Politics of History in Eastern Europe

Working at home or working in the West, East European historians have led the way in the exploitation of new archival resources and the documentation of the history of communism. Yet the opening of the archives and the freedom to travel have not undone all of the intellectual barriers to historical research. National history remains the dominant model. There are national institutes for commemoration, national archives collecting material from the communist era and national museums. There is not and very likely never will be an East European site of memory, research, or exposition devoted to the common past under communism. This is in no way surprising; East European polities and publics are simply following the example of their Western neighbors and colleagues.

What, then, is special about Eastern Europe?

Many East European historians believe that theirs is a fundamentally different story, incompatible with the major narratives that dominate to their in the West, because it is characterized by both National Socialist and communist rule. Yet East European historians who are most eager to discuss victimhood are often also those who are most eager to explain it within a national framework. The association of the nation with the victim, when pushed too far, discredits historical work, especially when it marginalizes other victims. Although the Holocaust took place in Eastern Europe, its history (with many laudable exceptions) has not yet been written by East Europeans. Poland is the best case a contrario; in Belarus and Ukraine, the other important sites of the Holocaust, research is rather limited. There is still no systematic study of the Holocaust in the Czech lands, where the number of victims was smaller and where the political conditions for such a study might seem more favorable.

This provincialism is in some way favored by institutions. Although east European politicians are often inclined to link communism and National Socialism together as totalitarianism, in practice state research institutions usually empha-
size the crimes of communism. Most East European countries have some form of central historical agency, funded and controlled by the state, concerned with some mixture of lustration (government policies of limiting the participation of former communists), prosecution, documentation and commemoration. Precisely because the histories of these lands are so complex, this is a particularly dangerous mix. Historians can be reduced to scribes, screening and presenting documents. Because the work of historians in such institutes is in obvious ways dependent upon political direction, both the selection of cadres and their development into scholars can be problematic.

These institutions fall prey to politics. In Ukraine, the official attitude towards Stalinism and its crimes changes dramatically after presidential elections. Beyond the former Soviet Union, in the former satellite states, the influence of domestic politics upon historical politics is not quite so blatant, but it is nevertheless pronounced. In Hungary the right and the left want different sites of commemoration for different victims. In Poland the Institute for National Remembrance changes its mission dramatically with a change of government. In the Czech Republic the mission of the analogous institution is regarded by many as political from the very beginning.

Can anything be done? Cadres can be rotated. All of the various memory institutions could require that their employees spend at least one year working in a similar institution abroad. This would improve language skills, broaden perspectives and enable better research. The European Union has a positive interest in promoting such a rotation of cadres, which would be inexpensive to fund. The EU could also provide «reintegration» fellowships for East European students who complete doctorates abroad. Unfortunately, such degrees often leave them unemployable in their home countries. A relatively modest fellowship divided between such people and the memory institutes that employed them would benefit all concerned.

Barring this or some other equally unlikely farsighted European policy, East European historians will continue their important work within the limitations of a political landscape that is itself very often unfamiliar in the West. We have thus asked six leading historians of eastern Europe (from Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine) to assess the craft of history in their own countries. None of them, to be sure, would claim to speak for colleagues (let alone for whole countries); but we believe that, taken together, their essays provide an introduction to the contemporary politics of history in Eastern Europe.
Ivo Banac
Memory Politics in Croatia

I was recently appointed a member of the board for the Jasenovac Memorial Area. Jasenovac – on the Sava River, downstream from Zagreb – was the most notorious of the Ustaša concentration camps during the Second World War, and the only camp or prison that the Ustaša regime did not inherit from its various predecessors. During the Yugoslav period, the communists allowed for a systematic exaggeration of Ustaša crimes, whereby 700,000 victims were claimed for Jasenovac alone. This became counterproductive by the 1970s, when this figure was used as a weapon by Serbian nationalists inside and outside of the ruling League of Communists (SKJ). It is cited even today (on April 1, 2010 Milorad Dodik, the prime minister of Republika Srpska, the Serb entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina, invoked it in denouncing the resolution of the Serbian parliament that condemned the Srebrenica massacre of 1995), despite the fact that the most careful studies have documented significantly fewer Ustaša killings at Jasenovac, somewhere in the neighborhood of 80,000 victims, 59 percent of them Serbs, 14 per cent Jews, 9 per cent Roma, 8 per cent Croats and 10 per cent others.

