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## **Master Narratives of Contemporary History in Eastern European National Museums**

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### **Abstract**

The paper addresses the ways contemporary history (the “short 20th century”, 1914–1989) is represented in the national museums of post-communist East-Central Europe. It focuses particularly on the Hungarian House of Terror, and draws on examples from Romania, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Serbia and the Baltic Republics. The representations of communism regularly reflect two interrelated problems: how to contain Fascism and how to maintain the idea of an eternal set of continuous national qualities, a mystical concept of the nation.

## Introduction

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 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 animated 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 Băseșcu, 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), which are going to be analyzed in this paper.

In many regards, these new museums devoted to recent history provide more powerful visions of the past than their more conventional counterparts in historical exhibitions of various traditional national museums. Contrary to national museums' historical exhibition that typically are reluctant to address controversial issues of the past, these new museums are not afraid of formulating strong and, in many cases, provoking ideas on the interpretation of national history and national identity. Arguably, the situation of historical exhibitions in traditional national museums reflects an uncertainty or the incapacity of representing the traumatic recent past. In a few cases like in Romania or Hungary, the exhibitions on national history lacks a profound rearrangement or revision of the master narrative. In Serbia, the National Museum, which used to display the parallel narrative of Serbian and Yugoslav identity, has been closed, while in Latvia there is no comprehensive historical exhibition. In Poland and Bulgaria national historical

exhibitions are only at the project stage: a fact to be addressed later on in the paper. In contrast, the emerging new post-Communist master narrative of national history is spectacularly shaped by the new or re-established museums of communism or of broader recent history. As a consequence, despite that many of them have resulted from private initiatives and funded by non-governmental agencies, these truly function as national museums. The current report explores crucial aspects of how these museums create master narratives of the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in post-Communist Eastern Europe. There are five components that are crucial in shaping these narratives: 1, the display of violence and atrocities; 2, the comparison of Fascism and Communism; 3, a “nostalgic exoticism” of everyday objects; 4, a mystical concept of the nation; 5, a transnational or pan-European implication. Finally, the report considers the recent challenge to these master narrative introduced by a few critical initiatives in some of the countries in the region.

### **Violence**

The exhibition in the Budapest House of Terror capitalizes on a shocking and depressing atmosphere of violence. The dark, gothic-style design immediately weighs heavily on the visitor upon entering the main hall. 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 experience is the depressing impression that one gets during the elevator descent into the cellars of the museum in the company of an elderly man – formerly a cleaning attendant present at executions. As the elevator reaches its destination, a reconstructed torture chamber of the communist secret police, he provides a detailed description of a routine hanging.

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 is the dominant feature of the displays situated in the building of the 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, another 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 Ceausescu. 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). In a similar manner, the National History Museum, which in general is reluctant to install a comprehensive exhibition on contemporary history, focuses on surveillance and police persecution in its temporary exhibitions. In Prague, the exhibitions in the recently founded Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes highlight the history of the secret police and its victims.

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, showcasing 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 the first twenty meters deep exploratory wells 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 result 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 of understanding. Instead of providing historical explanations for the origins of the communist dictatorships, these exhibitions construct a general moralizing discourse 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 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 labor, 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 an 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, one of the members 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 2004: 288.)

### **Comparison of Communism and Fascism**

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 Trials, 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. 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. 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 Central 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.

### **The Exotic of the Everyday**

Many of the exhibitions devoted to the history of Communism in East-Central European National Museums represent an apparently nostalgic display of everyday objects. The history of the late socialist period, Kádár’s “goulash communism” in the Hungarian National Museum is a typical example. Although Kádár’s personal objects, mostly gifts collected from various industrial companies, occupy almost half of the exhibition space devoted to the period, the First Secretary himself seldom appears as a real person. The most spectacular and visually compelling part of this section is the reconstructed living room typical for the late socialist urban middle-class dwelling environment of the massively produced prefabricated concrete block-of-flats. The last decade of the regime, the 1980s, is depicted by an installation showcasing kitchen utensils produced by socialist industry, a pioneer uniform and posters mobilizing for various festivities like the Revolutionary Youth Days of the 1980s, designed originally to domesticate generational radicalism and activism. The exhibition tries to forget about memories of discontent, disappointment and frustration, but highlights the nostalgia for allegedly common everyday experiences of ordinary citizens. As the intention to avoid internal conflict and create a

homogenous field of experience suggests, however, this nostalgic contemplation about the past does not refer to the period of “socialism” as an imaginary Golden Age, but rather to the self-identity of the Kádárist ordinary men and women, the cunning and creative Hungarians who managed to survive Soviet dominance and the experiments of domestic communist leaders in constructing a new society and, when time ripened, got rid of the Soviets and dismantled the regime.

