of the memorial on the liberty square I examine how can a cultural object 's meaning inspire, motivate and influence individual action and how can a memorial constructed to be evil in the eyes of different carrier groups. The case of the memorial in Budapest demonstrates the power of culture, cultural memory and meaning in point to its importance in contemporary society. Bernhard Giesen (2004) argues that iconic meaning is constructed during an extraordinary event. In the case of the Liberty square memorial the meanings were already there before the riots. The reason for this is in the different levels of the past of the square itself, which I will explain later in this paper. The attack and the

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<sup>2</sup> Árpád dynasty ruled the Kingdom of Hungary from 1000 to 1301.

removing of the soviet emblem demonstrated how different meanings can be brought up to the surface by an extraordinary event and push the memorial in the middle of a conflict situation.

Cultural-material objects like memorials and statues are holding meanings that are deeply graved into unconsciousness and that they influence people's actions. The attack was the visualization of understanding of iconic meanings and the conflict is originated in national trauma. According to Alexander (2004) trauma is constructed by the society, by narratives and as a cultural process trauma is in relation to the process of identity construction (Eyerman 2004). In the case of the riots and the protests trauma also functioned for confirming and objectifying the imagined community of the radical right. Different levels of trauma were displayed into the memorial as an icon of different trauma experiences.

### **Memory and place**

Memory needs places and objects to remember. If there are no places of memory, it is created. "The built environment of urban centers occupies a focal position in and for our memory culture" (Staiger, Steiner, Webber 2009) and if it is fulfilled with conflicting meanings it can also structure the space around into binary oppositions. According to Assmann (1997) material culture is filled with meanings, because it is a common need to give meanings to the objects that are around us. It creates connective structure of shared knowledge and self-presentation. The connective structure is stucked together by memory of common past and the collective values. These objects can represent different levels of the past. The example of the memorial demonstrates how different levels of the past can be surfaced and actualized (according to Assmann's model of repetition and interpretation) during one extraordinary event. Assmann (1997:81) writes that ritual is more than repetition strictly done actions. It is also actualization of meaning by surfacing them. In the case of the attack we can not talk about ritual, it was not following any textual rules. There were efforts to give higher value and legitimacy to the attack by reference to the 1956 revolution, but there is no connection between the those two events.

Cultural memory has a strong influence on narrations of the past. Different versions of the past are represented on Liberty square with different versions of narratives connected to the memorial. The memorial has iconic meanings that are displayed into the whole square. The different meanings are constructed by narrative of the past, present and future and motivate

people's actions. The different narratives structure the square with the memorial to sacred and profane dimensions. So the aim of the rioters by attacking the memorial was to clean the square from the evil object of the memorial and its iconic meanings. In other words to purify the sacred space of the liberty square. The Durkheimian classification (2002) of binary oppositions can help us to understand the motivation of the rioters. Different narratives of different carrier groups structure the representations of the memorial into different classifications that then construct different iconic meanings of the memorial. For the anti-communists and revisionists the square itself is a sacred space which is contaminated by the soviet memorial. In the narratives of these carrier groups the memorial must be removed to restore the sacred status of the square, of the space. In following this logic, the memorial not only desacralizes the square on a micro level but desacralizes also on macro level the whole city and the country with its iconic meanings. For the carrier group that narrates the memorial as a triumph over nazism the square with the memorial has sacred status.

### **Different narratives**

We can also understand the Memorial as certain kind of totem with its sacred or evil status (Durkheim 2002). It depends from the side of which carrier group's narrative we are looking at. According to Giesen (2006b), we can examine the Memorial as a sacred object, because it refers to the collective identity of a particular community. The main symbol of the Memorial is the star, which is on the top of the obelisk and the Soviet emblem on the bottom. The Memorial represents and commemorates the events of World War II. which were extraordinary at the level of meanings. To be sacred, an object needs to fulfill requirements that move it into sacred status. For the 50 years of communism, the Memorial was sacred without any problem because it *had* to be sacred. The government in power wouldn't have it any other way. The sacredness of the Memorial, through its meanings, connects the people who share the same symbolic universe and creates a shared collective identity. They are visiting the Memorial frequently on particular state festival days and ritually sing the national anthem, offer flowers and candles. As Giesen (2006b: 327) writes,

Symbolic art is embedded in the familiar symbolic universe of a social community – every member of the respective community is able to understand its language, the narrative is obvious and plain, the emotional impact is clear.

That is the function of the sacred object. In the case of the Memorial of fallen soldiers, the symbolic universe is shared through storytelling and rituals that are connected with World



War II. Through this symbolic universe, the cultural order is created, which gives sense to the people that share the same collective identity.

The symbolic universe is shared by narrative, but is not only shared, it is also created and reproduced via narrative and socialization in a Berger-Luckmannian sense (Berger, Luckmann 1999). The symbolic universe connected to personal identity is created via narrations by others and self-narration. According to Hamar (2008: 45-46) these are the two perspectives of creating identity by narrative presented by Hannah Arendt and Paul Ricoeur. These two perspectives are completing each other in the case of relationship to material objects like the Memorial. Storytelling plays an important role in this because through narration, identity can be formed and confirmed. Through storytelling cultural identity is reproduced and so actors and audience get access to cognitive knowledge and “iconic representations” (Alexander 2006:35). These iconic representations are playing crucial role in producing different and contradictory narratives about memorials like the one in Budapest’s Liberty square.