Franjo Tudjman himself dabbled in the history of Jasenovac, which aroused serious suspicions about his revisionist intent. The post-Tudjman governments of Croatia have done their best since his death in 1999 to limit the damage and support the Jasenovac Memorial Area in the most sophisticated manner possible, drawing on the experience and expertise of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. and the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The museum that was opened at Jasenovac several years ago is operated by an expert research staff of professional historians, some educated in the United States, and a governing board that is defined by law as representing delegates of the Croatian Sabor (diet), the Ministry of Culture (the ministry responsible for state museums), the commune of Jasenovac, the Jasenovac camp survivors, the Serb, Jewish, and Roma communities, the representative of the Alliance of Antifascist Fighters (SAB, the partisan veterans’ organization) and the eight members of the museum administration. I am a delegate of the Ministry of Culture.

Spring is the time of year in Croatia for which I have coined the ironical term, «May devotions». It is the season of memorial confrontations of the two Croatiats. After the Jasenovac memorial ceremonies in mid-April,1 there follows the anniversary of Tito’s death (May 4), the occasion when Tito’s devotees gather for rallies

1 Last year hijacked by the outgoing president Stjepan Mesić in order to defend Tito’s regime as «harsh and authoritarian in its first years, occasionally unable to resist crimes, but not criminal.» just as «no resistance leader in enslaved and occupied Europe was a criminal, despite the fact that in outpourings of revenge in all previously occupied countries, independently of the political order that was being established in them, thousands of people died.»
and merrymaking at his birthplace in Kumrovec, northwest of Zagreb. Then there are the Bleiburg memorial ceremonies in mid-May at the Field of Bleiburg in Austria — these are usually addressed by a representative of the Croatian Sabor. And, finally, there is Tito’s official birthday on May 25 (celebrated as Youth Day during the Communist period, although Tito actually was born on May 7!), when the anti-communists gather for rallies at Zagreb’s central Marshal Tito Square to demand that the old name of the square (Kazališni trg, Theater Square) be restored.

How to make sense of these polarizing activities? Transition has empowered «those ousted from the old regime,» representing a very broad segment of public opinion, from Ustaša sympathizers to democratic socialists. The ex-Communist holdovers can retain some scraps of legitimacy by harping on their anti-fascist activities, simultaneously wiping out all references to the Communist ideology or program. The worse the fascist fiends were, the more justified the measures were taken against them, however harsh. Tito was simply a local expression of this tendency that was as brutal and vengeful elsewhere (e.g., France), albeit under entirely different political systems. Moreover, his international acceptance argues in favor of his regime, which had universal legitimacy. The nationalist opponents of the old regime are aware of this strategy and therefore go some way to disassociate themselves from all fascist antecedents, no matter how explicit the connection. One sure way to accomplish this is by playing to the international audience, especially Jews or Israelis. It is fairly typical for right-wing journals that offer tepid apologies for wartime collaborators to simultaneously cheer Israeli policies in Gaza or offer translations of contemporary Hebrew poetry. Tito was a universal expression of communist tyranny, which (now) has no universal legitimacy. His nonaligned policy was innately pro-Arab and therefore anti-Israeli. Moreover, he was no Croat, but a crypto-Serb or at best an indifferent Croat. These fault lines also indicate the level of atavistic identification that is more pronounced in the countries that experienced domestic revolutions than in the states where communism was imposed from the top. And so it will continue, until the next revelation.

2 In May 1945, the British occupation authorities turned over some 30,000 captured refugees, both military and civilian, most of them Croat collaborators, to the Yugoslav partisan authorities at Bleiburg, Austria. There ensued the series of massacres of most of these returnees that was conducted mainly in northeastern Slovenia, but elsewhere in northern Yugoslavia in May and June of 1945.

3 Last year Andrija Hebrang, a deputy of the ruling HDZ and the president of his party’s parliamentary club, but also, ironically the son of Andrija Hebrang senior, a member of Tito’s Politburo in 1945, who was executed in prison in 1949 after he sided with Stalin’s criticisms of the Yugoslav party leadership a year earlier.
Michal Kopeček
The Czech Republic: From Democracy Legitimization to the Politics of Memory

We can divide the twenty years of Czech «politics of history» after 1989 into roughly two time periods. In the first decade or so, the «quest for legitimacy» of the new order was the most urgent issue influencing the way in which the «politics of history» was being shaped. Then, from the turn of the century, with the legitimacy of the political system essentially secured, distinct variants of «politics of memory» became tools of political struggle. During this period, it seems, a wider gulf divided the expert historical discourse, on the one hand, and the politically motivated politics of memory, on the other.

