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## Exhibiting Atrocity

Amy Sodaro

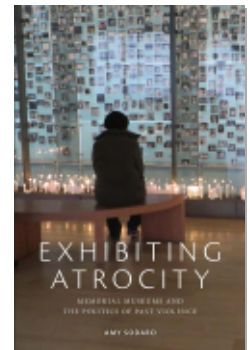
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## 3 • THE HOUSE OF TERROR

### “The Only One of Its Kind”

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The Terrorhaza, or House of Terror, opened in 2002 in what was once an apartment building on one of Budapest’s most beautiful avenues. Its location, 60 Andrassy Boulevard, is loaded with meaning and memory: the building was taken over in 1944 by the Arrow Cross, Hungary’s National Socialist movement, which deemed it the “House of Loyalty” and used it as its headquarters and prison; after 1945, the Hungarian communist secret police took over the building and used it until 1963. The renovated building now houses the ultramodern museum meant to tell the story of these two regimes of terror and to serve as “a monument to the memory of those held captive, tortured and killed in this building” (Terrorhaza). The past it remembers is difficult indeed—a complicated past of collaboration and complicity, suffering and terror under two of the twentieth century’s worst totalitarian regimes.

The House of Terror was conceived by Viktor Orbán, head of the right-wing Fidesz Party, and paid for using government money<sup>1</sup> in the midst of the bitter 2002 election campaign against the Socialist Party, the successor to the Hungarian Communist Party. Orbán, who in 2010 again became prime minister when Fidesz regained control in the Hungarian Parliament, which it retained in the 2014 election, is a highly controversial figure. His detractors argued in 2002 and continue to argue today that the museum was and is a political device employed by him to vilify the Communist Party and—by association—all left-of-center politicians and politics in Hungary today. The nearly twenty-million-dollar museum opened in February 2002, just two months before Orbán lost the election, to a crowd of

thirty thousand Orbán supporters. As Orbán's government approaches the opening of their highly controversial House of Fates Holocaust museum and with the wave of right-wing populism sweeping Europe and deepening in Hungary, the politics behind the House of Terror are again in the spotlight, highlighting the ways in which Orbán and Fidesz use the past and its memory for political purposes.

Like other memorial museums, the House of Terror has an ambitious and complicated mission. It seeks not only to remember the victims of the two totalitarian regimes—the fascist Nazis and Arrow Cross and the Soviet and Hungarian communists—but also to serve as a space of history and learning, with its central task being to morally educate its visitors to reject totalitarian and dictatorial ideologies in the future. By injecting its exhibitions and portrayal of the past with a powerful moral message about the evils of totalitarianism, the House of Terror positions itself as something of a “moral compass,” like the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), against which contemporary Hungarian society can measure itself. However, its political provenance and unbalanced representation of twentieth-century Hungarian history (of more than a dozen rooms, only two are devoted to fascism, the Holocaust, and the Arrow Cross) threaten to undermine its moral message and instead have made it a highly controversial museum and memorial. The politics surrounding the House of Terror, in particular, and Hungarian memory of the recent past, more generally, are complex and emotionally charged.

Hungary had an extremely difficult twentieth century. It started the century as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, controlling a large expanse of territory stretching from Russia to the Mediterranean and enjoying semi-autonomous rule and booming economic growth. However, World War I shattered all that; Austria-Hungary took the side of Germany and suffered serious losses, and ultimately the union of Austria-Hungary was dissolved. In the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost three-quarters of its territory, almost 70 percent of its population, and more than three million ethnic Hungarians, who were living outside of Hungary's borders. This was a devastating loss and a national trauma that continues to haunt Hungary ninety years later (Jordan 2010). Following World War I and Trianon, Hungary searched for a way to regain its territory and rebuild its economy and again looked toward Germany.

With the outbreak of World War II, right-wing politics had already taken hold in Hungary under the leadership of Miklós Horthy, in large part a

response to the fear of communism sparked by the short-lived revolution of communist Béla Kun in 1919. When World War II broke out, Hungary again joined the losing side, fighting with Nazi Germany and suffering crippling losses. In 1944, Germany lost patience with Hungary's reluctance to toe the fascist party line in regard to its Jewish population and invaded and occupied the country, ushering into power the brutal Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross Party under the leadership of Ferenc Szálasi. Over the short span of several months, approximately four hundred thousand Hungarian Jews were deported to death camps in Poland, and the country was devastated by the war. Hungary surrendered unconditionally in 1945 and was promptly occupied by the Soviet Union. Under a new totalitarian regime, Hungary went through the same repression and terror of the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, enjoying a momentary glimpse of freedom in the 1956 uprising, only to see the Iron Curtain again descend. It was not until 1989 that Hungary again tasted independence, but it has since struggled with how to remember and come to terms with its difficult past.

Pierre Nora has written about the "recovery of memory" that occurred with the fall of communism in 1989; this recovery released a flood of memories not only from the communist period but from the preceding fascist period as well, complicating memory in the postcommunist world and presenting challenges to the representation of the past in public memorial initiatives, especially memorial museums. Nora's "recovery of memory" also echoes the theories of Olick and others that see a breakdown in hegemonic collective memories in the late twentieth century and a move toward inclusive, discursive, regretful memory. Using Nora's notion of the "recovery of memory" as a point of departure for the particular Hungarian case, in this chapter, I analyze the exhibition narrative and strategies employed by the House of Terror in light of Hungary's postcommunist political and social context. An analysis of the House of Terror, one of the most prominent but also problematic memorial museums in postcommunist Eastern Europe, reveals the often-conflicting legacies and memories of fascism and communism found in other memorial initiatives throughout the region. Similar tensions are evident in memorial museums from former East Berlin to the Baltic countries,<sup>2</sup> indicating the difficulty of representing and remembering the tumultuous twentieth century in this part of the world. However, while the particularities of repression and persecution under two of the twentieth century's worst totalitarian regimes are unique to the former Eastern Bloc, the chosen tools for memorializing this past,

specifically memorial museums, are not. Throughout the former communist world, memorial museums abound; the House of Terror is one of many, but it puts the issues related to the dueling memories of fascism and communism into very sharp focus and is therefore an excellent lens through which to examine the complexity of memory and memorialization in this part of the world.

