

## **Eurocommunism\***

### **Commemorating Communism in Contemporary Eastern Europe**

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On 25 February 2002 the Prime Minister of the Hungarian government, at the time led by the originally radical anti-communist liberal party, later turned into radical anti-communist conservative *Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Párt; Fidesz,-MPP* (Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Party), inaugurated the House of Terror. It was claimed that this museum was built to commemorate the victims of dictatorial rule in the country. The spectacular opening ceremony for the museum preceded the general elections by just two months and was part of the electoral campaign of the ruling conservative party. The personal presence and inauguration speech of the Prime Minister, the appointment of his personal consultant in ‘historical matters’, and the establishment of a public foundation from huge state subsidies to manage the museum clearly indicated that the event was considered a highly important political step. In his address, the Prime Minister stressed the eventual realization of a true representation of the history of the twentieth century in Hungary which would teach future generations the meaning of the fight for freedom (The speech of the Prime Minister is available at <http://www.orbanviktor.hu>). The House of Terror immediately became the subject of fierce criticism. Public intellectuals, including many respected historians, pointed out the ambiguity of historical interpretation in the museum, the controversial nature of

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the comparison of Fascism and Communism, the unclear distinction of victims and perpetrators and the ignorance of the longer-term historical roots of political terror and violence in Hungary.<sup>1</sup>

Albeit the Hungarian debate was very spectacular and the House of Terror benefited from an exceptional amount of tax-payers' money, the significance attributed to a historical museum devoted to the representation of the communist past was far from being a uniquely Hungarian phenomenon. The President of Romania, Traian Băsescu, who initiated a presidential commission to investigate the crimes of the communist regimes in Romania, proposed to set up an official, state-sponsored Museum of Communism in the capital in December 2006.<sup>2</sup> Likewise in Poland, the cultural program of the conservative-nationalist government of the Law and Justice Party (*PiS*) emphasized the necessity of establishing a Museum of Freedom culminating in the display of the break up of the communist regime. Similar to the controversial reception of the central initiatives, the foundation of private museums in the Baltic republics, Poland and Romania devoted to the history of the communist dictatorships triggered passionate debates and exchanges (Knigge – Mählert 2005).

Antiquarianism is certainly not the first term that comes to mind when considering the relationship towards the contemporary past. Collecting and displaying strange and alien objects regularly recalls the image of archeological exhibitions dedicated to demonstrate the richness and fascinating nature of radically distant and different pasts such as ancient or medieval periods of human history (On antiquarianism and archeological interest in Western historical culture see Bann 1990). Nonetheless, the strange yet characteristic obsession with relics such as communist medals, images of 'great leaders' (An eloquent example is in Boym 1994: 225-38.) together with the frenzy of demolition of old statues, the erection of new monuments and the mushrooming of

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<sup>1</sup> The following study provides a thorough analysis of the inauguration and the reception of the House of Terror:

Frazon – K. Horváth 2002. The article contains a profound bibliography of the debate, as well.

<sup>2</sup> 'I support the establishment in Bucharest of a Museum of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania. This museum will in equal measure be a place of remembrance and one of affirmation of the values of open society. Besides the Museum, it is necessary to create a centre for documentation, with the scope of informing the public and giving unrestricted access, in which there will be gathered documents essential for an understanding of the communist phenomenon, of the labor camps, and of propaganda as a means of spiritual constraint.' The address of the President is available in English at: [http://www.presidency.ro/?\\_RID=det&tb=date&id=8288&\\_PRID=ag](http://www.presidency.ro/?_RID=det&tb=date&id=8288&_PRID=ag)

museums dedicated to the terror of the dictatorship, suggests that physical objects play a significant role in the relationship to the recent past. The relationship of the present – here understood as the period after 1989 – to the recent past is established through a peculiar practical activity simultaneously concerned with the construction and destruction of things. The fate of themes in the public discussion of contemporary history seems to be bound to the assignment of objects. Why are historical museums and exhibitions so important in the current politics of commemorating the communist past in Central and Eastern Europe?