The principal aim of the first stage was to convey a timeless message that decent behavior pays off in a longer term perspective, whereas malevolent actions are eventually punished. Hence, one of the first concerns of the new political elite was to remedy past injustices. Among the first legal and administrative measures in 1990–1991, there were several acts concerning the rehabilitation of former political prisoners and other victims of communist repression. Property restitution was meant to play a similar role, but it was also one of the major tools used in the strategy to privatize within the context of the period’s complete economic transformation.

The conspicuous and controversial issue at the time was the use of lustration: the screening of public officials with regard to their past political activity in the communist regime and possible collaboration with the security services. Unregulated lustrations of the members of the parliaments (federal, Czech and Slovak) and the governments began as early as spring 1990 at the federal ministry of interior, which finally required their systematic management. The initial aim was to prevent the possibility of blackmail among the political elite. By the second half of the year, increasing agentomania (i.e., the obsession with the possible malicious influence of former agents) changed this motivation to cleansing the public sphere from the supposed malicious influence of the «old structures.» The lustration law accepted by the Federal Assembly in October 1991 banned from higher administration offices and public functions former notables of the Communist Party, members of the People’s Militia and State Security (StB), their secret collaborators, graduates of certain Soviet universities and activists of the former regime.

The law, however, did not prevent further political gamesmanship with the lists of names of agents and collaborators. Politicians began to think about official publication of the verified list of the StB agents and collaborators. Before anything had been done in this respect, though, the radical anti-communist group around the former dissident Petr Cibulka – whose only motivation was to expose the culprits of the past injustices – published an unofficial, extensive list of agents of the StB in
June 1992. President Václav Havel called its publication one of the biggest victories of the former state security.

The lustrations may have fortified the legitimacy of the new democratic regime in the early 1990s. They did not, however, prevent further political maneuvering with sensitive information, nor did they induce a feeling of historical justice on the part of the victims of the communist crimes, affiliated by various organizations, such as the Confederation of the Political Prisoners, the Union of PTP, the Club of Engaged Non-Party-Members (KAN) and others.

One of the chief concerns of the politics-of-history activists was that juridical rehabilitation processes seemed to be a repetition of the communist rehabilitation commissions from the 1960s insofar as violations of the «socialist legality» were punished, but were not condemned in their «criminal essence» as relates to the political regime as a whole. This was supposed to have been changed by the «Act on the Unlawfulness of the Communist Regime and the Resistance against It,» approved by Czech Parliament in July 1993. It declared the former regime illegitimate and condemnable in contrast to the resistance against it that in all forms was to be regarded as legitimate, morally warranted and respectable. The rhetoric of the Act drew from the popular and simplified totalitarian historical imaginary and portrayed the Czechoslovak communist regime from February 1948 to November 1989 as a period of continuous totalitarian rule, implying a perception that it was a historical distortion or aberration from the supposed natural path of national and European history. This law had great symbolic value and served as a major foothold for all subsequent politics of history efforts.

An Office for the Documentation and Prosecution of the Communist Crimes (ÚDV), under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior, came into existence in January 1995 with former anti-communist dissident Václav Benda as its director. Benda enjoyed – apart from his own moral authority – political backing from the strongest political organization, the center-right, neo-liberal Civic Democratic Party of Václav Klaus. In the field of penal prosecution, the Office concentrated on the most conspicuous cases of the former communist party and security nomenclature offences (e.g., the charge of treason for signatories of the «invitation letter» that would have legitimized the invasion of Warsaw Treaty armies of Czechoslovakia in August 1968), the activity of middle-rank officers of the state security (e.g., the StB operation «Asanace» prepared after the creation of Charter 77, whose main aim was to chase out the most prominent dissidents from the republic), the shooting at the state borders and the torturing of political prisoners. In the end, however, only a few cases led to sentences.

Perhaps more important was the archival activity of the Office. It documented and substantiated cases of the criminal behavior of the communist state adminis-
trative and political apparatus against its own citizens, allowing for descriptions of mechanisms of state terror and repression with many of the results published in the Office’s Securitas Imperii journal. The documentation and public exposure of the actual individuals responsible for the past injustices, a memento for future generations, was clearly the main motivation driving Benda and his team in their work.

The position of the Office, however, weakened in 1998. Benda resigned, a minority social democratic government came to power and sensitive information supposedly leaked from the Office about the alleged collaboration of the former social democratic Vienna mayor, Helmut Zilk, with StB.

