



Introduction: The Holocaust/Genocide Template in Eastern Europe

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Authoritarianism is on the rise again and we need to call it by its name and lay open how it operates and functions. This special issue discusses how “mnemonic warriors”¹ employ the “Holocaust template,”² and the concept of genocide in tendentious ways to justify radical policies and externalize the culpability for their international isolation and worsening social and economic circumstances domestically. This issue focuses specifically on the “memory wars”³ in the course of the post-Communist re-narration of history since 1989, but it goes without saying that the authoritarian backlash and the revisionist reinvention of history are obviously by no means phenomena limited to Eastern Europe.

The articles in this issue analyze three dimensions of this memory war: 1) the competing narratives of the “universalization of the Holocaust”⁴ as the negative icon of our era, on the one hand, and the “double genocide” paradigm, on the other, which focuses equally on “our own” national suffering under Nazism and Communism; 2) The juxtaposition of post-Communist Eastern Europe and Russia, reflected primarily in the struggle of the Baltic states and Ukraine to challenge Russian propaganda, a struggle that runs the risk of employing similarly distorting and propagandistic tropes; and 3) the post-Yugoslav rhetoric portraying one’s own group as “the new Jews” and one’s opponents in the wars of the 1990s as (akin to) “Nazis.” This special issue surveys major battle sites in this “memory war”: memorial museums, monuments, film and the war over definitions and terminology in relevant public discourse.

Several articles single out memorial museums in particular as cornerstones of national identity and key producers of historical knowledge – or, to be more precise, of the currently dominant national narrative and the way in which it positions itself in a transnational context. Among the relevant museums, the most prominent embodiment of the “double genocide” theory has been the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius. Although the building usually referred to as the “KGB museum” also housed a Gestapo prison in the period between the two Soviet occupations, for two decades, the permanent exhibition was devoted exclusively to the Soviet occupations, presented as a “genocide” perpetrated against the Lithuanian people. Not until 2011, following massive criticism, was a small

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¹ Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, “A Theory of the Politics of Memory,” in *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, ed. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2014), 17.

² Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin, *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2010).

³ Ljiljana Radonić, *Krieg um die Erinnerung. Kroatische Vergangenheitspolitik zwischen Revisionismus und europäischen Standards* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2010).

⁴ Jan Eckel and Claudia Moisel, *Universalisierung des Holocaust? Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik in internationaler Perspektive* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008).

exhibit on the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust added in one of the numerous prison cells in the basement. Only in the spring of 2018 did the museum change its name, in a rare case of terminological disarmament, to Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights.⁵

The trend clearly points in a different direction in Hungary. In the early 2000s, two museums with extremely divergent agendas opened. In 2002, at the end of Viktor Orbán's first term in government, the nationalist-revisionist House of Terror was inaugurated, followed in 2004, only weeks before Hungary joined the EU, by the first Central European Holocaust museum. Since regaining power in 2010, Fidesz has worked strenuously to assert its nationalist-revisionist memory politics as the dominant paradigm. The Monument for the Victims of German Occupation, erected at the dead of night in 2014, clearly demonstrated Fidesz' re-invention of history, which places Hungarian collective victimhood centre stage. Fidesz had also planned to open a second Holocaust memorial museum in Budapest in 2014, the so-called "House of Fates," with Mária Schmidt, the director of the House of Terror, at its helm. Until very recently, international criticism and protests from the Hungarian Jewish community had prevented the completion of this undertaking. Given Schmidt's involvement in the project and their all too understandable fear that it would create yet another revisionist Fidesz museum, the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities has firmly withheld its cooperation. Yet, in September 2018, Gergely Gulyas, the head of the Hungarian Prime Minister's office who is overseeing the establishment of the museum, announced that the cooperation of the Chabad-affiliated Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation (EMIH) was now forthcoming and the museum would open in 2019. While he sought to counter fears that the involvement of Hungarians in the Holocaust might be downplayed in the new museum, it became clear that for Gulyas Hungarian responsibility goes no further than a failure of the state to "protect its citizens" following the begin of the German occupation in March 1944.⁶

The concept of "negative memory,"⁷ the self-critical confrontation not only with the crimes perpetrated against but also by one's own community, is under heavy attack in Poland too. In one of his first statements after his "Law and justice" party won the Polish elections in 2015, Jarosław Kaczyński launched a scathing attack on the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, which, he claimed, was too international and should focus not on shame but on "Polish truth."⁸ Hungary and Poland have currently drawn the most critical attention for their pursuit of trends discernible in the whole of post-Communist Europe: the deployment of the "Holocaust template" to present one's own suffering while referencing the murder of the Jews in their respective countries merely as a side show suited to highlight the role of "our" countrymen in saving Jews. They also align themselves to varying degrees with Moscow. Putin's Russia for her part claims that the Donbas Russians need to be protected from a supposedly imminent Ukrainian campaign of genocide against them.

⁵ Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, <http://genocid.lt/muziejus/en/695/c/>, accessed 20 September 2018.

⁶ Jeremy Sharon, "Hungarian Chabad Affiliate Gains Ownership of Budapest Holocaust Museum," *Jerusalem Post*, 16 September 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Transfer-of-Hungarian-Holocaust-museum-to-Chabad-federation-567343> (accessed 20 September 2018).

⁷ Volkhard Knigge, "Europäische Erinnerungskultur: Identitätspolitik oder kritisch-kommunikative historische Selbstvergewisserung," *kultur.macht.europa – europa.macht.kultur*, ed. Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft e. V. (Bonn: Klartext, 2008), 157.

⁸ Florian Kellermann, "Museen vor Neuausrichtung: Polens Regierung schreibt Geschichte," *Deutschlandfunk*, 18 April 2016, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/museen-vor-neuausrichtung-polens-regierung-schreibt.1013.de.html?dram:article_id=351721 (accessed 20 September 2018).