For the anticommunists this Memorial represents a symbol of the oppression. Its meaning is not connected to World War II, but rather to the almost 50 years of communism with all its negative characteristics, memories, experiences, family tragedies and consequences. Petitions for its replacement or removal from the square have had no success. The reasons for this desired replacement we can find in the symbolical and iconic level (Alexander 2008a, 2008b). On the top of the Memorial’s obelisk is a red star and in the lower part is the emblem of Soviet Union. For those who are against the Memorial, it is connected to totalitarian oppression. On one side for a group of people, the Memorial needs to be removed. But there is a legal barrier and because of it, it is not possible to remove it. This fact gives some kind of sacred status to the Memorial. It is legally untouchable. This group is not in direct contact with the Memorial, the individuals from this group can approach it only from outside the fences. This kind of space structuring functions as some a circle dividing holy and profane space (Eliade 2006). On the other side the Memorial is sacred for another group of people, who often visit the statue, commemorate the fallen soldiers and the end of World War II. They are staying inside the fences and they do not want the Memorial to be removed. They are those, who can access the holy circle and provide the rituals connected to their totem.

We can follow different narratives that are connected to the Memorial in contemporary Hungarian society. There is one that looks at it with pity for the fallen Soviet soldiers. That is one image of the Memorial. The other is connected to anticommunist attitudes and like that is

linked to the events of 1989 revolution and to negative representations of communism in Hungary. There is a third narrative that is represented by the radical right wing parties and nationalist-revisionist attitudes. This third narrative is also anticommunist but with strong revisionist, xenophobe and antiwest ideological background. This narrative links the events with the Memorial before 1945. There is also another one which goes beyond the historical-political level, does not have strong political support but is also important. The fourth narrative is the socio-cultural dimension of the square. This dimension is filled with children and their parents who use the square's playground every day.

In short, there is one narrative that interprets the memorial positively and one that interprets it negatively. Representatives of both narratives mentioned above have their own interpretations, rituals and discourses with the Memorial as central object in it. The result of these multiple perspectives is the creation of different meanings and collective identity frames. In one narrative, this object is sacred according to Giesen (2006a) and is “fused with sacrality” (Giesen 2006b). Through its sacred character it fulfills the function of creating identity frames (Durkheim 2002). Through narratives identity is confirmed by remembering and retelling the extraordinary events in the past (Hamar 2010). This process of retelling has the function of constitutional meaning making for the individual and for the community too. For one group the narrative tells about the liberation of Hungary in 1945 and introduces the soviet soldiers as heros. For the other group the narration tells about the communist terror. For them the desacralisation of the Memorial during the riots means a symbolical victory over communism and the beginning of real liberation of the hungarian society.

### **Icono-conflict between meanings**

During the riots the Memorial was ritually purified and re-sacralized by the attackers who removed the soviet star and put up an Árpád stripe flag instead. But there was another act, that is more important from the perspective of cultural sociology. During the riots, the Memorial was attacked and the Soviet emblem was removed by the same way as it was in 1956 revolution<sup>3</sup>. The emblem was taken by a smaller group of rioters to one of the bridges in Budapest and was thrown into the Danube by singing the national anthem of Hungary. We

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<sup>3</sup> I have to mention here, that there is no other correspondence between the 1956 revolution and the riots in 2006. Video recordings about the social performance of attacking the Memorial are available to watch online on the links: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQiy4uhp5UA&feature=related>, 28. January 2011. and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hDGLJNIEOO&feature=related> 28. January 2011.

can examine this act as social performance. It has the elements of social pragmatics stated by Alexander (2006: 32-37). There is a system of collective representations and iconic meanings. These are the iconic representations described via different narratives around the Memorial. There are actors and audience even if there is no boundary between them. Both groups were actively participating the riots and the attack, and so this is a problematic point, because it is hard to differentiate between these two groups. The means of symbolic production were given by the presence of media. The rioters/performers were expressing their motives and the media transmitted their performance or they used multimedia. After this riot the police reacted and demonstrations gradually calmed down in the following three months. But the process of power distribution had began and culminated in the 2010 parliamentary elections, when the right-wing party Fidesz won the elections getting 2/3 of the votes<sup>4</sup>.