The nostalgia character of representations of Communism is not an association with the contemplation of the innocent “Good Old Days” of youth-hood. Nostalgia in this case rather represents the intention to create a temporal distance from the period of the socialist dictatorships, to turn that period into a different, curious, but still familiar area: into the exoticism of the strange land once visited and experienced, therefore, partly appropriated by the tourist. At the end of the 2000s two similar temporary exhibitions, the “Golden Sixties” and the “Golden Era: Between Propaganda and Reality” were respectively installed in Prague (2009-10) and Bucharest (2007). These two displays focused on consumer cultures and life styles, but also aimed to demonstrate the repercussions of the corrupt and destructive Communist rule on social mentalities. In Prague, the Museum of Communism, which is a private profit-oriented initiative, collects and displays objects, curiosities and memorabilia from the socialist period. The Museum situated next to a MacDonalD’s restaurant represents the period of Communism as a weird exotic era: a representation intended to satisfy the eager expectations of tourism, but, probably also complying with the ordinary Czech citizens’ desire to forget.

The Internet Museum of People’s Poland started in 1999 as a collective website that displays objects related to the history of Communist Poland in a virtual exhibition area. The network of interested volunteers uploaded images of objects they themselves preserved, therefore, the collection was virtually made of objects associated to everyday life. The initiative reflects an awareness of Communism as history, whose memories, experiences and objects are discontinuous with the present and refer to a different and separate past. This past is definitely distant, but not frightening: it is still able to evoke comforting memories like those that might have been made during a holiday to a far-away exotic land.

### **Mystical Nationalism**

The action of Traian Bănescu 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, which previously mainly various civic and Church organizations had supported. 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 2004: 290-307.).

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 Party (*PiS*), 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 favor 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: 405.)

The Museum of Genocide Victims in Serbia, founded originally in 1967 to commemorate the victims of the anti-fascist struggle in Yugoslavia during WWII, has developed a narrative of these struggles in increasingly nationalist terms since its re-foundation in 1992. The ideological clash between Fascism and Communism that used to be central before 1989 has shifted to emphasize the ethnic contents of the massacre and to re-interpret the atrocities as anti-Serbian genocide. The museum, hence, played a crucial role in representing contemporary history as the history of the martyrdom and victimhood of an imaginary homogenous Serbian nation. The nation as the taken-for-granted, homogenous, continuous subject of history shapes the understanding of historical exhibitions in other countries of former Yugoslavia, as well. The National Museum in Slovenia installed an exhibition on Slovenian language in 2006 reflecting the idea of linguistic unity as the basis of national identity.

Many representations of the recent past in East-Central Europe are inclined to accept the authentic image of national history even those depictions, which isolate and tear the exhibited material off from other evidence available for interpretation. An obvious example of the post-Yugoslav nation building processes is the Modern History Museum in Sarajevo, which claims to represent the post-1945 history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The organizers of the exhibition, which occupies a full storey of the building, apparently have not recognized any other events worth mentioning between the end of WWII and 1992, the beginning of the Bosnian war. Whereas the museum exhibition dedicates most of its room to display the medieval and 19th century history of the Bosniak nation, it isolates two important events of the recent past, the resurrection of the Bosnian republic in 1945 and its dissolution in 1992, from other related

historical material such as the instances of Balkan ethnic politics and Yugoslav communism. The mode, which the museum regards an authentic representation of the past, offers the visitor only an isolated narrow selection of evidence and rips them off the opportunity to create authentic versions of interpretation by engaging them with a broader set of related historical material.

Even in cases where the representation of national history occurs in a less obviously ethnic and ahistorical terms, the homogenous nation as the subject of display is clearly recognizable. The Vítkov Hill Monument in Prague was constructed as the core component of the new post-1918 Czechoslovak national identity. The memorial, which was under construction for almost ten years between 1929 and 1938, officially was called the “National Revival Memorial”. This and the fact that it was meant to commemorate the deeds of the Czechoslovak legion fighting against the Central Powers in WWI shows that 1918 was considered by the new elite as the resurrection of the long dormant, but truly existing Czechoslovak nation. Yet, as the memorial was completed with a huge equestrian statue of 15th century Czech Hussite general, Jan Žižka, who defeated Crusader anti-Hussite troops here in 1420, it soon became the symbol of a particularly distinct Czech national identity. The Germans were well aware of this fact and turned the memorial into storage of weaponry during the occupation years, 1939-1945. The postwar Communist dictatorship abused the cultural and ideological potential of the memorial and tried to establish the claim of the Communist Party as a national political force by connecting the memory of chief party leader, Klement Gottwald with the implications of the history of the Hussite wars: Gottwald’s mausoleum was situated within the memorial between 1953 and 1962 and other Communist leaders were also buried here.