Along with the rise of the popularity of the succeeding communist party (KSČM), this generated greater vehemence in the anti-communist sentiments and brought a new round of legal, as well as civic, initiatives in the realm of the politics surrounding the communist past.

One of the long-term mistakes of the hitherto politics of history in the eyes of the anti-communist activists was the difficult, or discontinued, access to the archives of the communist’s repressive apparatus. Renewals of laws regarding the archival materials from the communist period made a number of the former counter-intelligence service files accessible, though only to Czech citizens and with sensitive information blacked out. They also allowed the declassification of materials from the former Central Committee of the Communist Party Archive and the Archive of the Ministry of the Interior. In 2002 and 2004, amendments broadened the range of accessible files pertaining to the security apparatus, granted archival access also to foreign citizens, and offered free access to the majority of archival documents from the era of the Communist regime. This series of legal archival provisions made the Czech archival policy one of the most, if not the most, liberal in the entire post-communist world. Despite the hopes of the adherents of this policy, however, it neither ended in the prosecution of the ongoing series of exposures of well-known public figures for their alleged collaboration with the state security (with the Milan Kundera case of 2008 being just the most visible) nor did it lead to moral condemnation of the communist past among the wider population.

The second dimension of the new politics of history were the initiatives to create a special institution to safeguard commemoration. This development mirrored a general trend in post-communist East Central Europe at the turn of the century that was characterized by a significant political challenge of the «liberal consensus» of the 1990s and new emphasis on patriotic civic education with the politics of memory towards communism playing a prominent role. These efforts were further reflected by the establishment of new, generously funded Institutes of National Memory in several countries of the region. Inspired by the Polish and Slovak institutes, a similar institution – which, after tremendous public controversy, adopted the no less problematic name of «Institute for Study of Totalitarian Regimes» (ÚSTR) – was established in the Czech Republic by a special law in June 2007.
The first director appointed by the Minister of Interior was Pavel Žáček, a journalist by education and one of the most dedicated activists of the anti-communist politics of memory throughout the whole democratic period. The establishment of the Institute, and the first years of its existence, were marked by numerous controversies with regard to its political role, as well as its internal affairs. In April 2010, Žáček was replaced by a historian, Jiří Pernes, in a standard tendering procedure, the result of which, nonetheless, was again made into a public scandal. The second director stayed in office only a month and a half, after which he was recalled by the Institute’s Council.

The law on the ÚSTR in its preamble reflected a black-and-white anti-totalitarian historical meta-narrative and the distinctly patriotic rhetoric of the above-mentioned Act on the Unlawfulness of the Communist Regime from 1993. It declared its mission in terms of remembering the «crimes against the nation.» Communist and Nazi crimes, war crimes and crimes against humanity and the preservation of the «patriotic tradition of the fighting against unlawful occupants, Nazism and Communism.» Much more controversial than this general declaration, however, proved to be the political ties of the Institute to center-right political forces through its Council, elected by the Senate of the Czech Parliament (with a right-wing majority at the time of the election), along with the fact that there was virtually no one to represent the whole left-wing of the political spectrum. It is no wonder that during the numerous scandals (e.g. the uncovering of an alleged plot to assassinate Klement Gottwald that proved to be a hoax, the Kundera or Joska Skalník affairs, etc.), the Institute has been often charged with carrying out political aims favoring its right-wing patrons.

The Institute includes a new Archive of the Security Forces. Its task is to gather, declassify, and make accessible a vast amount of archival resources coming from the various departmental and central archives of the communist’s repressive apparatus. This has been accompanied by the rather questionable and highly costly project of digitalizing most of the archival collection.

Another important activity the Institute shared with many similar institutions in Central and Eastern Europe was an effort to Europeanize and internationalize the «memory of Communism» issue. International conferences organized by the Institute in Prague, as well as its other initiatives such as a special hearing of the European Parliament on the crimes of the communist regimes in March 2009, have aimed at a political recognition of the «memory of the Gulag» at the same level as the «memory of the Holocaust» and called for a «unified European approach.».