## 1989 AND THE RECOVERY OF MEMORY

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory  
against forgetting.

—Milan Kundera (1978)

Even before the collapse of communism in 1989, a new emphasis on memory, with a focus on coming to terms with past violence and atrocity, had been trickling into consciousness, shaping today's pervasive politics of regret. While World War I presented its own challenge to remembering and commemorating the past, resulting in new priorities and forms of commemoration (Winter 1995), the Holocaust presented an entirely new set of challenges and necessitated a new vocabulary (crimes against humanity, genocide) and a new system of international justice (exemplified by the Nuremberg trials), as well as new forms of commemoration. And while memory of the Holocaust tells us much about the emergence of the memorial museum, understanding what Nora terms the "recovery of memory," which occurred with the fall of communism in 1989 and the subsequent toppling of dictatorships and democratization around the globe, can further help us understand what is at stake in the practice and study of memory today, as well as the new solutions, like memorial museums, that have emerged to deal with the past.

While in the nineteenth century the nation-state was the dominant producer and caretaker of memory and history, using the past to unite a people around a common identity and set of political objectives, the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century sought an even greater hegemonic control over the past in the service of their ideological goals. For the many dictatorial regimes of the twentieth century, including not only fascism and communism but also apartheid in South Africa and the military dictatorships of Latin America, it was in their greatest interest to suppress the diverse,

plural memories of oppressed populations and instead manipulate history and rewrite the past to suit their present political needs. Especially under regimes like those in communist Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, history and memory were imposed top-down by the state. This allowed the state to reduce the official and dominant versions of the past to those events and persons that supported the goals of the regimes. One striking example of this is communist regimes' portrayal of World War II as the triumph of communism over fascism—one that completely obscured memory of the Holocaust and the persecution and murder of Jews or other nonpolitical groups.<sup>3</sup> Memory and the past became tools of oppression; following Orwell, the communist regimes firmly believed that “he who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past” (1949, 34).

Accordingly, regaining “control” of memory was central to the struggle against communism and for the future, and Nora's recovery of memory has its roots in the collapse of various hegemonic ideologies throughout the twentieth century. With the fall of fascism and the breakdown of trust in modernity caused by World War II, one hegemonic history was shattered and, along with it, some of the faith in the nation-state and nationalism as ruling principles of modernity and progress. Throughout the Cold War, remaining repressive ideologies and hegemonies were questioned and dismantled, especially in the domestic revolutions of the 1960s: the feminist, student, and civil rights movements further diversified the voices of individuals and groups claiming the past and its memory. And with the end of the Cold War, yet another “subterranean stream” of history that had long been repressed and silenced by the dominant narrative entered global consciousness (Arendt 1973 [1951], ix).

Nora describes this as an “ideological decolonization [that] helped reunite these liberated peoples with traditional, long-term memories confiscated, destroyed or manipulated by those regimes” (2002, 5). In addition to the release of longer-term, “traditional,” and national memories that had been suppressed by communist regimes throughout the region, there was the recovery of memories of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust as well as the liberation of more recent memories of the suffering of individuals and groups at the hands of the Soviet-controlled communist governments. Memories of suffering under communism were the most recent and acute of those memories suddenly allowed to have public life, and it was the communist regime that transitional governments were most zealously

trying to put behind them. In many senses, then, the recent past of communist dictatorship loomed largest in the sphere of collective memory and became important political capital for new regimes trying to move forward.

However, as Tony Judt writes, “the real problem was the temptation to overcome the memory of communism by inverting it” (2005, 824). Thus while the mostly peaceful revolutions of 1989 cleared the way for the development of open, democratic societies, on pace with the development of individualism, constitutionalism, and liberalism were nationalism, xenophobia, and ethnic tensions. The breakup of the former Yugoslavia is the most dramatic case but certainly not the only one. The rise of nationalism and the ethnicization of politics are not surprising following the fall of a repressive regime, especially in the former Communist Bloc, whose nations had been buffeted about throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, changing hands, borders, and alliances at a dizzying rate and having barely tasted sovereignty. Without communist or fascist ideology to provide meaning and structure society, the countries of the former Eastern Bloc emerged from the ashes of communism with their national belonging as the most cohesive and prevalent identity to cling to. After a century of occupation, persecution, and domination, many postcommunist countries embraced nationalism as a central pillar of their newly formed political autonomy.

With this renewed sense of national belonging and an emergent national identity centered on the newly independent nation-state, ethnicity and other forms of difference surfaced. The flood of memories and alternative histories that accompanied the liberation of society came as something of a shock: “The fall of communism destroyed this shroud of sameness, and the world was caught napping by an outburst of the many unanticipated differences concealed beneath it” (Havel, qtd. in Tismaneanu 1998, 39). Ethnic, religious, and other identities that had been repressed were suddenly freed, making the world a new place full of difference and numerous “others” with alternative—and sometimes competing—versions of the past and present, as well as differing views of the future. In other words, following the fall of communism, there was “too much memory, too many pasts on which people can draw, usually as a weapon against the past of someone else” (Judt 1992, 99). Hence throughout the region—and especially in Hungary—together with the constitution of liberal democracy, we have seen the rise of right-wing parties and nationalistic ideologies, as well as a proliferation of memorial museums of national suffering created

to portray the newly liberated nation as an innocent victim of the terror of totalitarian—namely, *communist*—rule.

## POSTCOMMUNIST POLITICS IN HUNGARY

Hungary has been especially susceptible to the rise of nationalism and extreme right-wing politics resulting from nostalgia for the communist past and insecurity in the present and about the future. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a thorough analysis of Hungarian postcommunist politics, I would like to offer a few conclusions about the particularity of the Hungarian transition that help illuminate the political uses of the past in the House of Terror.