The exhibition in the House of Terror capitalizes on a shocking and depressing atmosphere of violence. Immediately the entrance hall with its dark, mystical design weighs heavily on the visitor. The inner courtyard of the building is dominated by a Soviet-made tank and a huge board displaying a vast selection of photographs of the victims of soviet terror. For the average visitor a crucial part of the impression formed by the visiting experience is the depressing descent in an elevator while an old man – formerly a cleaning attendant present at executions - provides a detailed description of the routine hanging. The journey underground ends in the cellars of the museum where a torture chamber of the communist secret police has been reconstructed.

The exhibition of communist prison cells plays a central role in post-communist museums. The reconstructed communist execution chamber in the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius dominates the exhibition situated in the building of former KGB and Gestapo prisons. In spite of the little evidence for its alleged previous uses, the curators opted for the conspicuous demonstration of the marks of violence of the Soviet political police. The bullet holes in the walls were carefully covered with glass, a chute claimed to have been used to drain out the blood of the executed victims was also left in place. Two other Baltic Museums of Occupation in Riga and Tartu emphasize horrible aspects of the Soviet era such as deportations, national subjugation and mass executions. Both built their historical representations on the remnants and reconstructions of former communist prisons, and particularly, underground cells (Mark 2007).

Similarly, the major site of encounter with the history of communism in Romania is the impressive building of a former political prison in the small provincial town of Sighetul Marmatiei. The building was constructed as a barracks during the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy and later became a border town next to the USSR. In the 1950s it began to house important prisoners, major figures of the inter-war Romanian political and cultural elite, many of whom

died in captivity. The museum opened in the early 1990s, first with one room, claimed to be a torture chamber and called the Black Room. Subsequently, other cells of former captives were reconstructed. Today the museum continues to preserve the original prison structure and atmosphere through its renovated iron stairs and walks and tiny exhibition spaces transformed directly from the previous small cells. The aim is to provide a comprehensive display of the history of Romanian communism in the context of the Cold War. In fact, it represents only the terrorist aspects of the regime such as forced collectivization, labour camps, political police, persecution and the tyranny of Ceaușescu. Other significant topics are the anti-communist resistance and revolutions throughout in East Central Europe. Although the prison ceased to accept political convicts in 1955 and was closed in the 1970s, the museum claims to symbolize the entire communist regime, thus forging the latter into an abstract, ahistorical period of violent clashes between oppression and resistance (Radu-Bucurenci – Cristea 2007).

The most well-known museum of communism in Poland, the SocLand Foundation, which is paradoxically still in project stage, also emphasizes the violent nature of the regime in its representation of the communist dictatorship. The Foundation behind this very ambitious initiative focuses on the demonstration of the inhumanity and cruelty of the communist system and insists on depicting the history of profound brain-washing, the subsequent revolts and the final collapse of the dictatorships (Main 2007).

These museums, concentrating violence, martyrs and terror within their walls are the direct descendants of the anti-communist imagination. When anti-Stalinist insurgents occupied the party headquarters in Budapest in October 1956, they immediately began to search for the secret underground cellars that were believed to hold numerous captives of the communist secret police. When no entrance was found within the building, the freedom fighters started to dig up the square with excavators to access the hidden prison of the communist party. Despite the fact that exploratory wells twenty meters deep failed to reveal any underground constructions, the search continued. It was stopped only when the Soviet troops crushed the revolution. The museums that eventually succeeded in establishing these underground prisons, were thus the antitheses of Stalin's utopia realized beneath the surface in the Moscow metro system (Rév 2005: 249-65.).

The emphasis on instances of terror and violence in this interpretation is not accidental. The intention is not simply to demonstrate the brutality and barbarity of communist rule in these

countries, rather the demonstration of terror represents the regimes as if they had been founded and maintained exclusively by force and profound systems of coercion. The rule of the communist parties thus appears alien to these societies, a result of outside or foreign forces for which the respective nations bear no responsibility. It follows that the dictatorships contradicted the true spirit of these nations since the regimes were imposed on them by means that were impossible to resist. Communism is presented as the conclusion of ‘fate’, a tragic historical event caused by uncontrollable forces; ‘the Soviets’, ‘the Great Powers’ or ‘the Communists’. The history of Communism gains mythical qualities in these museums as a catastrophe, a disaster that remains beyond the limits of human (national) capacities. Instead of providing historical explanations for the origins of the communist dictatorships, these exhibitions seek for general moralizing about the significance of human suffering.<sup>3</sup>

