



2021 EuMePo Country Studies – Introducing the National Context

EuMePo Scholars from Canada and European countries explore how the 20th century’s past is (re)interpreted, commemorated, and narrativized in contemporary political life.

The Hungarian Case

Hungary’s fragmented historical memory

by Ildikó Barna

Jean Monnet Network : **European Memory Politics**
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It is an accepted statement among historians that historical memory and national identity cannot be disconnected (Smith 1986). Anthony D. Smith did not argue the statement above but doubted the implicit causal link. He claimed that ethnicity forms due to history. History and the canon of the nation not only define the values and the common myths but also settle who the group member is and who the community's enemies are (Smith 1986). However, the framework of this interpretation is constantly changing; there is no permanent "enemy" or "friend" in history. Due to the dynamic movement, communities can only internalize those elements of history that were communicated and fit into the established reference framework (Assmann 2004:36-46). The communication and the faith in the truth of the statement create communities' collective memory. However, the identity and the collective memory of the "we" depend on the individual "I"-s: the group increases and thus develops the self-identity.

Still, the group can only consist of self-identical individuals (Assmann 2004: 129-131). One of the most prominent actors of the communities' collective memory is the respective sovereign: power needs an origin and therefore it claims the "past" and the "future". Power wants its traces to remain, be narrated, be part of the memory, and justify its power's legitimacy. To this end, power may seek control over communication channels, which may include the control of speech about the past. (Assmann 2004: 69-73) Due to the constant uncertainty, the wars, collective traumas, and repression, we can stipulate about Hungary that the national past and identity constantly and substantially change. A form of history telling developed in which the current power chooses the "past" acceptable to its narrative and does not include alternative ones.

Hungary's traumatic experience and fragmented historical memory

Hungary's historical memory is fragmented and divided. The country's history and the society's collective memory could not evolve organically. In the 19th century, Hungary became an integrated and semi-autonomous part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Dualism – a form of state administration after 1867 – assured breathing space for the country in the fields of its internal economy, culture, and science. Still, Hungary did not have autonomy in finance, foreign policy, and defense (Ormos 2008: 17). Hungary could not become a sovereign nation-state, and the First World War ruptured the country's development.

The 20th century illustrates the savagery of humanity and Western civilization. Wars, dictatorships, and genocides followed each other. The 20th century – as a traumatic experience – seek to appropriate the recent past and remain in the collective memory of the society. The experience and the trauma of the First World War left behind an environment in which the memory of the dramatic events were largely incomprehensible and impossible to process (Gyáni 2009: 3-7). The War, the wounds of the loss, and the traumatic memory have not been fully processed. Only the number of victims was counted, but mentioning the grief and the loss did not happen. The events of WWI became myths. The fallen soldiers and the sacrifices were altered to symbols (Gyáni 2016: 152-153). The artificially created symbol-system was a political act: the cult of the victims meant to reduce the burden of individually-lived mourning (Gyáni 2016: 157). After the War, the concept of “nation” became a current theme in politics and the public sphere.

As a consequence of the Trianon peace treaty, Hungary lost two-thirds of its pre-war territory. The questions of “who the Hungarian is” and “what the nation is” turned into a subject of political life. The trauma of Trianon was complex: important economic and industrial centers were detached and families were torn apart. The attitude towards Trianon has undergone many changes. Politics in the interwar period focused on regaining lost territory and population. This fact also contributed to the country’s shift to the right and its commitment to Nazi Germany. After the Second World War, until the regime change in 1989-1990, the subject of Trianon remained a complete taboo. Then in the 21st century, this trauma transformed into a Trianon-cult. The concept and memory of 1920 were connected with symbols, nationalism, and radical right-wing ideology (Papp 2017).