The communist experience in Hungary following the suppressed 1956 revolt was arguably different from that of its neighbors. The relatively open and comfortable so-called goulash communism of János Kádár's regime meant that many Hungarians enjoyed not only relative wealth but also greater freedom compared to more severe neighboring regimes. However, the economic compromises of the Kádár regime to keep the people relatively content paved the way for a host of economic challenges: inflation, debt, and deficits immediately threatened the economic stability of the country throughout the period of transition to democracy and a market economy (Bohle and Greskovits 2009, 54). For many, the fall of communism most obviously brought an end to personal economic stability, not necessarily the long-desired freedom and openness that other countries experienced.

Additionally, as János Kis argued shortly after Hungary's first democratic election (1991), the nature of Hungary's transition as negotiated by the communist elites and dissident intellectuals, instead of resulting from a larger civil society movement, left much of the Hungarian public feeling disenfranchised and disconnected from Hungary's new democracy. Unlike the large Solidarity movement in Poland, for example, the Hungarian people had not been very active in the struggle for political change, and so their stakes in the new political system were not as high; according to Kis, this made it much more difficult for them to accept the sacrifices necessitated by the transition to democracy and a free market.<sup>4</sup> Because "the overwhelming majority of Hungarians [could] detect little or no change in their lives" (Kis 1991, 5), the perceived success of the postcommunist leadership was largely



based on the economic situation of the Hungarian people, which was often not better but worse than under communism.

This link between political leadership and the economic situation “on the ground” took new form after the economic crisis of 2008. Hungary was one of the worst-hit EU nations in the economic crisis of 2008—its economy shrank by 7 percent—and it is still reeling from the effects. Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party was reelected in 2010 and has since moved further and further to the right. Orbán has shocked Europe with his open promotion of what he calls “illiberal democracy” and his party’s deeply troubling antidemocratic laws regulating the media and freedom of religion. Most recently, Hungary erected a razor-wire wall to keep migrants out, revealing an increasingly xenophobic, populist stance that is gaining traction throughout Europe and the United States. With Donald Trump (whom Orbán no doubt sees as an ally) assuming the presidency of the United States, Fidesz has stated that any civil society group funded by George Soros should be “swept out” of Hungary, including – and perhaps especially – Budapest’s well-regarded Central European University (Than 2017). According to Freedom House, Hungary has been downgraded in the last few years of Orbán’s rule from a free, consolidated democratic regime to “semi-consolidated” (Freedom House 2016). And it is in this climate that the far right-wing Jobbik Party has gained in popularity and influence. Though Orbán vowed to rein in the anti-Semitic, anti-Roma ultranationalistic party, Fidesz has in fact been more and more openly supporting Jobbik’s positions and capitalizing on its exploitation of the memory of a once great and powerful “Hungary for Hungarians” to consolidate its political power.

The political, economic, and social upheavals of Hungary following 1989, like many of its neighboring former Soviet satellite states, have bred a powerful combination of nationalism and nostalgia for the simpler and stabler communist past, both of which are evident in the House of Terror. In addition, politicians and political parties in Hungary have evoked memory of the recent and more distant past to further their political agenda. This political use of the past is starkly evident in the House of Terror, which both plays to the nationalist rhetoric of the Hungarian right and touches on the nostalgia for the “good old days”; what is lacking, though, is any sort of critical or engaged examination of the more distant past of Nazi occupation and the short but brutal Arrow Cross regime. Though it is meant to be a memorial museum to the two totalitarian regimes that controlled Hungary

for much of the twentieth century, it remembers only the horrors of communism and underscores Hungary's sharp jolt toward the right.

## HISTORY, MEMORY, AND POLITICS OF THE HOUSE OF TERROR

Already in 1997, József Szájer, a leader of the then-out-of-power Fidesz Party, had the idea to turn the building at 60 Andrássy into a museum of communism. The seed was thus planted, and when Fidesz gained power in 1998, with Orbán as prime minister, the project began to take shape. In 2000, the beautiful building at 60 Andrássy was purchased by the Public Foundation for the Research of Central and East European History and Society, a government-sponsored foundation under the directorship of Maria Schmidt, a historian by training who was one of Orbán's closest political advisors and has been director of the museum since its inception.

According to Schmidt (personal communication), the primary impetus behind the creation of the House of Terror was the question of what to do with the many perpetrators of crimes committed under the communist regime. Hungary has had an uneasy relationship with transitional justice, swinging back and forth between calls for opening the secret police files, criminal prosecution, and lustration (the purging of former communist officials from government) on the one hand and closing the door on the past on the other. However, most proposals for any form of "transitional justice" were at the root primarily political posturing, meaning none were ever taken very seriously by the Hungarian people, and little in the way of transitional justice ever came to fruition (Kiss 2006). In the early nineties, the Hungarian parliament created a law that would allow perpetrators from the communist leadership to be tried for those crimes committed during the darkest days of Hungarian communism, especially those immediately following the suppressed 1956 uprising. However, the Hungarian Supreme Court overturned the law as unconstitutional and not fitting the criteria of rule of law (Kiss 2006, 932), essentially placing the "rule of law over justice" (M. Schmidt, personal communication). This was not at all uncommon in the region; many countries throughout Central and Eastern Europe struggling with coming to terms with the past and its perpetrators rejected the notion of criminal trials as impractical, divisive, and expensive: the perpetrators seemed too old and too numerous and the peace and

democracy too tenuous to be threatened by lengthy criminal trials (Rosenberg 1995). Rather, an uneasy amnesty was settled upon, and the gaze of the former Eastern Bloc and Hungary was toward the future.

However, this was a deeply unsatisfying resolution to many people, especially Schmidt and her colleagues in the Fidesz Party, which has moved steadily to the right after 1989 in the effort to wrest power from the Socialist Party, which has been seen as the remnants of the old, communist regime. Firmly believing that without justice in the form of holding perpetrators responsible Hungary would not be able to move forward, plans for a museum to expose the truth about the communist past were drawn up in the effort to come to terms with Hungary's recent history. The museum, then, was conceived in large part to be a public forum for holding the perpetrators of communist crimes accountable—if not judicially then morally. Like the USHMM, truth-telling about the past was central to its mission, though in this case, a part of that mission was publicly exposing the crimes of individuals still alive and active in Hungarian political and cultural life. By extension, however—because the building itself had been used by both the communist regime and the preceding fascist regime and because of the striking similarity of repression under these two totalitarians—the museum was also created to remember Hungary's more distant past of suffering under German Nazi occupation.