At the meeting of the Romanian parliament on 19 December 2006, the president of the Republic of Romania, Traian Băsescu formally condemned the communist regime in the country and declared its existence illegitimate. The president’s statement was based on a report of almost 700 pages, compiled by a group of 22 contemporary historians led by the internationally renowned intellectual historian, Vladimir Tismaneanu. Members of the Civic Academy Foundation, the initiator of the Sighet Museum, played a prominent role in the construction of the historical report. The document focused on the genesis of the communist dictatorship in Romania and revealed its subsequent crimes and killings. For the first time after 1989 the persons responsible were named. The president declared,

‘The Commission’s conclusions, which I espouse, confirm that the totalitarian communist regime in Romania was imposed by foreign dictate. Indeed, it was a case of an illegitimate

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<sup>3</sup> ‘In situations of extreme social devastation, mythic discourse erupts and flows into the semantic space made vacant by the incapacity of science to recognise the moral significance of human suffering. This is because science cannot address the question of the *value* of human suffering. It may very well provide an explanation of *how* the disaster occurred and identify the factors, physical and social, that caused it, but *why* it occurred at the specific time and in the specific place that it did, and *why* its effects on the human population appear to the survivors to be a kind of “cruel and unusual punishment”, are questions that science, with its interest in fact rather than value, cannot even perceive, much less answer.’ White 2000: 52-3.

regime, founded upon a fanatical ideology, an ideology that systematically cultivated hatred, an ideology for which the “class struggle” and the “dictatorship of the proletariat” symbolized the essence of historical progress. Imported from the USSR, the communist ideology justified the assault against civil society, against political and economic pluralism; it justified the annihilation of the democratic parties, the destruction of the free market, extermination by assassination, deportations, forced labour, and the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of people.’ (The address of the President at: [http://www.presidency.ro/?\\_RID=det&tb=date&id=8288&\\_PRID=ag.](http://www.presidency.ro/?_RID=det&tb=date&id=8288&_PRID=ag.))

However, instead of a historically accurate analysis of the reasons and social and political context of the horrific crimes, the report simply attributed these to a vaguely defined undifferentiated conglomerate; the ‘communists’. This distanced the terror, describing it as an abnormal phenomenon which originated from outside Romanian society. This theory was grounded in extremist reasoning like that of Stelian Tănase, member of the historians’ commission. Tănase claimed that communism was ultimately a materialization of abstract ahistorical forces of evil. Communists in power, he wrote, ‘remained hidden in a bunker, far away, alien to society, continuously conspiring against it. They failed to come to the surface, to obtain legitimacy, not even for one day during the almost half a century when they were running the Romanian world. They remained confined to their condition of eternal beings of darkness.’ (Quoted in Cristea – Radu-Bucurenci 2007: 278.)

The action of Traian Băsescu was embedded in a characteristic trajectory of post-1989 Romanian anti-communism, while, in turn, his political steps provided recognition and made official previously marginalized ways of representing the communist system supported mainly by various civic and Church organizations. This anti-communist representation builds extensively on Christian symbols and articulates a quasi-religious interpretation of the martyrdom of the nation. Various monuments to the victims of Communism or the Romanian Peasant Museum present the fallen as fighters for national dignity. The victims of Communism are regularly incorporated in a broader historical continuity of the struggle for the state of all Romanians since they are associated with the image of the interwar Greater Romania and linked to the fallen soldiers of the First and Second World Wars. The unveiling of the majority of these monuments was

accompanied by a religious service and the symbol of the Cross was strongly present. Thus, the essence of the nation is defined in close connection to the (Orthodox) Church and the (all-Romanian) state. The Romanian Peasant Museum transforms these national virtues into eternal entities: the exhibitions display an image of the peasantry as profoundly Christian, permanent and unchanged since antiquity. The Museum claims that this atemporal and ahistorical peasant life was destroyed by Communism. The communist dictatorship thus appears as a brutal rupture in the harmonious history of the nation, its state and Church (Cristea – Radu-Bucurenci 2007: 279-295.).