As the so-called Prague appeal – one of the most outspoken documents of this kind – claims: «Europe will not be united unless it is able to reunite its history.» Further European integration should, from this point of view, be informed by a broadening of national engagement with the communist past to the European level and the creation of a common collective memory of the Nazi and communist crimes.
Egidijus Aleksandravičius  
The Politics of Memory: Peculiarities of the Lithuanian Case

After 1989, some wise heads provided a good piece of advice: leave the past to the historians. But this didn’t happen. Expelled through the door of the European political theater, the traumas of memory and the quarrels of the historians came back through the window, to paraphrase an old Lithuanian proverb. The past did come back to haunt present-day politics. Today, memory has become an essential European metaphor for showing how painfully difficult it is for the old and new members of the European Union to communicate with each other.

The politics of memory in Lithuania already has a history. In twenty years’ time political behavior changed. Lithuanian society began to face its repressed memory at the very dawn of the liberation revolution. The filling in of the empty spaces of history became a very important way to mobilize society. In the 1980s, differences in the evaluation of the Soviet past were more important than political and ideological themes on the traditional left-right spectrum. The emotional climate of the first independence years was so strongly anti-communist that no special political measures were needed to give these tendencies a legal and administrative direction (although the Communist Party was outlawed). Broad sectors of the public, as well as administrators of education and scholarship, were basically of one mind, supporting the revision of history and school textbooks with the introduction of nationalist and patriotic motifs.

The changes in cultural memory and Lithuanian identity after 1990 influenced revisions in all of Lithuania’s history. The period receiving the most attention began with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. The Second World War, the Soviet and Nazi occupations, the Holocaust and the Lithuanian role in it, and the long years of ant-Soviet resistance – these were the topics that fired the imagination, demanded explanations, and compelled guardians of memory to take each other on. The political idea of desovietization was discussed quite intensely, but some sectors of society and many political actors supported it less than wholeheartedly. Why? Because in the throes of the Singing Revolution the main forces of the Lithuanian Communists threw their lot in with the Sąjūdis. Once you’ve won, it is not so easy to call your former allies to task.

In the first years of Lithuanian freedom, the politics of memory consisted not so much in political prohibitions or legal restrictions than in initiatives and subsidies resulting in the establishment of institutions dedicated to the preservation of memory. The first and foremost of these was the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania, financed to this day by the state. («Genocide» here has the standard meaning as defined by the U.N.; many Lithuanians think that Soviet crimes against Lithuanians have some genocidal qualities.) Though the state did not monopolize history and memory, the official patriotic and anti-Soviet attitude
recognizing the Lithuanians’ victimhood became politically privileged and emotionally acceptable to many, if not all. The Center published dozens of monographs and source collections as well as a serious scholarly journal: this all represented a major factor in the advance of Lithuanian historiography and memory construction in a way that influenced mass consciousness without any formal declarations or government resolutions.

Throughout two decades of independence, Lithuanian historiography experienced a boom, not only because of salutary political circumstances, but also because of the psychological role that history and historians had played in Lithuania for almost a century. National independence and freedom of speech doubtless created favorable conditions for scholarly disputes. Many groups claimed to have a monopoly on historical truth, but this did not diminish the whirlwind of free opinions. The most prominent discussions within were conditioned less by any well-articulated politics of memory than by personal and group interests. The field of history depended by and large on personal recognition, popularity contests and competition for research grants and publication funds. The transgressions of history and historians were due less to the dictates of the state than to moral corruption and exaggerated self-importance in the arena of historical narration.

The politics of memory in Lithuania has its peculiarities. For example, some historical truths are enshrined in law. The heritage of the old Grand Duchy of Lithuania is emphasized even in the Preamble to the Constitution. According to it, contemporary Lithuania is the successor to Mindaugas’s Kingdom from the thirteenth century. For twenty years this constitutional doctrine of historical continuity was fostered in the national program for the 1000-year anniversary of Lithuania’s name, a program that ended in 2009. For such a small country, enormous expenditures were devoted to investigations of the past as well as print and electronic publications pertaining thereto.

A direct intrusion into the province of memory is the law which prohibits the sale, display and use of Soviet and Nazi symbols. But a broader legal intervention into the field of historical scholarship was prevented by the intellectual efforts of the free community of historians. The Lithuanian press devoted much attention to the decision of some European Union countries to punish Holocaust-deniers (and in France’s case those denying the Armenian genocide in Turkey). It seems that those Lithuanians who in one way or another strive, or perhaps only pretend, to guard memory are inclined to the view that the formation of memory should be regulated by scholarly arguments rather than legal acts. Hence, the academic community reacted almost uniformly negatively to Russia’s Historical Truth Commission, formed not to investigate but to evaluate the explanations offered by other historians.