Further, it was not enough for the museum to serve as a space for those who had experienced communism (and fascism) to come to terms with the past and find some sort of reparation in the public exposure of their victimizers. Rather, echoing similar initiatives around the world—like the USHMM—the creators of the House of Terror wanted to create a museum for the younger generations. For those who did not live through communism or are not old enough to remember, the House of Terror is intended to portray such a picture of Hungary's past under communism (and fascism) as to make today's youth appreciate that they do not live under dictatorship. As many have noted, in the years following the fall of communism, it was difficult to have a positive relationship to democracy (Kis 1991); things had not gotten especially better for the many people who found themselves worse off economically, still politically disenfranchised, and longing for the stability of socialism. For this reason, it was deemed important to create a museum to show the "reality" of life under dictatorship. By demonstrating how terrible it was, the House of Terror is intended to teach young generations the advantages of democracy over dictatorship—no matter how much

effort is required to make democracy work and despite the fraying Hungarian democracy today.

In order for the museum to effectively tell the story of totalitarianism in Hungary for the young generations, the museum's creators believed that it needed to first "reach the heart" of its visitors before reaching their minds (M. Schmidt, personal communication). Like the USHMM's intention to give the visitor an emotional "Holocaust experience" that augments the intellectual content of the exhibit, the House of Terror is intended to provoke an emotional reaction first and foremost, with an intellectual response following. It also, for Schmidt, had to be a museum in which her daughter (fifteen when the museum opened and born just one year before the collapse of communism) would not be bored. Having visited similar memorial museums in Germany, the Baltic countries, France, and the United Kingdom, Schmidt and her team envisioned something that would be even more interactive, technological, and engaging than what they'd seen. Hence the museum is a dramatic, experiential, and haunting encounter for the visitor, with numerous audio, visual, and interactive components that attempt to engage the visitor and seek to provoke an emotional, guttural response to the horrors of totalitarianism. Design and special effects like lighting, music, and atmospheric scenery are the most immediately striking characteristics of the House of Terror—and it surpasses the USHMM and most other memorial museums in its use of these dramatic elements. It is clear this sort of interactive theatricality was central to its mission to reach the hearts and minds of young people who might not have direct experience of life (and terror) under totalitarianism.<sup>5</sup>

## INSIDE THE HOUSE OF TERROR

The dramatic and emotional experience of the House of Terror begins before one even enters the building. Architecture plays varying important roles in memorial museums but is never simply an afterthought; although the House of Terror is actually a site of historic significance to the story it tells, the architecture of the original building has been altered enough to make striking what is otherwise only an especially lovely building on an avenue of beautiful buildings.

The graceful nineteenth-century facade is completely dominated by the striking black "blade walls" that separate it from the building next to it and warn the visitor of what is inside: jutting from the roof is a stark black overhang



FIGURE 4. House of Terror exterior.

Photo by Amy Sodaro.

with the word *TERROR* spelled backward, the communist five-pointed star, and the Arrow Cross symbol cut out of it to let the sun shine through to spell out the terror of the two regimes that awaits inside. It is claimed that at precisely noon, the sun shines so that the *TERROR* shadow fills the sidewalk below (Rev 2008, 64); but at any time of day, it is obvious what lies inside the museum. Designed by award-winning architect and scenic designer Attila Ferenczfy-Kovács, who also designed the museum's interior, the striking facade not only spells out the museum's dominant theme; it is also prelude to the dramatic experience that lies within. It was also a fierce point of controversy, as Andrássy Boulevard is a UNESCO World Heritage site and such a dramatic change to the facade was arguably not to be permitted.<sup>6</sup>

Greeted by *TERROR*, the experiential rendering of the past begins before even gaining entrance to the museum: the museum's entrance is small and cramped, meaning that visitors often must stand in long lines to buy tickets, calling to mind the bread lines that dominate popular imaginaries of life under communism. It also echoes the lengthy security lines at the USHMM and the 9/11 Museum, and the experience at these museums of mild violation as one is asked to remove watches, belts, and jewelry

and walk through a metal detector. The lines and obstacles to get into these museums speak at once to their popularity, the sensitive nature of what lies inside, and the overall experience of visiting the violence of the past. Once inside the House of Terror, the visitor is greeted by an ominous and foreboding soundtrack<sup>7</sup> that will haunt her throughout the entire museum. Rising up over the music, on television screens lining the entry, a sobbing victim of communism asks “Why?,” seeking to understand the senselessness of the terror one is about to witness. Like the facade and lines to get in, these dramatic elements set up the entire experience for the visitor, which is as carefully narrated, framed, and rendered, as the glaring, cut-out word *TERROR* is angled for the proper effect.

Past the ticket counter is a courtyard, which must have once been beautiful but is now dominated by a massive Soviet tank sitting in a pool of oil against a towering wall of photographs of victims, underlining the magnitude of victimization that one is about to witness (though it is not clear if these are victims of communism or fascism or both). The tank clearly symbolizes the Soviet occupiers, who in 1945 promptly took over the graceful but menacing building and planted themselves, unwanted and unwelcome, into Hungarian society. Already well-oriented toward the narrative the museum will tell, then, the visitor is directed to an elevator to the third floor where the journey through the two totalitarian regimes begins with “Double Occupation.” The name of the room articulates the museum’s overarching message and indicates that Hungarians were victims, first pawns of the Germans and then the Soviets. Dramatically arranged with a wall splitting the room into fascist and communist occupations, what is immediately striking—and what will remain true throughout the rest of the museum—is the sacrifice of information and documentation in the form of text, labels, photographs, and documents to dramatic renderings and artistic and imaginative scenes that blur concrete, historical data with symbolism that leaves much room for the imagination. In “Double Occupation,” the wall has screens playing documentary film footage, but there are no signs (in Hungarian or English) to tell the visitor what she is seeing; rather the effect of the bold wall, splitting the room (and symbolically splitting the spoils of Hungary in the twentieth century) seems intended to convey all that needs to be conveyed. Each room is dominated by a quote on the wall, which is intended to “say it all” (A. Mathe, personal communication)—in the case of “Double Occupation,” the quote is “Last night I dreamt the Germans left



FIGURE 5. House of Terror Courtyard with Soviet tank and wall of victim photos. Photo by Amy Sodaro.

and no one stepped into their shoes,” from Imre Kovács—and make up for the lack of other text and information; however the quotes are in Hungarian, and there is no translation. An information sheet accompanies each room, for those willing to seek the information out, but otherwise the museum is striking in its lack of textual information, especially for the non-Hungarian visitor. While it is not necessarily unusual for a Hungarian museum not to have

English or other translations, the fact that the museum intends to be—and is—one of the most popular and visited tourist sites for non-Hungarian visitors to Budapest, the lack of translation is somewhat surprising.

