

Much has changed in the politics of memory in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) since the 1980s when the ‘historians’ dispute’ first flared. The former ‘communist’ states are now mostly run by conservative or liberal authoritarians. Germany, having reunified and shaken off its occupiers, presents itself to the Eastern neighbours it once occupied as their guide in the politics of memory.

This volume, in its editors and authors, is majority German, while the conference from which it stems was co-funded by the German and Polish governments and a Hungarian university. Its introductory chapters, by the conservative historian Hendrik Hansen, carry the rather smug conviction that ‘we Germans, having properly atoned for our past, can be confidently patriotic again.’ The past, here, refers to the Nazi and Communist regimes, two totalitarian systems under which, Hansen observes, Poland and Hungary and other CEE societies have also suffered. To what extent, the volume asks, does this common history—the shared subjugation under totalitarianism—facilitate a unified European memory landscape?

Hansen, hewing closely to the Nolte/Stürmer wing of the historians’ dispute, sets out to relativise Nazi crimes through comparison with those of communism, from which he believes Nazism took its inspiration. By cherry-picking some paraphrased ideas from Marx (Marx scholarship is emphatically not Hansen’s strong suit) and running them alongside ideas from *Mein Kampf*, he tries to demonstrate that genocidal terror is fundamental to both philosophies. Marxists and Nazis, through Hansen’s eyes, are alike in their determinism, materialism, contempt for human individuality and dignity, and propensity to slaughter people by the million. From this flows his objection to those who treat the Holocaust as a singularity. In their fixation on 1933-45 they marginalise the crimes of the GDR, downplaying the similarities of these two totalitarian regimes and exaggerating the importance of racism (p.39). The same obsession with Nazism has led the German state to systematically repress right-wing extremism while giving left extremism a free pass. His main evidence for this highly unorthodox charge is that Germany’s security services turned a blind eye to the justification of some forms of violence in some chapters of a book published by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (p.41). From this we must infer that Hansen is a pacifist. Yet he is not. This mystery is never resolved.

The volume is no monolith and Hansen’s chapters are followed by a bracingly different perspective, from the Austrian historian Heidemarie Uhl. For her, totalitarianism is an unsatisfactory concept, a polemical ‘Kampfbegriff’ that was seized on by German and Austrian cold-warriors to relativise their nations’ hideous recent histories (p.75). That the Holocaust is more widely memorialised than the Gulag is perfectly understandable, not only because the fascist menace remains alive today, but also because it represented the Nazi regime’s culmination whereas Communist states lasted much longer and in far less ghastly form, and the Holocaust targeted specific groups for genocide (pp.77-78). This latter argument is unintentionally buttressed by the volume’s composition, in that the only chapter that discusses a genocidal crime in any detail concerns a Nazi atrocity, at Babi Yar: the murder of tens of thousands of Kyiv’s Jews (followed later by communists, Roma, Ukrainian nationalists

and Soviet PoWs). Its author, Verena Vortisch, offers insightful reflections – via a discussion of Katja Petrowskaja’s novel *Maybe Esther* – on the agonies and difficulties of memorialising humans who have been massacred anonymously and dumped in a ravine. Ukraine was of course an epicentre of mass death under Stalin too: the Holodomor. The scale of suffering was enormous. Yet it illustrates Uhl’s observation about targeted groups. The extermination of Ukrainians came principally through famine, not murder; and although markedly worse than the famine and repression being visited on Russians that same decade, it was of similar type.

Memorialising Communist crimes in CEE today, Uhl observes (pp.74-78), is frequently instrumentalised; it serves to de-legitimize the antifascist resistance and to present the nation simplistically as a victim of foreign powers, whitewashing the collaborations with Nazism. Such memory-political abuses in Hungary are thematised in Catherin Horel’s chapter. The equation of the two totalitarianisms, she observes (p.133), is used to exculpate the proto-fascist (yet, arguably, non-totalitarian) regime of Miklós Horthy. Réka Szentiványi’s chapter discusses Budapest’s House of Terror, a museum that, although ostensibly dedicated to examination of fascist and communist dictatorships, focuses almost exclusively on the latter, and depicts all Hungarians as victims (p.166). Fidesz, and its leader Viktor Orbán, she shows, deploy memory politics strategically: to polarise society and cement their power, in pursuit of conspicuously undemocratic ends.