In 2005 historians Tomasz Merta and Robert Kostro published a collective volume titled ‘Memory and Responsibility’ in Poland. Merta, the ideologist behind the volume, was also the author of the cultural program of the Law and Justice (*PiS*) party, the governing force of Poland elected in October 2005. In the introduction the authors argued for the necessity of a ‘memory politics’ for the Polish government. They suggested that this new politics of commemoration would be a proper means to raise the self-respect of Polish citizens and the appreciation of national heroes fighting for the freedom of the country through history, including the period of the communist regime. In this understanding the communist dictatorship was nothing but another device in the history of the repression of the Polish nation (Górny 2007: 131.). The idea of a Museum of Freedom was at the core of the related measures of the Polish government in favour of this ‘memory politics’. The Museum of Freedom was to represent the history of the Polish nation as constant manifestations of its essence, the love of and readiness to fight for freedom. The Minister of Culture and National Heritage of this government suggested that the exhibitions would focus on the ‘unique aspirations for freedom during the period of the First Republic (sixteenth-nineteenth centuries), the struggles in the nineteenth century, and the successful fight against two totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century: the Polish victory over Communism and Nazism.’ (Main 2007: 389.)

The House of Terror in Budapest was inaugurated on 25 February 2002, on the Day of the Victims of the Communist Dictatorships. This commemorative day was created on 16 June 2000, when the Parliament of the Republic of Hungary passed resolution 58/2000. There were 201 ‘yes’ votes, 24 ‘no’ votes and 87 abstentions. This decision expressed the conviction of the Parliament about the necessity of a particular day for commemorating the victims of the communist dictatorships in Hungarian secondary schools (*Magyar Közlöny* 2000: 3360.). On 25 February

1947 the Soviet Red Army had carried away Béla Kovács, the general secretary of the Smallholders' Party, one of the most ardent critiques of the communist aspirations to power. In 1947, this violent action clearly marked the borders of Hungarian democracy: the Hungarian communists could count on the support of the Soviet military forces to resolve crucial political conflicts. The date the national assembly passed the decision in 2000, 16 June, was the same as that of the execution of Imre Nagy in 1958. In 1989, the reburial of the Prime Minister of the 1956 revolution on the anniversary of his death constituted the core symbolic event of the demise of the communist regime. This parliamentary act depicted the continuity of communism from the takeover in 1947 through its fundamental crisis in 1956 to its fall in 1989. The communist dictatorship appeared as a state of undifferentiated repression in this depiction. The resolution showed isolated historical facts and blurred the personal fate of the communist prime minister who had remained true to his conviction, consciously accepting the death penalty, as well as that of the persecuted Small-holder oppositionist politician who had become a member of the parliament in 1958 in the post-revolution Kádár-regime. The history of communism was represented an abstract entity identified with political terror.

The relatively recent manifestation of the Hungarian legislative assembly to establish a memorial day for the victims of communism marked the first post-1989 commitment towards a systematic politics of commemoration related to the communist past in the country. The anniversaries of the October 1956 revolution were celebrated annually with remarkable pomp and publicity, and bore the mark of the contemporary daily political context. Nonetheless, they failed to express any coherent intention to systematically interpret the history of the communist dictatorship. Although the members of the first conservative government (1990-1994) demonstrated considerable interest in historical matters and did not decline to make statements on particular historical questions, these remained individual manifestations rather than parts of a comprehensive political will to remember. Immediately after 1989, the general disorientation of history produced a variety of interpretations, yet the self-identity of the first socialist-liberal coalition (1994-1998) was largely based on the priority of the current economic and social problems and appeared rather disinterested in and indifferent to issues of the past. The then still largely post-communist socialists found it extremely inconvenient to face their fairly dubious late-communist legacy. Liberals considered questions of historical identity a second-rate issue in comparison to the pressing need for restructuring the economy and public administration.