The next two rooms, “Hall of the Arrow Cross” and “Arrow Cross,” constitute the extent of the museum’s representation of fascist occupation by Germany, the Holocaust, and Hungary’s Arrow Cross movement. Through the vilification of Hungary’s fascist leader, Ferenc Szálasi, some of the horrors of the Holocaust and the destruction of Hungarian Jewry are touched upon, though with scant reference to the homegrown anti-Semitism that brought the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross movement (and the Germans) to power. The “Hall of the Arrow Cross” is dripping with symbolism and arranged as a kind of “last supper of hatred” (A. Mathe, personal communication). A fascist dinner party convenes in the center of the room, with china inlaid with the Arrow Cross symbol and a ghostly leader standing at the head of the table (Szálasi?); behind him, a blurry projection on the wall makes no sense to the visitor, until it’s explained that this represents the Danube, where many Jews from Budapest met their end at the hands of the Arrow Cross. Alternating Nazi and Arrow Cross uniforms hung on the walls remind one that it was the German infiltration of Hungarian politics that led to the Holocaust’s devastation in Hungary and underlines the museum’s message of victimization at the hands of the occupying regimes. It is also in this room that the House of Terror’s indifference to authenticity first becomes apparent, though not necessarily on first glance; the uniforms and Arrow Cross plates on display are not actual artifacts, but reproductions, like much of the museum, with no labels indicating their provenance. As the layers of symbolism and dramatic interpretation—impenetrable without a Hungarian guide and preferably one who is very knowledgeable about the museum—become apparent in the museum, the departure from traditional museological principles becomes ever more striking. And yet the lack of information is surprisingly effective: the experience is one of affect and emotion, and there is little space for critical thought or historical comprehension.

Following these two small rooms that are the museum’s sole focus on fascism, the visitor is taken to the “Gulag” in the far reaches of Siberia, where lighted cones with artifacts from the labor camps rise up out of a floor map of the dreaded archipelago; from here the visitor enters a small antechamber, “Changing Clothes,” which shifts the focus of the exhibit to the heart of the museum’s message. In “Changing Clothes,” members of the Arrow Cross





FIGURE 6. Arrow Cross Assembly Hall exhibit on Hungarian Fascist Party collaboration with Nazis.

Photo by <http://thomasmayerarchive.com>.

are depicted as switching sides after the war and joining the communists; while their uniforms and politics may have changed, this small minority of “bad” Hungarians shifted sides to remain in their role as tormentor of innocent Hungary. The implication—in light of the full museum experience—is that these former fascists-turned-communists learned from the Nazis how to be especially evil, which was a skill that they would develop to its greatest potential under the Soviet occupation. From here, the visitor is immersed in the terror of the communist occupation of Hungary.

Beginning with Hungary’s darkest period of communism, the exhibit takes the visitor through “The Fifties”; the front of this room has red-curtained poll booths, which ironically reference at once the “perfect democracy” that communism purported to be (A. Mathe, personal communication) and the rigged election of 1947 and which allow visitors a moment to sit down and listen, on the period-style phones that are placed throughout the museum, to archival speeches from the era.<sup>8</sup> Behind the facade, though, the visitor finds the “reality” of life under communism in the shape of surveillance devices, blaring propaganda speeches, and the proscriptive Socialist Realist paintings of the period. This depiction of “Life under Communism” reminds the visitor that communist principles

and ideals permeated every aspect of life, even the most private corners of existence and gives her an opportunity to “experience” totalitarianism. However, lest one sense any complicity of the Hungarian population in the everyday life under communism, the next two rooms, “Soviet Advisors” and “Resistance,” emphasize the foreign nature of the communist regime and the effort to resist the totalitarian occupation, at all levels of Hungarian society. This society-wide resistance to communism is symbolized by the three desks on display moving from simple and poor to scholarly and intellectual to elegantly aristocratic. According to researcher Aron Mathe (personal communication), the reconstructed props and heavy symbolism like the three “resistance” desks, would be immediately understood by all Hungarian visitors who lived through the Stalinist period, though this might remain obscure to the casual international visitor.

From here, the horrors of communism persist, with “Resettlement and Deportation” depicted by a veiled Black Maria; the ominous black automobile—recognizable to even those with no direct experience of communism—evoking the heart-pounding knock on the door in the middle of the night that came with the car. From here, the visitor moves on to “The Torture Chamber,” on the wall of which hang ominous (imagined?) instruments of torture; without explication, the visitor is left to imagine what sorts of torture innocent victims were subject to. Two rooms on the “Hungarian Political Police” deliberately name and display photographs of members of the higher echelons, and the room entitled “Justice” depicts the staged nature of the communist show trials, complete with audience seating, a tiny room cut into the wall for the “prompt” to whisper forgotten lines to the actors, and a stage, all of which are papered with bureaucratic dossiers and documents related to trials, indictments, sentences, appeals, and investigations.