The undoubted quality of some chapters notwithstanding, the volume overall is limited by its framing assumptions, notably the categorical coupling of Nazism and Communism as brutal totalitarian systems. Defining Communism as a ‘criminal system’ effaces the heterogeneity of its historical record, which included 1930s Russia but also 1960s Yugoslavia and 1980s Hungary. It posits a Manichean dualism of totalitarian regimes (criminal, violent) and liberal democracies (legitimate, non-violent). Yet if one compares, say, communist East Germany (1949-89) with Britain or the USA in the same decades, one finds that the two democracies undertook an enormously higher number of political killings, including massacres and other atrocities, than did the communist dictatorship. Or consider 1930s Ukraine. The Holodomor was not simply a manifestation of Stalinist terror and the Gulag, it was simultaneously the reimposition of the colonial relationship that, initially established under Tsarism, had been abolished in the 1920s. Germany’s own history exhibits a parallel course. The semi-democratic Wilhelmine regime enacted horrific colonial violence, notably the genocide of the Herero and Nama. Following Versailles, Weimar Germany was largely non-colonial (even as some forces, notably Konrad Adenauer’s German Colonial Society, agitated for re-colonisation). Nazism committed to colonisation across CEE and beyond, a goal that drew inspiration from Germany’s own colonial record, and from US and British racism and imperialism. Germany’s refusal today to offer reparation for its genocides in Africa flows from a memory politics that recognises evil only when it was perpetrated by a so-called totalitarian regime.

In the concluding chapter Frank-Lothar Kroll asks if there can be “pan-European sites of memory” (p.220). If we are guided by the progressive core of Holocaust memorialisation, i.e. repentance for the oppression and murder inflicted by European regimes upon minorities, such sites, while including the CEE locations discussed in this volume, will be global in reach.

Communist states turned conservative, and developing a new politics of memory.

### **INTRO (Hendrik Hansen)**

On the political instrumentalization of the legacy of Communism.

Critical of those in Poland/Hungary that omit discussion of their nation's role in historic crimes. [The German as teacher]

The volume's objective: contribute to discussion of Europe-wide culture of memory (of Nazism/Communism). To contribute to a European 'community of values'.

Part 1: comparison of crimes of Nazism and Communism

Part 2: addresses politics of memory in Poland, Hungary, Germany

### **Hendrik Hansen chapter one: Totalitarianism and Extremism as Angriff auf die Menschenwürde – the role of memory culture in der streitbaren Demokratie**

Equates Nazism and Communism as criminal regimes in contrast to today.

p.22 For Marx, the proletariat will be immiserated.

p.23 Marx's utopia is collectivist, anti-individual

p.217 Mentions "from above" EU-driven attempts to create an EU sense of belonging.

p.220 He asks: are there transeuropean memory Orte? His answer is vague; reference to ideals of individual liberty and suchlike.

### **Heidemarie Uhl: Holocaust-remembering and the logic of comparison. Memory-cultural conflicts in (Central) Europe**

p.58 she quotes Judt: after 1945 Europe's self-conception (apart from FRG) was designed to exclude blame and guilt.

She writes as if the Holocaust was successfully forgotten until 1980 in Germany/Austria. This obliterates the student movement.

p.73 the discourse of Holocaust-as-crime was linked to Nazism's commitments to anti-racism and anti-semitism. This is problematic when this model was then adapted to include Soviet communism as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Criminal-regime.

### **Adam Krzemiński: CEE 1944-89 and after: our nameless revolutions**

p.193 Thirty years after 1989 we've seen the conservative counter-revolution, a trend to authoritarianism across Eastern Europe.

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Mention the toppling of statues in Bristol and Richmond; link to 1989. Statues and decolonisation.

A reader might also expect critical reflection on the relationship between Nazism and the broader category of far right ....why should the fascism focus solely on the Nazi example, and not also Italy, Horthy's Hungary, and clerico-fascist Austria, or even broadened further to 1950s Greece or Hungary and Poland today?

The historians' dispute was kicked off by Ernst Nolte arguing Bolsheviks pulled the trigger that led to the Nazis. Nolte was writing in West Germany, a state that was belatedly developing an official ideology of remembrance: Germany as responsible for the Holocaust, a uniquely evil historical event; but a frontier state pitted in armed rivalry against the 'communist' East.

From an op ed column, via facebook: "... some of the Eastern European politicians and governments involved in pushing for the recognition of the victims of communism in Europe during the Second World War have an ulterior motive. Not only are they engaged in Holocaust revisionism to diminish their own governments' complicity in Nazi war crimes, they are doing so even as they honour politicians who were Nazi sympathizers or outright collaborators. ...Hungary passed a law in 2010 that criminalizes saying there was only one genocide in World War II, punishable by three years in jail. Lithuania passed a similar law, with two years in jail, and in 2014 Latvia followed suit, with offenders risking five years in jail. ... It is not that the lives lost under communism are worth less, or that the Nazi Holocaust was worse, but that in so many ways it was unique – not in its victims, but in its intentions. ... Other totalitarian governments build prison and labour camps and engineered famines. But the Nazis were unique in designing and building infrastructure for the deliberate, planned slaughter of millions of humans on an industrial scale, with the purpose of eradicating every last Jewish man, woman and child. ...As a category, "communism" or "totalitarianism" are categories that are too abstract and too general."