However, the second conservative government (1998-2002) led by the Fidesz-MPP, managed to formulate a strongly historically-orientated conservative nationalist ideology. In the struggle for votes in the post-communist elections, the Fidesz-MPP realized the importance of identity politics, embedded in an imaginary history of the nation. The party, which had already laid great emphasis on its intention to ‘give back Hungarians their national self-esteem’ in its campaign, began to bomb the electorate with historical interpretation immediately after its victory in the general elections (The context of this politics of history in historiography proper is described in Trencsényi – Apor 2007: 45.). The Fidesz decided to build ‘national pride’ on a voluntaristic and mythical series of *grandeur et gloire* connected to the history of the Hungarian state and (Christian) church(es). The first element of this politics of history was the establishment of the new Ministry of National Cultural Heritage which was commissioned to define aspects of cultural heritage considered worth integrating into the imagined historical-national identity (Erdősi 2000). This initiative culminated in two controversial events. The first of these was the centrally organized celebration of the 1000 year anniversary of the foundation of the Hungarian State in 2000. Common historical understanding held that the Christmas of 1000, Stephen, the apostle of the Magyars, was crowned as the first King of Hungary. This millennium was clearly modelled on a previous 1000 years anniversary in 1896, when the modernizing Hungarian state had celebrated the conquest of the Carpathian basin by Magyar tribesmen. At that time, national pride had been embedded in the achievements of civilization and modernity connected to the active involvement of the state, whereas in 2000 the millenium provided an opportunity for the government to distil a historical continuity of the Hungarian state grounded in a Christian-clerical historicization and national particularism (Gerő 2006: 153-170.).<sup>4</sup> The intention to set the point of departure of the history of the modern Hungarian state in the symbolic foundation of the medieval kingdom was demonstrated by the transfer of the Sacra Corona from the National

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<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, the year of the millenium in 1896 was defined fairly pragmatically. The government commissioned the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to establish the exact date of the Magyar conquest, nonetheless, the accurate professional answer could identify only the period 888 and 900 as the most likely date of the event. The government, then, chose the middle of the decade and set the date of the millenium for 1895. However, when the great constructions could not be finished in time, the authorities postponed the celebrations by one year. See Gerő 1995: 204.

Museum to the building of the Parliament. The sacred crown of Saint Stephen started to be considered as the ultimate representative of the Hungarian political body in the late middle ages and early modern times. This was closely related to the fact that the actual ruler of the country resided outside the territory of the kingdom, in Vienna. The crown had been removed by the US army at the end of the Second World War and given back to Hungary in 1978. It was kept in the National Museum until 2000 when the Fidesz led government decided to place it in the hall of the Parliament as the symbol of Hungarian statehood, and thereby declared the contemporary Hungarian state the subject of the supra-personal Sacra Corona (Radnóti 2001). Thereby, the subject of this particular Hungarian history – the Christian state – became an ahistorical and eternal abstractum, whose essence was not subject to temporal change, but remained the deepest desire of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

The museums of communism play a special role in these politics of commemoration of national pride. The politics of history in contemporary Eastern Europe, which also embrace the interpretation of the communist dictatorships, represent the nation as an eternal entity, a set of virtues and values, whose history is described as a success story of the realization of these qualities. Shameful periods of national history are regarded as regrettable historical accidents caused by various external forces. Representing the communist regime exclusively as a terrorist rule generated by such external forces and maintained solely by violence is a crucial means of implementing this concept rooted historicist understanding of nationalism. If the communist dictatorships in these countries can be successfully isolated as events of non-national history, it becomes possible to claim that a range of resilient qualities and features characterize the nation

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<sup>5</sup> 'Ranke did not concern himself with useless speculations on the origins of churches and states or the manner in which they were constituted at the beginning. The *generally* beneficial character of these two institutions he took to be a *fact* of history, a truth established not only by historical reflection but also by quotidian experience. He was privately convinced that these institutions had been founded by God to impose order on a disorderly humanity; and he thought that a dispassionate study of history would confirm the generally beneficent role played by these two institutions in human life, which might suggest to the pious their divine origin. But it was necessary to believe in their divinity to appreciate their ordering function in the lives of peoples. They constitute the sole ordering principles in historical time; it is through them that a "people" can direct its spiritual and physical energies toward the constitution of itself as a "nation.'" White 1973: 169.

and that these remained unchanged despite and during communism. From such a basis it is possible to state that there is an eternal national identity despite temporal change and that the former manifested itself in the periods of genuine national history (On the formation of historical identity of nations see: Mosse 1975: esp. 47-99.).

Historical museums established in the course of the nineteenth century played a crucial role in the formation of national consciousness throughout modern history. In the museums of classical historicism, the value of the exhibited objects was derived from the fact that they were able to represent and preserve authentically the meaning of the past. For this purpose, exhibits were normally richly contextualized and situated in accurate historical periods. In this way, historical museums could tangibly demonstrate the origins of nations in the past and the notion of unbroken historical continuity since then (Korff – Roth 1990). It is precisely, this ‘touch of the real’ that makes historical exhibitions so attractive for various politics of history and memory. Museums, which are able to re-present the past, that is to say to make the past once again present, provide the perfect means to fulfill the function of commemorations and serve as ‘connective structures’ towards history.<sup>6</sup> Museums are frequently employed in contemporary Eastern Europe as means of creating historical authenticity to render communist terror tangible and the related interpretation of the recent past credible.