Tucked between these rooms that are meant to depict the brutality and arbitrary terror of communism are several rooms devoted to everyday life under the regime that are humorous, ironic, and even nostalgic. A room devoted to Hungarian peasants is a maze of one-kilogram blocks of lard, complete with a papier-mâché pig, intended to stir up memories of the 1969 satiric Hungarian film *The Witness* and evoke humor and irony in visitors for whom one kilogram of lard was precious under communist rationing. There are two rooms devoted to propaganda, which alternatively depict the vibrant colors of propagandistic posters and advertisements and drab black-and-white photographs of the reality of everyday life; however, the

empty food tins, old radios, newspaper cutouts, round, vinyl settee, and fake plant hold a poignant nostalgia for what was. Another room, completely aluminum with eerie blue lighting pokes fun at the “Hungarian silver” made from the bauxite mines of Hungary, again using kitsch to almost fondly recall life under communism. These rooms remind even the inexperienced visitor that life under communism was not so completely pervaded by the terror depicted in the preceding rooms and that “normal” life went on; however, the seemingly perfunctory nature of these moments of levity in what is otherwise a house of terror gives reason for skepticism that the museum is telling a balanced story of life under communism.

Departing again from nostalgia, the exhibition moves on to a dramatic, dark, and uncanny cave-like room with a lighted cross cut out in the floor and a disembodied priest at its head. Though there is no text to explain the room, the visitor knows that it refers to communism’s war on religion in Hungary. Dark, brooding music plays in the background under speakers recalling the blaring propaganda of the period, and small cut-out lighted shelves in the walls hold diminutive religious artifacts. Videos show footage of the arrest and persecution of various members of the clergy; however, again, all is in Hungarian, and other than soaking up the atmosphere and affect, the non-Hungarian visitor is a bit lost to historical understanding and is simply swept up in emotion.

Nearing the end of the exhibit, the visitor finds herself in an elevator descending painfully slowly to the (completely reconstructed) torture cells in the basement, while a former execution assistant describes the process of hanging political victims. Trapped in the enclosed and claustrophobic space, the visitor cannot help but imagine that this is how the victims felt as they were caught in the nightmare of detention and torture. In the basement, this affective experience continues, as visitors are encouraged to enter the torture cells, which have been re-created, as no records remain of what the cellar of 60 Andrassy actually held. There are cells too narrow to sit down in or too low to stand up and cells that forced the visitor to imagine standing in icy water for hours on end or to sit in complete darkness. There are small cells in which prisoners would have lived, arranged thematically with photographs of famous dissidents, clergy, antifascist activists, and others who may or may not have been imprisoned in 60 Andrassy. And there is the execution cell in which a gallows is erected, though if you do your research, you learn that no executions took place in this house of terror.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the visitor is invited to identify with the victims

of communist oppression and step into their proverbial shoes for a few moments in order to comprehend communism's terrors more completely.

The torture and "execution" cells open onto a moment of short-lived triumph, with the "Hall of the 1956 Revolution," where a haunting empty coat of one of the victims of the Soviet crackdown hangs from the ceiling and a bicycle damaged by a shell rests on a low wall of screens that bisects the room and shows footage from the brief uprising and brutal suppression. This is followed by an evocative memorial, "The Hall of Tears," that is dedicated to "those who were executed for *political* reasons between 1945–1967" (my emphasis). The names of these victims are inscribed in light on the room's four walls, and in the center, a graveyard of wobbly, tall crosses, each affixed with a flashlight, memorialize these victims.<sup>10</sup> At last, emerging from the horrors of the Soviet totalitarianism, the final room, "Farewell," bids farewell to the Soviet occupiers, assuring the visitor that they are gone forever and that Hungary has been justly—and finally—liberated. The visitor is brought to the edge of the abyss and then led out of the torture chamber and into liberty. Passing a wall of photos of the perpetrators,<sup>11</sup> the visitor is reminded that liberty has prevailed and that those who committed such atrocities will not escape (moral) judgment.<sup>12</sup>

## OUTSIDE THE HOUSE OF TERROR

While the public and educational programming of the House of Terror is nowhere near as robust as the USHMM's, like other memorial museums, the House of Terror sees itself at the intellectual center of discussions and issues related to memory and history of the recent past. The administrative offices' walls are hung with dozens of posters advertising conferences, temporary exhibitions, book launches, and lectures hosted by the museum—implied testament to its central place in Budapest's intellectual life. The website lists dozens of colleagues, associates, and scholars from around the world who are associated with the museum; at once a seeming attempt to legitimate it within the international academic community while remaining vague enough so that their connections to the museum are not quite clear.<sup>13</sup> Despite the controversy surrounding the museum—especially its unbalanced depiction of fascism and communism and its deeply political provenance—the museum and its director maintain that it is at the center

of Budapest and Hungary's intellectual life and that it leads the contemporary dialogue about Hungary's past.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to hosting temporary exhibitions and scholarly events, the educational outreach of the museum, though minimal, is growing. There are the requisite school visits and occasional trips by staff to schools (mostly on important dates and anniversaries), but for a museum aimed at youth and the younger generations, there is not much public educational programming. A recent project, funded by the EU, with secondary schools throughout Hungary, had students collecting oral histories from family members and acquaintances. The video testimonies gathered by the students are being archived in the museum. Schmidt and her colleagues are determined to continue to develop and implement additional educational programs, as well, though it seems that much of their energy is being poured into the House of Fates, a sister museum that is poised to open this year and devoted to remembering and educating about the Holocaust.

In addition to serving as a model for the new Holocaust museum, the House of Terror is also a model for other similar museums in Central and Eastern Europe. Schmidt describes a loose network of similar institutions that collaborate with each other and look to each other for inspiration and ideas about how best to try to represent and come to terms with the past. In addition to working with occupation museums in Riga, Latvia, and Tallinn, Estonia, Schmidt was involved in the creation of the Warsaw Uprising Museum in Poland<sup>15</sup> and has consulted on similar initiatives in Bucharest, Romania, and Kiev, Ukraine. She and her team of designers also completed a museum that is strikingly similar aesthetically in the southern Hungarian town of Hódmezővásárhely.<sup>16</sup> Their sleek, interactive, technologically sophisticated model utilizes dramatic—and often suggestive and symbolic rather than realistic—renderings of the past that rely on lighting, sound effects, and props in a way more reminiscent of stage scenery than museum displays; yet it seems to be increasingly reproduced throughout the region. And these institutions seem much more intent on conveying emotional impact than historical understanding.