Following 1989, Communists were gone, but Žižka remained the core symbol of the post-communist Czech national identity emphasizing a long-term historical legacy of democracy and equality. Members of the Czechoslovak legion were also kept inside the memorial making the focus on Czech statehood and national independence clear. Remarkably, the refurbished memorial was turned into a space of exhibitions. The major exhibition on modern Czech and Slovak history, “Crossroads of Czech and Czechoslovak Statehood in the 20th Century” was installed here in 2009-10. The exhibition discovered five milestones of this history: 1918, year of the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic; 1938-1939 as the end of the first Republic and the Munich Agreement; 1948, year of the Communist takeover (coup d’état in the terminology of the curators); 1968 and the Prague Spring reform movement and the creation of the new federal state; 1989-1992 with the Fall of Communism and the birth of the two new independent republics.

The exhibition ignores aspects of social history such as social transformations, the mentality of various classes and their relationships to political changes or opportunities of adaptation to the socialist dictatorship and also other possible milestones like 1945, the expulsion of German occupation armies and subsequently indigenous ethnic German inhabitants of Czechoslovakia. As a consequence, the exhibition simply reproduces the myth of Czech(oslovak) national history as the democratic island founded by Masaryk, fought against and oppressed by two dictatorial foreign powers and eventually liberated and re-created by the new post-Communist democratic republic(s). Accordingly, the exhibition neglects the troublesome occurrences of the Holocaust and the extermination of Czech Roma tolerated or even supported by groups of the domestic society.

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 June 16<sup>th</sup>, 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 choosing a particular day for commemorating the victims of the communist dictatorships in Hungarian secondary schools (*Magyar Közlöny* 2000: 3360.). On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1947 the Soviet Red Army removed (or abducted) Béla Kovács, the general secretary of the Smallholders' Party, one of the most ardent critiques of the communist's aspirations to power. In 1947, this violent action clearly established the limits 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 as 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 elements of a comprehensive political will to remember. Immediately after 1989, the general disorientation about the interpretation of history produced a variety of interpretations, yet the first socialist-liberal coalition (1994-1998) identified itself largely on the basis of the priority of 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 celebration 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 millennium provided an opportunity for the government to perform the historical continuity of the Hungarian state grounded in a Christian-clerical historicization and national particularism (Gerő 2004: 181-99).<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 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 in an 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 and that these remained unchanged during and in spite of 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.

### **A Communism for Europe?**

Nonetheless, one should not resort to the comfort of the notion that these issues are but another manifestation of familiar post-communist, East European nationalism and 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. Fundamentally, 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, it is precisely this general indifference that 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.

## **Postscript**

As a matter of fact, recently the fairly uncritical stress on the eternity of national values has started to slightly change thanks to some initiatives. In a few cases, most importantly in the case of the planned Polish History Museum and the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant the focus has begun to shift towards an ironical approach and modest criticism of the earlier concepts. The proposal for the Polish History Museum calls for building a critical distance from the mythical narrative of the nation based on heroes and martyrs and for coming to terms with less comfortable episodes of national history such as the Holocaust or the troublesome relationship with other national communities in the country.

In 2010, the Romanian Peasant Museum opened an exhibition connected to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing down of its predecessor, the Party Museum. The exhibition, which used original objects of the old Communist collections, in many ways, was not even an exhibition. The objects, which were fixed among the normal sequence of objects of the permanent exhibition, remained hidden and difficult to recognize. However, exactly this camouflage exhibition created the real, the intended exhibition in the Peasant Museum. The intention of the curators was to create abrupt, shocking moments of perception when among ordinary folk pottery the visitors recognized a plate imitating peasant style, but with a red style as the core motif or when they encountered the broadly used official portrait of communist leaders among rows of Christian icons. The way of organizing the exhibition called for reflection both on museum practices and on the period of Communism. The curators encouraged the visitors to think about how an object became a “Communist” one, how exhibitions in museums relate to the history of their collections or how the period of the socialist dictatorship related to the trajectory of national history.

These exhibitions represent a different agenda than the demonstration of the mystical idea of the nation. They invite the visitors to ask questions about their relationship to the period of

Communism or contemporary history in general and to try to understand the impacts of the past in tangible personal ways.

## Notes

- <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)
- <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.
- <sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, the year of the millennium 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 millennium 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.
- <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.
- <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.

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