When exhibitions of atrocity began to be connected to the image of communism, the same concepts and understandings had been already strongly identified with Nazism. Already after the Second World War, during the Nuremberg trial, Nazi atrocities and crimes were represented as signs of senseless, unintelligible barbarity, demonstrated by objects such as the shrunken head of Buchenwald. Atrocities committed with special ruthlessness emerged as a characteristic feature of the Nazi system at the Nuremberg trial. The judges in Nuremberg argued that the specificity of the newly formulated concept of the crimes against humanity was not the enormous size or industrial mode of killing, but rather its connection to atavistic practice. Nazi violence was represented as a return of primitivism in the heart of modern civilized Europe. The prosecution exhibited a shrunken head of a former prisoner of war that was found in the Buchenwald camp.

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<sup>6</sup> The goal of commemorative ceremonies is to make the past present again and to eliminate the distance in time in order to create a consciousness of continuity. Connerton 1989: 41-71. Assmann 1992.

The head shocked the audience, reminding them of the practice of head shrinking of the Latin-American Jivaros that had become widely known in the Western world a few years before the war. This depiction of primitive violence was accompanied by a constant description of uncontrolled instinctive anti-Jewish atrocities that invoked a conscious reference to medieval pogroms. The spatial and temporal distancing of uncivilized barbarous violence resulted in Nazi atrocities being described as unexpected and unimaginable in modern Europe. This remarkably tangible relationship between uncivilized and unlimited atrocities and the historical understanding of the Nazi regime successfully binds the icons of violence and barbarity to the notion of Nazism (Douglas 1998).

Many of the museums that depict the history of communism identify themselves as exhibition sites dedicated to the representation of the horrors of the modern totalitarian dictatorships, Fascism (Nazism) and Communism. These institutions intend to display and demonstrate the equally horrendous nature of these regimes. The museums in Tallin and Riga, which are called the Museum of Occupations and Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, respectively, claim to represent the history of these countries from the Second World War to the dissolution of the USSR. Hence, they contain images, objects and installations depicting the Nazi occupation of these countries. Similarly, at the History Meeting House in Warsaw, the historical exhibition arranged by the Karta Center, called its recent major show the 'Faces of Totalitarianism: Twentieth Century Europe'. The exhibition was designed to introduce visitors to the history of modern dictatorships and interpreted the history of Europe in the 'short' twentieth century. Although, the presentation stopped at the beginning of the communist regime in Poland, it represented parallel the genesis and functioning of the Bolshevik system in Russia and the Nazi dictatorship in Germany. The last boards depicted the German and Soviet occupation of Poland and the defeat of Nazism vs. the triumph of Communism. The House of Terror in Budapest also claims to represent the history of two terror regimes in Hungary. It provides an overview of the rule of the Hungarian fascist party, the Arrow Cross, then a long and labyrinth-like presentation of the communist dictatorship.

These exhibitions represent a very important agenda. The depiction of communism solely as a terror regime conspicuously next to the already established icon of violence, Nazism, is an attempt to transform the Gulag into a counter-Auschwitz, to construct an understanding of the history of communism as the twin of the ultimate horrors of Nazism and as the Eastern double of

the ultimate catastrophe of European civilization. This understanding represents an attempt to raise the fatally misunderstood significance of Communism for a pan-European history of the modern period, by claiming that it was equally as destructive and merciless as the Nazi regime. The promoters of this present day 'Euro-communist' interpretation falsely believe that their actions are able to establish the history of East Central European communist dictatorships as a genuine European event.