## MEMORY, HISTORY, AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE HOUSE OF TERROR

As director Maria Schmidt avers, the purpose of the House of Terror is to help Hungary come to terms with its past in order to enter a new era of freedom and democracy, though ironically, as has been noted, under Orbán Hungary has been slipping away from democracy toward authoritarianism. This needs to begin, for her and the creators of the museum, with holding the (communist) perpetrators accountable and teaching the younger generations the dangers of totalitarianism. As with all memorial museums, this intention is noble. However, the ways in which these goals play out in the House of Terror are troubling.

The House of Terror describes its exhibition as follows: “The exhibition is structured within a framework: that frame is provided by the rooms called ‘Double Occupation’ and ‘Farewell’. The frame-like structure indicates that the Nazi occupation of the country on March 19, 1944 enabled the introduction of an autocracy modeled on foreign examples, while the Russian withdrawal, which ended on June 19, 1991 guaranteed—and made irreversible—the independent, national, democratic evolution of the new Hungarian Republic” (Terrorhaza “Permanent Exhibition”). The purpose of the museum is thus to depict the terror of foreign occupation and to juxtapose it against Hungarian independence, nationalism, and democracy. It is a museum for the newly independent Hungary to celebrate her independence, and the narrative it tells is intended to bolster Hungarian nationalism in the present and future. Istvan Rev, a historian and political scientist at Central European University, summarizes the story of the museum: “After the long decades of degeneration—starting with the German occupation on 19 March 1944 and terminating with the humiliating retreat of the Soviet troops on 19 June 1991—the new era has begun. The leader [Orbán] and his native people . . . have finally found each other, and are ready to embark on a smooth road leading to the future” (2008, 72).

Issues of past collaboration are lightly touched upon—and cannot be avoided when dealing with the Arrow Cross and communism—but ultimately in the museum’s portrayal, virtually all (true) Hungarians were innocent victims of German and Soviet occupiers. And now that Hungary is liberated and reunited, the future is at last in the hands of “real” Hungarians. This sort of nationalistic narrative is understandable in these countries that emerged from nearly a century of occupation, and as Tony Judt points

out, it is very prevalent throughout the region (2005). However, the nationalistic, though implicit, effort to define *real* Hungarians and put the future in their hands is dangerous in countries like Hungary, where exclusion of minorities (Roma and Jews especially, but also, more recently, migrants from the Middle East) is central to the politics of the far right and Orbán's own party platform. One sure lesson that emerged from World War II and European fascism is the danger of nationalistic, exclusive ideologies; this lesson seems to be missing from the House of Terror.

However, equally troubling, and the subject of much of the controversy surrounding the museum and the highly political context of its creation, is the utterly imbalanced representation of fascism and the Holocaust versus communism; unfortunately, like the nationalistic tenor of the exhibition, this imbalance reveals much about Hungarian politics and society today. Though it is meant to be a museum focused on the terror of both regimes, in the terrible building that was used first by one and then the other, just two rooms are devoted to the Arrow Cross, Holocaust, and German Nazi occupation of Hungary; and these rooms emphasize German control over Hungary's actions and allude to how short-lived fascism in Hungary was, while barely touching on Hungarian complicity. Nowhere is it clearly stated just how devastating the Hungarian Holocaust was (75 percent of the Jewish population was killed), nor is the homegrown build-up of anti-Semitism in Hungary that paved the way for the Holocaust addressed. In the most biting interpretation of this dramatic imbalance, Rev argues that the House of Terror indicates that it was the Jews who were responsible for the decades-long communist rule, their intention being to "take revenge for the Arrow Cross rule and to punish all of Hungary for what had been done to them (by the German Nazis)" (2008, 65).

The House of Terror purports to use the authenticity of space—of this terrible, beautiful building on Andrassy Avenue that for much of the twentieth century was a symbol of supreme repression, fear, and totalitarianism—to tell the evils of *both* totalitarian regimes: "The site was intended to provide authority for the historical events being described" (Rev 2008, 61). It is troubling not only because it does an extremely uneven job of telling these historical events, and in doing so exposes its deeply political roots and objectives, but also because it sleekly packages "history"—exemplifying Irwin-Zarecka's critique of contemporary museums' "attractive packaging of the past"—with so little regard for authenticity and actual history that it compromises the power of place that it attempts

to harness. It differs from the USHMM, the Kigali center, the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, and many other memorial museums around the world that are not on the actual site of the terrible events that they commemorate, often because a neutral site enables the museums to promote a more universal message. The House of Terror, on the other hand, attempts to use the site-specificity of 60 Andrassy to tell its story of horror, but in its flagrant use of reproduction, guesswork, artistry, and emphasis on symbolism at the expense of actuality, it is more of a communist crimes theme park than museum, aimed more at affect than education: as Sara Jones writes, “The visitor experience of the House of Terror is not based on the ‘auratic’ nature of the artefacts themselves, but on the stimulation of the senses” (2011, 103).

In each part of the exhibit, it is dramatically evident that the building renovation and exhibitions were designed by an architect who has primarily worked in scenic design for theatre, opera, and film. The theatricality of the museum design is stunning and clearly meant to evoke a specific response in visitors: revulsion at the cruelty of the communist regime. As Rev writes, “The House of Terror and the story it tells were presented as the embodiment of concrete, tangible, historically situated horror, as the only conceivable story to tell. Yet the concrete details of the terror it was meant to evoke was merely fictional” (2008, 61). While memorial museums in general have departed from the traditional museological focus on collecting and displaying with the intent to provide a richer, more emotional, and more affective experience for the visitor, the lack of authenticity<sup>17</sup> in the House of Terror marks a new era of experiential exhibition strategies.

Like other memorial museums, the House of Terror is intended to tell the truth about what happened under the communist totalitarian regime (and to a far lesser degree, under fascism); however, if the museum itself is so careless with truth, in the form of the many reconstructions, reproductions, and re-creations that do not explicitly state their provenance, and offers so little in the way of explanatory text about the artifacts, film footage, and other objects and documents on display, what are we to make of its claims of authenticity and the idea that it is telling the truth about the past? While we know that the building itself is dripping with history and memory, what is authentic and could reveal something “true” about what happened there has been stripped away and covered by elaborate paint, images, wallpaper, and silver leaf and no longer can “speak” for itself. And



knowing the political origins of the museum and the present politics being enacted in Hungary and in the museum, we must wonder about what words are being put in 60 Andrassy's mouth.