In Lithuania the political decisions to fill in the gaps of memory were more encouraging than prohibitive. Thus, a decree by President Valdas Adamkus established the special International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the
Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania. Without going into various interpretations about what it means to entrust a single commission with evaluating the crimes of both occupations, it must be noted that this was an unquestionably positive act. The fact that Lithuanian, German, American and Israeli historians joined in the research into the Holocaust and other dramatic World War II events in Lithuania stimulated the publication of some very important historical studies. The commission’s activities laid the foundations for serious educational policy, enabling Lithuanians to approach the threshold of recognizing harm and guilt and eventually making peace.

There is one legal and political decision that was not immediately tied to memory politics, though it influenced it indirectly. I have in mind the Lustration Law pertaining to former KGB agents. It provided that the identity of former agents who confessed voluntarily would be kept secret. This function of taking confessions, and then sealing them, is performed by the Lithuanian State Security Department. The files of possible unconfessed agents are analyzed by the Lustration Commission, which then sends them to the court. It is worth mentioning that, in a legal sense, former KGB agents/officials are prevented by some restrictions from obtaining certain types of employment.

In contrast to most post-communist Central Eastern European nations, where the archives of the repressive apparatus are controlled by state institutions other than the secret services, in Lithuania there is very limited access to Lithuanian KGB documents. For example, according to the Lithuanian Lustration Law adopted on July 16, 1998, the files of former agents who have undergone the lustration process are simply closed. Although some privileged historians have broader access, in general this arrangement does not permit the disclosure of many circumstances of great significance for supporting Lithuania’s cultural memory. However, historians often raise the issue that political restrictions and the narrowing of access to KGB archives might be a political mistake that only increases a lack of awareness and misleads society. Perhaps this area of the past should be opened up to historians and made available to the possibility of moral judgment, and perhaps the norms affecting the political prosecution of former KGB personnel should be repealed. For example, Lithuanians are well-acquainted with the case of the former KGB agent Šatrija (ex-prime minister Kazimira Prunskienė), and yet she still almost won a Lithuanian presidential election. What then, we may ask, is the significance of memory, evaluation of the past and the politics of prosecution?

The struggle over memory in Lithuania goes on, but it is not directly affected by political manipulations. The community of Lithuanian historians and the supporters of liberal democracy are strong enough to defend the freedom of research and diversity of opinion both from our own security officials and from the radical extremists in our society. Lithuania knows the price of freedom and can find space in its memory both for its sufferings and for confessing the crimes it has committed.
Andriy Portnov
Post-Soviet Ukraine Dealing with its Controversial Past

In Ukraine, the presence of several different regional centres with their own versions of history fosters the preservation of pluralism in the public sphere and ensures that no version of history dominates throughout all of the territories of Ukraine. This pluralism arises from the interaction of different views of the past, each of which, taken separately, is fairly one-sided. The memory initiatives of official Kiev on the international level also play a role, though not necessarily one that unites these regional perspectives.

Ukrainian debates on history are still primarily debates about World War II. As a result of that war, Eastern Galicia, Volhynia, Northern Bukovina and Transcarpathia became part of Ukraine (then the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic). It was during the war, and the early postwar years, that Eastern Galicia and Volhynia effectively became monoethnic territories. This was a result of the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews, the anti-Polish activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (in Ukrainian, Ukrain's'ka Povstan's'ka Armia or UPA) and the Soviet-Polish «population exchange.» All the territories that are now part of Ukraine experienced a Nazi occupation of several years, then the traumatic renewal of Soviet rule. The obligatory Soviet narrative of the «Great Patriotic War» was challenged by the nationalistic one, which emphasizes the anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi struggle of the Ukrainian nationalistic underground, but tends to avoid questions of its participation in anti-Polish or anti-Jewish actions.

Despite the uniform nature of the Ukrainian state, decisions about the erection of monuments or changes to street names fall within the competence of local authorities. President Viktor Yushchenko’s attempts to dedicate a monument to Symon Petlura in Poltava failed because of the objections of the city council, which was controlled by his rival Viktor Yanukovych’s Party of the Regions. When President Leonid Kuchma wanted to open a Polish military cemetery in Lviv, he had to negotiate with the deputies of the Lviv city council. School textbooks and state holidays, by contrast, are the domain of the central government. But, they have to be presented, interpreted and approved in local settings. To take a striking example: Galician cities boast monuments to the wartime Ukrainian nationalistic underground, while on the main square of Simferopol, in Crimea, there stands a monument to their victims.

President Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004) allowed for such regional differences. His approach was to speak about a «united Ukraine,» while avoiding a one-sided position on issues of historical controversy. He was willing to endorse different symbols, celebrate various anniversaries and even publish alternate versions of the same memorial book about World War II for diverse parts of the country. In 2003, President Kuchma had to confront an issue that was of considerable importance in
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Poland: the sixtieth anniversary of the Volhynian events of 1943, when the then UPA killed or removed the Polish civil population from the region. Kuchma tried to follow the official rhetoric of Polish-Ukrainian «forgiveness and reconciliation», but tended not to emphasize the topic in internal Ukrainian debate. Sociological surveys in the year of the official ceremonies showed that 48.9 per cent Ukrainians were completely unaware of the Volhynian events (inter alia those events were not welcomed and left completely unexplored in Soviet historiography). In post-soviet times, even though as a result of the strong challenge from Poland this topic did not become a solely Ukrainian issue, it was also not widely discussed in the media or described in detail in school textbooks.

Kuchma’s tactic of evading, rather than addressing, the problems of memory was perhaps counterproductive in the long run. The best illustration of this is the issue of the official recognition of UPA veterans and their anti-Soviet struggle, which lasted until the early 1950s. All attempts to recognize them as World War II veterans (this is the parliament’s purview), and to give them the benefits of Red Army veterans, failed. That failure has strengthened the feeling of uncertainty about the future of the Ukrainian identity in some parts of Ukrainian society (particularly in Eastern Galicia) and has served as a psychological justification for the unwillingness to open the public discussion over nationalistic underground participation in the implementation of the Holocaust or Volhynian «ethnic cleansing».

President Viktor Yushchenko (2004–2009) continued the rhetoric of internal Ukrainian reconciliation (above all between UPA and Red Army veterans) and, instead of avoiding the problem, tried to make it public. While maintaining the Soviet notion of the «Great Patriotic War,» President Yushchenko in his May 9 speeches started to mention the Holocaust and the deportation of the Tatars from Crimea by the NKVD in 1943. He expressed the need to integrate such an event into a national Ukrainian narrative of the war. Unlike the Kremlin, all presidents of post-Soviet Ukraine had delicately tried to humanize the view of the war – to contrast the sufferings and heroism of common people to the crimes and cruelty of the Soviet political and military leadership. The perception of Ukraine as a «victim of two totalitarism» was supposed to play an important role in disassociating the newly independent state from its Soviet heritage. On the international level that meant that Ukraine has voluntarily delegated the role of the «main winner in the war against fascism» to official Russia.

Yushchenko’s policies of veterans reconciliation has had a very limited effect within Ukraine because of the lack of successful programs, unwillingness of local powers to support the president’s initiatives and the president’s failure to insist on pushing them through. By awarding Stepan Bandera – the symbol of Ukrainian nationalism and «anti-hero No. 1» in Soviet propaganda – with the title of «Hero of Ukraine» after the first round of the 2009 presidential elections, where Yush-
Yushchenko has paid special attention to the recognition of the Great Famine as genocide on the international level. Thus, Ukraine has entered the scene of international struggle for victimization and for what might be called «memory capital.» The main opponent of such efforts was official Russia. Acknowledging the fact of mass famine, the Kremlin was strongly opposed to the idea that it could be described as a genocide directed against the Ukrainians as a nation. The story of diplomatic achievements and failures in advancement of the Holodomor issue is long and controversial, but it is interesting to note that, in appealing to the international community with its own historical sufferings, official Kiev failed to acknowledge the massacres of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire because of its «strategic partnership» with Turkey.

In 2006, at Yushchenko's initiative, an Institute for National Memory was created. Despite the evident inheritance of the name from influential Polish (and Slovak) institutions, the Ukrainian Institute possesses a rather decorative function. Its activities are limited to book publications and conference organizations. It has no authority for prosecution or lustration. The archives of Soviet secret services were never removed from their Ukrainian heirs to the special archive under supervision of the Institute for National Memory. A draft law was written that would have provided for such a transfer, but it was never even debated in the parliament.

