



ARTICLES

HISTORICAL MEMORY IN POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE AND THE RULE OF LAW – SECOND PART

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HOW CAN STATES POSSESS HISTORY VIA MEMORIALS?

In the 12th district of Budapest, on 64-65 Városmajor Street, at the site of an old sanatorium, a memorial has stood since 2007 dedicated to the “Jewish victims who lost their lives here in 1945”. However, on further analysis, the sign misses several crucial historical details. 1) It fails to mention that the Hungarian authorities harmed the victims, 2) several of the victims of the killings – local nurses – were not Jews, and 3) the memorial does not specify exactly how many people were killed and who they were. This story, recounted in *Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships*,¹ points out how those who constructed the memorial must have known all these details, but did not consider it necessary to mention them. Consequently, the authors ask: what exactly is the intention of this memorial, and how is history instrumentalised by states? While the book does not wholly answer this question, a reply could be hypothesized by reviewing it in tandem with *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History after 1945*.² Due to the differing nature of the two books, this review focuses on questions relating to the instrumentalisation of memorials – the claiming of places of memory.

These volumes both engage in analysis of state practices in the treatment of historical memory. *The Palgrave Handbook* is devoted to the state’s involvement in history in as many areas as possible, such as legal provisions, truth commissions, monuments, education, archives and so forth. It provides an encompassing view spanning around the world. *Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships* offers a more intimate look into one specific country and city: Hungary and Budapest. It walks the reader through Budapest’s monuments with a historical perspective, presenting the attitude towards history by governments and citizens throughout 20th and 21st century Hungary. Simultaneous analysis of these two books offers the opportunity to delve into the big picture of histo-

¹ K. UNGVÁRY, G. TABAJDI, *Budapest a Diktatúrák Árnyékában: Titkos Helyszínek, Szimbolikus Terek és Emlékhelyek – Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorship: Secret Places, Symbolic Spaces and Places of Memory*, Budapest: Jaffa, 2013.

² B. BEVERNAGE, N. WOUTERS (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History after 1945*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.



ry's instrumentalisation by states, as well as to discover the impact of states' interference in the specific, delicate environment of post-transitional Hungary.

Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships presents the city as reminiscent of Troy – possessing many different layers reflecting its ruling regimes. The book provides an extraordinarily thorough description of the city's monuments, even including those not officially state-sanctioned – some privately owned, some lost in the shadows, not claimed by anyone, neither State nor citizens. Such streets and buildings remind the reader of the ever-changing regimes of Hungary's 20th century. While the book does not delve into the analysis of the politics of memory in great detail, it does outline a significant question – considering how memorial sites are claimed and utilized by various actors, are the erection of monuments and other commemorative symbols the obligation of the state?

Such a question leads me to my analysis of *The Palgrave Handbook*. This book casts an undeniably wider net, but, in my view, they both lead to the same conclusion. Is it the state's obligation to address historical memory, and is there a choice for the state whether to engage in history at all? The book introduces the idea of state-sponsored history – an encompassing term including the creation of official history via state initiatives and memory regimes. It traces state-sponsored history in a very wide area: in the creation of memory laws, archives, research institutes, textbooks, museums, memorials, court proceedings, truth commissions, historical expert commissions and apologies. *The Palgrave Handbook* concludes that state-sponsored history involves instrumentalisation, but such instrumentalisation possesses both positive and negative values. It discerns the well-meaning efforts in memory law-making, such as criminalizing Holocaust denial; preserving the past via archives; providing plausibly neutral, expert viewpoints on sensitive historical events; and satisfying the victims of historical atrocities. However, the studies also demonstrate that no matter how good intentions are, all of these attempts result in some form of controversy.

The two volumes provide proof that the past permeates a wide variety of policy areas and really cannot be left behind. *The Palgrave Handbook* speaks of state-sponsored history, but I would rather describe the processes analysed in the book as the instrumentalisation of history, because it results in various extents of control over the construction of historical memory. The case studies illustrate the need of the state to be careful with its meddling in the creation for historical narratives. *Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships* further shows that even when the state does not attempt to interfere in the treatment of the past, they may be possessed by other means, for example by the erection of monuments on private initiatives.

Pierre Nora claimed that by the 1990s, we were living in an "age of commemoration" – society's naturally integrated commemoration of history via oral stories and legends had disappeared, replaced by artificially engineered narratives of collective

memory.³ *Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships* explains the most obvious symbols of this process – the memorial and the monument. Nowadays, commemoration has become an obligation, further inviting the question of whether selected tragedies in history imply a duty to remember. In other words, asking whether instrumentalisation of state-sponsored history can possess different, mandatory moral connotations.

