period that dealt with Hungary’s recent history and its echoes. A search for literary narratives in the mold of what we have become conditioned to identify as “Holocaust literature”—floating free from national politics, critical of the nation as a whole, with the victims and the camps at the center—might come up mostly empty. But our recognition of the terms of cultural expression constructed by the Communist Party and the literary intelligentsia can yield much material for analysis. Jewish identity is often—though not always—muffled in these narratives. The events of 1944 as they happened to Jews are intertwined with the experience of the non-Jewish population, often seen through the eyes of non-Jewish protagonists. Class issues are constantly foregrounded, with the aristocratic and exploitative nature of the perpetrators (and sometimes of the victims) emphasized. Fascism is the enemy of the whole Hungarian nation, if parts of that nation are often seen as collaborating with it. 1945 is seen not as an end to the story but as another turn in a complex and turbulent history, often incorporating the Stalinist period and the 1956 revolution, and implicating memory and the effects of bad conscience. Such a perspective may violate our contemporary universalist precepts of how Holocaust memory “should” be constructed; but in doing so it begins to break down the walls between “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” memory, so often barriers to understanding and even discussion or intellectual exchange.

The Kádárist Cultural Landscape

A sense of the contradictions and ambiguities embedded in the cultural policy of the Kádár-era leadership, and more specifically in its relationship to questions of Jewish identity, is crucial to navigating this “gray zone” of Holocaust memory. The particularity of the Hungarian Holocaust left a larger number of Jewish survivors (mostly in Budapest) than in any other state in the Soviet Union’s new sphere of influence, survivors who at the same time were thoroughly assimilated into Hungarian culture and identity, often the descendants of converts or themselves converts to Christianity. The Hungarian Communist Party (MKP) was initially dominated by Hungarians of Jewish origin, including all four members of the top leadership up until 1953. But it was surrounded by a population steeped in a quarter-century of propaganda that identified Jews with the failed Soviet experiment of 1919, and with the national tragedy of Trianon in 1920, which separated rump Hungary from half its population and two-thirds of its territory.11

---

11 István Deák, “Jews and Communism: The Hungarian Case,” in *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Com-
Towards a Shared Memory?

The Party therefore took pains to distance itself from any appearance of acting in the “Jewish interest,” and went to great lengths to try to establish its national bona fides, expressed as being on the side of “peasants and workers,” and against the formerly “dominant bourgeois classes,” and later in the campaign against “cosmopolitanism.” This stance also engendered a cautious approach to questions of responsibility, avoiding any national self-examination and pushing guilt onto a relatively few politicians and “executioner thugs” (hóhérlegények).12

The 1956 revolution and its suppression, part of a longer process over the decade following Stalin’s death in 1953 in which the strictly controlled Stalinist truth dis-integrated and ultimately was replaced with a looser regime of knowledge, created a new situation for Holocaust memory. The various public taboos of the earlier period—of particular relevance here is that on the recognition of a non-religious Jewish identity13—were superseded by the aforementioned new overriding taboo, on any validation of the 1956 uprising. In addition, having seen the danger to their authority posed by nationalist mobilization, the new Party leadership (ironically, now somewhat “dejudaized,” at least at the top) was less prone to pandering to national sentiment. This opened up space for more critical treatments of the Holocaust experience.14 Nationalism was attacked—though by also targeting certain figures associated with the still potent Stalinist wing of the Party, this offensive in addition served as a means to consolidate the anti-Stalinist hegemony. Writers were consequently released from their strict ideological-pedagogical responsibilities, as the new regime cultivated a passive population under the slogan “Whoever is not against us, is with us.”15 As Kádár’s control stabilized, the “reform model” gained dominance in the latter half of the 1960s. Thus, a shift from ideological control to the reign of “market forces,” within the limits of ideological taboos, took place.16

13 The communist takeover included the restriction of public Jewishness to religious activity only, for example by suppressing Zionist groups and restricting the Jewish press to a single publication controlled through the official religious hierarchy. Győri Szabó, A kommunizmus és a zsidóság, 158, 285, 301.
14 Köszeg, personal interview.
Despite the post-'56 repression, the reorganized Party was actually weak—especially in the field of culture, where it had been almost completely abandoned by the intelligentsia—and was in need of at least the tacit loyalty and passive support of the writers, who after the dark years of Stalinism had redeemed their status as the conscience of the nation.17 The system that emerged was one based more on cooption than coercion and, as Péter György argues, more on the editor than the censor—that is, on the carrot over the stick, and on massaging conflicts or delaying reckoning with them until the potential sticking point had been worn down, or, in the constantly changing stream of “correct” politics, no longer stuck out.18 This policy is signified by the well-known “TTT” formulation, standing for the three categories of artistic regulation: Támogatott, Tűrt, Tiltott (Supported, Tolerated, Prohibited), and ruled until 1972 by György Aczél. Aczél, a figure shot through with contradictions surrounding his Jewish identity and wartime memory, took charge of an also ambiguous and constantly shifting cultural policy. He is an apt representative of what Kata Bohus has called the “institutionalized confusion” of Hungarian Jewish policy during this period. Though permeated with a rigid antifascist ideology and its accordant taboos, it evolved, especially in the wake of the 1961 Adolf Eichmann trial, into a “dynamically changing body” featuring “ongoing negotiation and incessant dynamism.”19

**Jews and Non-Jews: Responsibility and Guilt**

The key question for the Hungarian Holocaust, both in the communist period and now, is that of responsibility for the Jewish catastrophe—and for the broader national one. Kertész’s answer was sharply negative—the protagonist of *Fatelessness*, Gyuri Köves, finds no help or even sympathy among the non-Jewish population, accounting in large part for Kertész’s difficulties in publishing and harsh reactions, at the time and after. The picture in the earlier novels consid-

---