In the West, since the early 1960s – and especially in the wake of the publication of Hannah Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial - the history of the Nazi regime understood as the ultimate manifestation of barbarity and violence and evoked by the images of Auschwitz and the Holocaust has functioned as a powerful means to prevent similar crimes. In spite of the various dilemmas it embraces, the historical memory of the Second World War based on notions of moral and political responsibility, serves as the effective obstacle to the repetition of state sponsored genocide (Arendt 1963, Friedländer 1993, Young 1993, the special German case is in Lüdtke 1993.). The East European post and anti-communist revision of fascism offers a radically and dangerously different interpretation. The exhibitions in the House of Terror represent the history of twentieth century Hungary as the site of the violent clash of two equally barbarous, but opposing ideologies. Germany and Russia, the manifestations of totalitarian Fascism and Communism were fighting for global dominance. By chance, Hungary became the battleground of this conflict. According to the museum, however, Hungary had nothing to do with either of these two ideologically motivated great powers. The Hungarians remained the suffering subjects and victims of the war (The way the House of Terror constructs the allegory of the offended nation is eloquently described in Frazon – K. Horváth 2002: 338-46.). Critics have already pointed to the dubious implications of these exhibitions, which appear to use the demonstration of communist crimes to build up and convey nationalist ideological messages and mitigate or even release Nazi crimes and criminals retroactively. Indeed, the House of Terror fails to raise questions concerning the role and responsibility of the nationalist authoritarian regime preceding the Arrow Cross takeover in assisting Nazi aspirations as well as the legal and social exclusion and subsequent deportation of Jewish citizens of Hungary. The museum similarly fails to address the impact of the interwar social and political system on the discrediting of non-communist alternatives in the postwar period and its contribution to the eventual communist takeover. In addition, the exhibition consciously manipulates the comparison of the short-lived and fairly

insignificant episode of Arrow Cross rule isolated from its historical context and the tangibly longer communist system represented an undifferentiated terror regime.

The House of Terror is typical of attempts in contemporary East-central Europe to provide a historical understanding of the recent past. Such an approach situates the struggle between Fascism and Communism outside of the history of the nation and combines with an interpretation which emphasizes the similar terrorist essence of these regimes whilst ignoring their contradictory ideological claims. This is clear in the example of the museums in the Baltic republics which depict these periods of the past as the culmination of the tragedy of a nation suffering two consecutive occupations. This tragic representation of the past is the clear and definite opposition of the Western interpretation of Nazism: instead of raising a barrier between the possibility of committing similar crimes and contemporary societies, the East European offer is an ‘unbearably light’ attempt to divert this responsibility.

Nonetheless, before leaning back in the comfort of the notion that these issues are but another manifestation of familiar post-communist East European nationalism, it is important to take note of the genuinely pan-European nature of this construction. The Sighet museum is affiliated to an International Centre for the Study of Communism, the executive scientific board of which reflects a truly all-European composition. The members of the board are: Thomas Blanton (National Security Archives, George Washington University), Vladimir Bukovsky (Cambridge University), Stephane Courtois (CNRS, Paris), Dennis Deletant (SSEES, London University), Helmut Muller-Engbergs (The Federal Office for the Study of STASI Archives, Berlin) and Pierre Hassner. Furthermore, in 1998 the Council of Europe granted the Sighet memorial the status of being among the most significant monuments of the continent, together with the Auschwitz Museum and the Peace Memorial in Normandy. The Twentieth Century Institute that accompanies the House of Terror in Budapest has received visits from such illustrious guests as Ernst Nolte, the controversial German historian of Fascism. The museum in Warsaw that staged the exhibition ‘Two Faces of Totalitarianism’, the History Meeting House and its background organization the Karta Centre have close links with the Institute of National Memory, members of which contributed to the Polish sections of the Black Book of Communism. The honorary members of the board of the SocLand Foundation include Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US National Security Adviser and the well-known French historian Alain Besançon.

The participation of Western scholars and policy makers in the process of shaping the historicist-nationalist memory of communism and fascism can be explained by benevolent ignorance and a sincere will to condemn the communist dictatorships as a Soviet phenomenon. At base, the reason the public tends to disregard the problematic implications of the interpretation of communism based exclusively on the comparison of totalitarian violence is general indifference. The West, which has already succeeded in containing fascism, is reluctant to give up its convenient position and to face a new challenge of once again coming to terms with a dictatorial past. It would be dis-comforting to understand communism as the consequence of European modernity, instead of attributing it to an imagined East European anti-modernity. In general, there is no willingness to open up these issues, which allows East European politicians of history or the Black Book to shape the discussions about communism.