Rather, the House of Terror seems to support the Halbwachsian notion that the past does not exist as an existential reality but is always a reconstruction in and by the present. In this particular museum this is quite literal; the actual building has been reconstructed to tell a particular narrative of the past. While perhaps often we think of this reconstruction as more metaphorical, the House of Terror is a useful reminder of just how good the present is at reproducing the past for its own needs. In the words of historian Zsolt K. Horvath, it is not so much a historical museum as a "memorial representation with a teleological function, whose main purpose is the affirmation and confirmation of a political identity" (2007, 270).

## CONCLUSION

The House of Terror, like most memorial museums, is intended to induce moral reflection on the past, in addition to telling and teaching twentieth-century Hungarian history. This is evident in its intent not only to reveal the "truth" about communism in Hungary, and so hold perpetrators accountable on a moral level, but also to use the memory of the past in a way that will morally educate Hungarians (and visitors) about the evil of totalitarianism so that they will more readily embrace democracy. However, the overt politics behind the museum, the scant and imbalanced nature of its narrative, and the artificiality of its exhibitions seriously undermine its role as a moral authority. Yet the drama of the visitor experience and the forceful story that the museum tells make it extremely compelling, especially for a visitor without much background knowledge, or one whose opinions are reinforced by the House of Terror's message. A rave review of the museum in a *New York Times* travel blog post calls it "a brilliant amalgam of history museum, performance art and touching architectural memorial" (2008), and the visitor book is filled with comments about the power of the museum and invocations of the ethic of "never again." It seems that the trust that people place in museums as spaces of truth and authenticity, coupled with the emotional impact of the House of Terror's story, is indeed convincing and having the desired effect. However, in a country like Hungary that has struggled since

1989 with right-wing extremism, ethnic tension, and economic hardship, perhaps a prominent public memory institution should be striving for more subtlety, inclusivity, and openness to diversity and plurality.

In many ways, like the communist regimes that gripped Hungary and the Eastern Bloc for much of the twentieth century, the House of Terror tells a hegemonic version of the past that leaves no space for the flood of alternative narratives and “recovery of memory” that emerged after 1989. On the contrary, it minimizes the experience of the Holocaust and Hungary’s own dangerous brush with fascism, and it shapes the past and its memory in the service of present day (Fidesz) politics. Though, as I have argued, in much of the literature on memory today and in the realization of many contemporary “regretful” memory projects, there appears to be a move toward a more self-reflexive and introspective approach, with careful attention to inclusivity, pluralism, and even-handedness (Bickford and Sodaro 2010). This is not evident in the House of Terror. Rather, it is often one-sided and brash in its representation of the past, and its creators too easily disregard legitimate criticism and the potential for democratic debate and dialogue that nuanced discussions of the past and its representation could provoke. For a museum intended to portray the benefits of democracy over dictatorship, it seems dangerously authoritarian in its execution, undermining the important moral role in Hungarian society that has been set for it. Hungary’s past is filled with enough divisiveness, ideology, and violence; a better moral lesson might be derived from an examination of the politics that divide Hungarian society today and how these politics are using—and abusing—the memory of the past.

Criticism of the museum points toward a broader criticism of Orbán, Schmidt, and the Fidesz Party—namely, that they are actively revising history in a way that abdicates Hungary of any responsibility for the destruction of its Jewish population. Further, that they are doing this from a right-wing, exclusionary stance that seeks to silence Jewish and other voices and to take back Hungary for Hungarians. To counter this criticism, the Fidesz government deemed 2014 a year of Holocaust commemoration, with various events, tributes, and ceremonies as well as the construction of a memorial<sup>18</sup> and, the crowning project, the House of Fates museum. The House of Fates, as the name might suggest, is already highly controversial. The brainchild of Maria Schmidt and fellow revisionist historian Szabolcs Szita, the non-Jewish man Orbán made head of Budapest’s Holocaust Memorial Center after removing its leader, it is located well outside of the city center in the

abandoned Józsefváros Railway Station. While the Jewish community in Budapest would have rather seen the 7 million forints put toward its construction used to enhance the already existent Holocaust Memorial Center, the government went ahead with its plans. The House of Fates—a “love story” to the Jewish people, in the words of Schmidt (Hungarian Spectator, “House of Fates”)—is intended to mirror the House of Terror’s exhibitionary and narrative strategies to tell the story of the Holocaust, though Budapest’s Jewish community—and good portions of the international Jewish community as well—have distanced themselves from the project and it remains to be seen where the ill-*fated* project will go.

Like the USHMM, the House of Terror (and perhaps someday the House of Fates) is one of the city’s most popular tourist attractions and so has become central to national (and international) perceptions about the past it is depicting. It is striking in its use of new, interactive museological strategies and bold exhibition design that are aimed at a younger generation of museum-goers, and like the USHMM, it is more concerned with telling an emotionally moving story of the past than with simply documenting and collecting. Both museums attempt to bring the visitor back in time to “experience” the past in a way that will create a new “prosthetic memory” that will ultimately change their moral and political outlook in the present; in the USHMM, the goal is to embrace American ideals of tolerance, pluralism, and democracy, and in the House of Terror, it is to embrace democracy over dictatorship, though what comes through the exhibition is an even more simplistic—and less universal—message that (communist) totalitarianism is evil.

The institutions are also similar in that their conception, design, and representation of the past are rooted in a particular political context and each has a distinct political agenda. The House of Terror is much more blatant and its politics much more problematic than those of the USHMM, and so it has rightly been the more controversial of the two; nevertheless, the explicit politicization of the past as portrayed in the House of Terror helps illuminate the highly political nature of memorial museums as public, national institutions of memory even when their politics are more understated. The House of Terror tells us much more about present Hungarian politics than Hungary’s past under fascist or communist occupation, and in this it tells us much about memorial museums themselves and the roles that they play in the societies that create them.