Spaces selected for memorial sites are occupied in several ways and the state may erect a memorial led by various motives. Firstly, the duty element must be considered – monuments to fallen soldiers or victims of atrocities – as the idea of the present generation owing a recognition of their dignity, is widespread. Second, the construction of memorials contains an aspect of illustration of the national consciousness and national historical education. For example, *Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships* highlights the Heroes Square as a pantheon of historical figures, old kings, and revolutionary politicians. It was built as an exhibition of Hungarian history, aimed at both insiders and outsiders. The idea is that Hungarian children can learn the names and deeds of the figures depicted on their school field for history class, whereas tourists can be amazed by the magnificence of the achievements of Hungarian history.

If the state leaves memorial spaces unclaimed, they can still be filled – whether by groups intending to display revisionism or by groups intending to reckon with the past honestly, even without state action. The star houses in Budapest intend to commemorate and raise awareness of the magnitude of Jewish deportations in Hungary, because state memorials do not provide this picture. Gertjan Plets' chapter in *The Palgrave Handbook* analyses another situation in Russia, where in the Altai Republic and Tatarstan, global corporations have become involved in memorialisation.

Yet, unclaimed spaces of memory are just as suspicious as claimed memorial spaces. A way of determining the official state narrative of a historical event is by analysing what is chosen for glorification and commemoration, and what is not. For example, there are few to no memorials dedicated to the victims of the Armenian genocide to be found in Europe. Even if memorials are built, how they look and the message they transmit is subject to significant debate – a question analysed in the chapter by Shanti Sumartojo in *The Palgrave Handbook*.

Such problems relate to a crucial inquiry on memorials. What is their aim exactly? Are they constructed to blind spectators with the magnificence of history, to draw a curtain over the historical truth and hide it like the Wizard of Oz? Or are they constructed to educate the public, to show respect and honour towards those who cannot speak for themselves and to inform the younger generation that what has passed can happen again?

³ P. NORA (ed.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire, Tome 3*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997, pp. 609-610.

In an episode of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, Oliver showed a clip of a debate meeting on the local confederate monument in a US town.⁴ Participants of the meeting claimed that such memorials are necessary, because their removal would amount to the erasure of history. However, as John Oliver points out, monuments are not the principal means of history education. A well-organized and informative museum can provide much deeper and more contextualized knowledge about historical events. In contrast, there is no room for nuance in memorials. They cannot convey a lengthy backstory on how the depicted figure served a regime built on exploitation and how the legacy of the regime still affects and lingers to the present day. They are inconvenient means of communicating the context around their own construction, which may tell just as interesting a story regarding backlash towards progress. Such memorials make neither lesson possible. Although museums have the potential for similar problems of instrumentalisation as memorials, even in states struggling with the gradual deterioration of democracy, one can still find museums inspired by historical truths and not official state narratives.⁵

In conclusion, do we need memorials? I would argue yes – but with caution. The same is true for all forms of instrumentalisation and state-sponsored history, a message clearly relayed by both *The Palgrave Handbook* and *Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships*. It can be observed in both volumes how history is instrumentalised by states. Although the existence of memorials may not directly affect the lives of citizens, they are both tools and symbols used to transmit official state narratives. Moreover, they can easily become symbols of states' control over history and symbols of the groups included in or excluded from state-sponsored narratives. Nonetheless, memorials should not be abandoned entirely, as their symbolic nature also provides means to reckon with history and express respect.

History cannot be excluded from analysis of the rule by the state over the lives of citizens, and it cannot be excluded from the rule of law either. In fact, states are expected to take stands on their history, and, if necessary, inculcate themselves or their legal predecessors in the commemoration of historical events. *The Palgrave Handbook* highlights this issue with several case studies and makes it abundantly clear that state-sponsored history is not perfect. Interestingly, and perhaps to the slight detriment of the book, it does not contain a full study on Hungary – thus *Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships* complements the book's narrative fittingly.

Furthermore, *Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships* emphasizes the lack of state occupation in memory spaces, which leaves local history able to be possessed by other

⁴ See the TV show, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver – Confederacy*, in HBO, 8 October 2017, available at www.youtube.com.

⁵ For example, the Polin Museum in Warsaw demonstrates this phenomenon. See B. KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Inside the Museum: Curating between Hope and Despair: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews*, in *East European Jewish Affairs*, 2015, p. 215 *et seq.*

groups. The state may, in fact, even be blamed for the lack of commemoration. The decades-long analysis of *Budapest in the Shadow of Dictatorships* also exposes how easily interpretations of state-sponsored history change, and the overhaul and transformation of memorials is a pattern that enables to track this process.

These two volumes clarify that if and when states must intervene in history, then state-sponsored history must be a balancing act. The instrumentalisation of history cannot be avoided, but the difference lies in the aims. It matters whether this instrumentalisation is done with the intention of honest reckoning with the past, or with the intention of strengthening governmental control over history, to the detriment of historical accuracy. If the latter is the case, such volumes, both examining local situations on a more intimate level and encompassing a wide selection of different case studies, are absolutely timely and necessary. They provide insight and initiate crucial questions on the relationship between state control over historical narratives, deteriorating democracy, and rule of law around the world.

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