Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

Stach, Stephan, Hallama, Peter, Bohus, Kata

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Stach, Stephan, et al.

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sions was a conscious one. However, taking into account the different approach manifested in their works, this choice might have indeed been intentional. Artists without a personal link to the Holocaust might have been more susceptible, more willing to follow the suggested historical narrative than survivors of the Holocaust, who could have insisted—as they did in their non-commissioned works—on depicting or reflecting upon their own personal experience.

Comparing the two types of works, non-commissioned ones attest to a plurality in their style and artistic approach, while commissioned works occupy a narrower spectrum, subscribing to more traditional forms of realism and figuration. The scale of the works differs as well: state-funded projects—such as memorials, as well as paintings conceived of as a representative means of decoration—tended to be monumental in size, while non-commissioned works tend to be smaller and more intimate, befitting the space of artists’ studios. (While a few non-commissioned, small-scale sculptural models exist, the creation of monumental sculptures was a state monopoly.)

In terms of meaning and message, non-commissioned works visualize the victims’ perspective; they focus on commemoration, some even raise the question of the perpetrators’ responsibility. Contrarily, state-commissioned works tend to visualize official memory politics, that is, the antifascist historical narrative. They emphasize the antifascist fight and its heroes, namely the communists, overshadowing the victims of genocide. Consequently, figures depicted in the commissioned works often assume an active role as opposed to the passivity of those in the non-commissioned works.

Introduction: Official Memory Politics and State Funded Projects

This study examines official memory politics, in particular the earliest state-funded Hungarian art projects related to the memory of the Holocaust during communism. These include the erection of a Hungarian memorial in Mauthausen (1955/1958–64), the art collection commissioned for the permanent Hungarian exhibition in Auschwitz (1964–65) and the exhibition titled Hungarian Artists Against Fascism, organized in 1965 at the Hungarian National Gallery in connection with the congress of the International Federation of Resistance Fighters (FIR). All of these endeavors shared certain characteristics. First, none of the projects stemmed from popular domestic or political initiatives to commemorate the Holocaust; rather the initial calls always came from—or at least were connected to—foreign organizations and institutions. Secondly, these projects
were either realized abroad, in the context of competing national histories, or were intended for an international audience.

These projects can be understood as embodiments of antifascism, an overarching historical narrative that connected the past to contemporary politics. Accordingly, the primary goal of these projects was to represent the country and to position its current communist leadership, as well as their perceived political ancestry, within an antifascist narrative that helped to legitimate them internationally. Despite being located at preeminent sites of the Holocaust like Auschwitz and Mauthausen, these projects focused on the antifascist struggle rather than (Jewish) victimhood, simultaneously promoting abroad—under the pretext of memorialization—the Hungarian communist leadership and their preferred historical narrative.

Nonetheless, this paper argues that antifascist memory politics had an unintended effect on the evolution of the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary. With the integration of the genocide into a wider historical narrative, both real and virtual spaces were created where the memory of the Holocaust could emerge. For instance, the victims’ perspective was represented amongst the unsuccessful candidates for the memorial in Mauthausen, as well as by some of the works created for the exhibition in Auschwitz. As for the antifascist exhibition in the National Gallery in Budapest, it is possible to identify a curatorial decision there to include Holocaust-related works of art despite their commemorative tone and private ownership. Moreover, these state-funded projects also opened up a discursive space, where eventually even criticism of official memory politics could emerge.

The Hungarian Memorial in Mauthausen (1955/1958–64)

The invitation to erect a memorial in Mauthausen “to the memory of the victims of fascism”—as Hungarian authorities put it—arrived from the International Mauthausen Committee (Comité international de Mauthausen) by the way of the Hungarian embassy in Vienna.2 In early 1955, the International Re-

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2 Proposition for the Secretariat [To erect a Hungarian memorial in Mauthausen], Hungarian Workers’ Party, Department of International Relations, January 24, 1955, attached to the acceptance, Proposition to erect a memorial to the memory of the victims of fascism in Mauthausen, subitem 12, within item 10 (Various issues), Proceedings of the meeting of the Secretariat [of the Hungarian Workers’ Party], January 31, 1955, Hungarian National Archives (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, hereafter MNL OL), M–KS 276, 76. f. 54. cs. 352. ő. e. Since the documents cited in this study do not have a formal title, I will refer to them with an English description.