However, exactly this general indifference might provide the chance to resist the historicist-nationalist revision of the history of the recent past. Nazism as a historical phenomenon has been clearly and powerfully associated with Auschwitz. The spectacle of the crematoria, gas chambers and mass graves unambiguously mark the historical identity of Nazism. Auschwitz, as an actual authentic site of mass extermination, successfully localizes, connects to credible evidence and, hence, renders tangible the interpretation of the genocide and war crimes. On the contrary, the image of communism as terror, as a dictatorship exclusively characterized by violence is an essentially abstract argument. The propagators of this historical view ordinarily base their reasoning on certain carefully selected historical facts that demonstrate their claims. The instances of atrocities, cruelty and terror are usually shown cautiously isolated from other sources of historical evidence, hence, in a profoundly de-contextualized environment ripped of any accurate historical reference and localization. Because of this the authenticity of the statement on the historical nature of communism as terror and violence is largely based on the comparative evocation of fascism.

The House of Terror, in all probability, is the most eloquent example of this manipulation. At the same time it contradicts the conditions of the museum representation based upon the relationships of the authenticity of the objects it contains and their narrative contextualization. The exhibition displays three different categories of objects. The first group covers the truly authentic historical material, the second consists of copies of original articles and the last includes objects from contemporary everyday life whose role, meaning and place remains unclear in the

context of the exhibition. The museum in general uses its authentic material in a way that further increases uncertainty concerning their interpretation. Typically, there is so little information attached to even authentic objects that it is often very difficult to decide whether these are the genuine remnant of an actual historical moment or simply objects that might represent a historical interpretation authentically if contextualized properly. This transforms the exhibited material into merely illustrative accessories of a dramatized story. In addition, the museum constantly blurs the distinction between real and fabricated objects since it displays them in the same way and eschews further explanation. The profound lack of historical contextualization, unclarity and methodological inconsistency eventually undermine the credibility of the displayed representation of the past. The entire museum thus resembles rather an installation referring to an imagined world, than an accurate representation of an actual historical period. The exhibition uses its objects to refer to previously established abstract ideological tenets, to illustrate and hence evoke, these allegorical meanings (Frazon – K. Horváth 2002: 311-25., Rév 2005: 278-90.).

Techniques of blurring the distinction between fiction and authentic representation were employed in other museums. The Museum of Genocide in Vilnius uses the same level of information, indeed the same lack of evidence to raise very different claims of authenticity. On the one hand, it reconstructs a Soviet era torture chamber based on insufficient and very dubious proof, stating that it is exactly the lack of information that guarantees the authenticity of the reconstruction since it proves the efficiency of the communist secret services to eliminate all evidence. On the other hand, the museum staff do not dare to use historical imagination in the same way in relation to the Nazi past; they refuse to reconstruct a Gestapo prison cell in the museum building, despite the fact that there had also been a prior Nazi presence, arguing that the tiny available evidence renders any speculation on the actual use of the chamber in question impossible (Mark 2007: 355-9.).

The considerable corpus of previous scholarship on memory and history in East-Central Europe usually registered the disorderly status of evocations of the recent past and tried to explain this by arguing that historical interpretations in this region are politically driven and usually supported and maintained by various political groups. The malfunctions of historical consciousness are understood as the distorting consequence of political projections. In this



context history (historical studies) increasingly came to be conceived as a manifestation of ideological intentions, as a means of politics and as a result has come to be viewed with suspicion (For instance Bucur – Wingfield 2001, Bartetzky, Dmitrieva and Troebst 2005, Todorova 2006, Watson 1994). This reasoning gradually undermined the relevance of assessing the problems of evidence, authenticity and truth. Nonetheless, as the survey of the contemporary politics of commemoration on Communism in Eastern Europe demonstrates, the deep and weird disorientation in historical matters is intimately connected to the conspicuous uncertainty of the criteria of authenticity of historical representations in the region. The credibility of abstract political projections of history, which have very little - if any – connection to the actual embedding of their sources in their respective historical contexts, is attributable to the growing demise of the evidential criteria of historical narratives. To understand the current state of the post-communist politics of commemoration, it is necessary to raise questions about the historically and socio-politically generated conditions and criteria of conceiving historical facts, of factuality, realism, credibility or acceptability in historical representation.

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