In contrast to the First World War, the memory politics of the Second World War and the Holocaust presented new features. Hungary was defeated in the Second World War and directly afterward occupied by the Soviets. The end of the war was not a relief, and it was not followed by a liberation and restoration process. The omission penetrated daily life and the thoughts about the War and loss. There was no historical research on the subject, and society could not grieve and process its loss. The official and only narrative about the past was from the perspective of the victorious Soviet Union and the country’s new oppressor power (Gyáni 2016: 189). The mourning process slowly started in the 1960s. During the 1970s, the remembrance of the War and Holocaust took shape: historians wrote about the deportation of Jews and persecuted groups. The remembrance of the fallen soldiers became part of Hungary’s memory politics. Moreover, diaries, personal memories of the survivors of the concentration camps gained ground, but the open discourse about the genocide only could start at the end of the 1980s. The narrative about the Second World War places Hungary in the “victims” position. As Gyáni says, the discourse about the governments’ former liabilities has not started yet (Gyáni 2016: 186-199).

Addressing trauma: Collective memory and the politics of memory

Jeffrey C. Alexander developed a methodological framework and the concept of cultural trauma, where instead of the individuum, the society is the keeper of the trauma. The trauma affects the collective memory and identity of the group and parallelly settles the limit of the “we-group” (Gyáni 2016: 87-88). During the period of the Soviet oppression, the “victim-role” among the society spread. People could not talk about the past and the Holocaust. At the same time, they had to accept the new form of government with all its misery. The oppression of the memories and the establishment of the communist dictatorship lead to the revolution of 1956. The revolution became a myth, impregnated with intense and rich meanings (Gyáni 2016: 230-231.).

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the political transition became possible in Hungary: Soviet dominance was replaced, and the Hungarian Republic was proclaimed. The new democratic

form of government facilitated the free remembrance of the past. Regardless of the democratic transition, the remembrance culture of the country remained divided. Western memory politics directed the countries with freshly-gained independence to focus on the grief of the Holocaust instead of the terror of the Communist Era (Assmann 2013: 30). Hungary opted for the expansion of public memory: this form of history telling gave perfectly shaped answers to the questions of academic historians. Its aim is not academic research but the (political) usage of the created answers to the questions of the past (Gyáni 2012: 361). The instant answers to the past's questions and traumas liberated and gave relief to one part of the society. Liberating only one part of the society affects polarization. The division of groups correspondingly means the division of the "voters"; therefore, political mobilization arises. Examining Hungarian remembrance culture and political communication, the conscious usage of the elements of national history can be frequently detected. We argue that nationalism is an essential component of the state organization of European countries (Brubaker 2006: 11). Therefore, it also played a crucial role in the formation of the image of the Hungarian nation. On closer inspection, nationalism became important in the 21st century: currently, we are witnessing the rebirth of this sentiment. As part of the revival and conscious usage of nationalism, we can detect several elements in the political communication that fit into this perspective. The cult of Trianon became outstanding: symbols of the detached territories became more frequent and the question of Hungarians in neighboring countries multiplied. Trianon also turned into a historical symbol with a strong emotional connotation (Feischmidt 2014:55-57).

Right-wing parties started to use historical symbols to mobilize and revitalize nationalist emotions. After 2010, this tendency became a fundamental part of daily political life: nationalism, protection of the borders against any foreign "enemy," the maintenance of a financially and emotionally strong connection with Hungarians in the neighboring countries are well-known and used topics in official communication. The separation between the "we" and the "them" is clear, and the picture of the enemy has regularly shown up in political life. The current political administration did not distance the country and its memory politics from the role of the "victims." In Hungary and Eastern Europe, memory politics is characterized by competition; former opposing countries measure their "level of suffering." The historical dialogue has not started in the country, and between the countries, the crimes committed by the nation do not constitute a part of collective memory (Zombory 2019: 9-10). The impact of the memories' oppression is huge: Volkan argues (as quoted by Wang 2018: 15-16) that groups – which can be families, leaders, and larger communities – "teach" the form of remembrance to the upcoming generations. In this way, traumatic or glorious events can be part of the identity, the collective memory of younger generations, while the strict boundaries between the groups remain. This heritage can cause conflict between those who had not even witnessed the conflict or the trauma.

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The Jean Monnet Network has established a transnational team of scholars and collaborators addressing the politics of memory, its use in the mobilizing efforts of populist-nationalist parties across the continent and the tension to an emerging transnational memory culture in the EU.

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