We can interpret this act as a fundamental act against the symbolic universe of the function of the Memorial. By the replacement of the emblem, the rioters presented their message to the Socialist government, which was in this case identified with the oppressive communist party. The reason of this identification is, that the Socialist party in Hungary is the legal inheritor of the Hungarian communist party. Another reason for this identification was, that the prime minister Gyurcsány in the beginning of his career was the leader of the community of young communists. In addition of course the last reason is that he had confessed to lies that he and his party were telling in the 2006 election campaign. The protesting mass identified the Socialist party and most of all the Prime Minister with the communists and their lies during communism. That was the reason why they had removed the Soviet emblem and had thrown into the Danube and replaced the red star with Árpád stripes flag, which has iconic meaning for radical right-wing parties. The Árpád striped flag became the symbol of the Hungarian nationalist and revisionist right-wing party and communities: it became sacred as well because it represents the past which is highly idealized.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this essay was to look at the role of iconic meanings of the Memorial during the events that occurred at Liberty square in September 2006 in Budapest. From a cultural sociology perspective I focused on how meaning could change a material cultural object by shifting it into evil status in the sacred space and create conflict around it. The different

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<sup>4</sup> The official results of the 2010 parliamentary elections are available at [http://www.valasztas.hu/hu/onkval2010/455/455\\_0.html](http://www.valasztas.hu/hu/onkval2010/455/455_0.html), last viewed 29.1.2011.

meanings then are able to influence collective and individual action. There was a need for purifying the sacred space from the contaminated object. There are different narratives and interpretations around the Memorial which is the same icon for every carrier group's narrative. Under the surface of the Memorial these are iconic meanings which polarize groups of people that understand it by their cognitive knowledge and their socialization (Berger-Luckmann 1999). These meanings clash with each other on the iconic dimension (Alexander 2008a, 2008b).

According to Szaló and Hamar (2008:117) remembering an event is coded in the interpretation of the event. The different meanings and narratives of the Memorial create conflicts on a cognitive dimension and also in a physical dimension. In other words different perspectives on an object, which are added meanings by different groups of people, are motivating people for action. In these actions people visualize or realize their meanings, their interpretations of those meanings. That means that the meaning is made iconically visible just like Alexander (2008a) argues with the example of Giacometti's *Standing women*, but not by creating that iconic meaning neither supporting or completing it, but by removing it. The social performance of removing of the soviet emblem from the Memorial and throwing it into the Danube by singing the national anthem was the act of visualizing of the iconic consciousness of the rioters.

There is a very important shift in the media discourse that evokes that the social performance of the rioters was fused (Alexander 2006). The left-wing media was from the beginning writing and talking about the riots and the attack as criminal act committed by criminals, radicals and football hooligans who are exploiting the situation for creating chaos on the streets of Budapest. The right-wing media from the beginning was presenting these acts as events, that will change hungarian history and political life. The media connected to the radical right-wing party was talking directly about revolution and about the real end of communism. The right wing media started to use metaphors and narratives, with the aim of delegitimizing the government by using narratives and creating discourses. According to Nair (2004:250) repeating topics, symbols and metaphors via narrative is one of the most powerful tools for reproducing culture.

Some of the carrier groups compared the demonstrations to the 1956 anticommunist revolution trying to give meaning and value to the demonstrations. Others were connecting it to the real end of communism in Hungary with the same reasoning. There are also people for who the attack of the Memorial was a criminal action because those think positively on the Memorial

and the fallen Soviet soldiers. There are also people who do not really care about the Memorial but they were sad that the park and the playground for children were destroyed after the demonstrations.

The events were followed by world wide media. It was also followed by the hungarian right wing and left wing media in Hungary, but in a different ways. The situation of media in Hungary is possibly as polarized as the political scene. That means that there is a huge block of media support of the left-wing and another block for supporting the right-parties. The left-wing media mediated the events as riots lead by right-wing radicals, criminals, hooligans and skinheads (archive of newspapers and journals Népszabadság, HVG, Élet és Irodalom, television news of the national public television - MTV). The right-wing media was presenting it as important groundbreaking events, that will change the country's route into the right way (archive of newspaper and journal Magyar Nemzet, news of HírTV newschannel). There is also another third media support which became popular during and after the riots and this is the radical right wing-media, supporting the party Jobbik. Nair (2004: 249-250) describes the consequence of the means of symbolic production as the most powerful way of spreading ideology of a culture by narrative practices. The consequence of the social performance during the riots is visible also in the left-wing media. Gradually the newspapers and the media changed the reputation of the riots and started to report it as events. In the case of the national public television this is a result of the change of power structures even before the elections. So we can declare that the social performance of the riots was fused.

The event in Budapest was the act of purification of the sacred space by carrier groups, for which the Memorial was untouchable and contaminated. But not only this. It gave us an opportunity to examine how do people understand material objects around themselves and how do they give meanings to them. People construct sacred and profane categories which gives them directions in their actions. In fact they give meanings to material objects and then they take those meanings for granted. The belief in one's own cultural perspective is so strong and important that it motivates to act and destroy the devil in a peace of stone, where one thinks the devil is.

The question of how the riots became an event and whether they are an event. In the narrative of the governing conservative party and the radical right-wing party it surely means the beginning of the political changes in Hungary which reached the top by the election results in

2010<sup>5</sup>. The radical right-wing got into the house of parliament. For this party the riots objectified and in a way their imagined community under the wing of the Jobbik party. The representatives of this party got publicity and they could define the public enemy through the iconic meanings of the memorial. It was also a form of the process of legitimization of their presence in the Hungarian political life.

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank to the participants of the Konstanzer Meisterklasse 2011 for their comments and for the discussion we had on this topic.

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