The fate of the Institute under the presidency of Viktor Yanukovych is still unclear, despite the clear willingness of the new president to correct, or even reformulate, official politics of memory. In his speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, Yanukovych disagreed with the classification of the Great Famine as genocide. Yanukovych has openly stressed his aim to «synchronize» the celebrations with Moscow and Minsk and the Kiev military parade on May 9, 2010 was held in Brezhnev style. Before the celebration of Victory Day, the Communist Party of Ukraine (a member of the ruling coalition and the government) issued posters with Stalin in the city of Luhansk and dedicated the monument to Stalin in Zaporizhzhia. One of the high officials of the Yanukovych administration characterized it as a local initiative of the «Great Patriotic War» veterans and an aspect of the pluralism of memory in Ukraine.
Thus, in present-day Ukraine one can find, admire, or fear, the coexistence of different, sometimes opposite, narratives of historical memory. Despite the evident lack of dialog between them, and the regional asymmetries of memory, the very fact of the existence and public competition of several visions of the past marks the essential difference between Ukraine and its neighbors on both the western and eastern sides of its border.

Krisztián Ungváry
Remembering Communist Crimes in Hungary: The House of Terror and the Central Cemetery (Rákoskeresztúr)

The 20th century was an age of totalitarianisms. Fascism and communism used the threat of the other to legitimize themselves. Destruction, deportation and mass murders were persistently carried out under the pretext that they were preventative measures. There is a mutual and close causal connection between Nazi and communist crimes in this respect. A culture of remembrance concerned only with one of the two is always at risk of serving the purpose of the other side and thereby justifying its crimes – or at the minimum, of helping to play down these crimes.

The house of terror
The building on 60 Andrássy Avenue was predestined to become a museum. It served as the headquarters for the Hungarian Nazis, the Arrow Cross Party, until 1945, after which the communist political police took over the building. The Conservative government spared no costs when in 2002 it built the most impressive museum in 15 years. In the courtyard of the museum, photographs are organized according to a wall of perpetrators and a wall of victims. The museum focuses on selected aspects of the dictatorships of both the Arrow Cross and communist parties on three storeys of generously furnished rooms. Before the building was turned into a museum, the idea of using it as a documentation site was criticized by socialist and liberal politicians alike. Instead of a House of Terror, the Foreign Minister László Kovács called for building a House of Remembrance and Reconciliation at another location.

This suggestion is the basis of the following argument. Reconciliation first requires that guilt should be acknowledged in an adequate manner. This has more or less never occurred in the case of the perpetrators.

The first exhibition room in the House of Terror is dedicated to the subject of double occupation. While the exhibition deliberately tries to sidestep the Holocaust and the developments leading up to the murder of the Jews – interestingly, the only point of consensus between the different parties was that this subject should be
moved to its own museum in a remote location – it cannot avoid the subject completely, and the resulting condensed account contains hair-raising compromises. In fact, it is suggested to visitors that only a small group of people can be made responsible for what occurred. Considering the unfortunate fact that hundreds of thousands of people greedily took part in the measures designed to rob the Jews and that the political parties in power up to 1944 were hardly less anti-Semitic than the Arrow Cross Party, this information is completely misleading. Although Miklós Horthy’s policies were able to rein in the Hungarian anti-Semites, his merits cannot undo his previous responsibility for the persecution of the Jews, or undo the responsibility of radical anti-Semites.

One room is dedicated to the theme of changing uniforms. It is in this room that the symbolic representation fails most clearly. Two figures stand back-to-back on a revolving platform; one is wearing the uniform of the Arrow Cross Party while the other wears the uniform of the communist political police. Continuity is illustrated through the sound of a wardrobe door closing, and shadows of people changing uniforms can be seen on a video screen. In reality, not a single Arrow Cross Party member traded in his or her uniform for a political police uniform in 1945. The curators would have done better to focus on the continuities within party membership if they wanted to demonstrate the similarities between the two totalitarian parties.

The curators’ idea behind the exhibition – illustrating the problem of continuity on the basis of the members of the political police – demonstrates their attempt to sidestep the issue of national responsibility. Only one sentence can be found to describe the members of the political police: «An organization of radical left-wing elements, criminals and ex-hangmen’s assistants from the Arrow Cross Party.» In reality, none of the top members of the political police – whose portraits may be viewed in the collection – were hangmen’s assistants from the Arrow Cross Party, nor were they average criminals. Many were staunch communists. Revenge may have been what motivated many of them to join the police. Most of the first cadres were people of Jewish origin who had served in the Arbeitsdienst (Labour Service) and therefore had been victims of the Nazi dictatorship. Very few members were people who had returned from exile. Regarding the communists, the exhibition is determined to display only compromising material. There is thus hardly any room for anti-fascism in the museum.

In the next room, which focuses on the anticommunist resistance, the following text can be found: «Tens of thousands followed the call to take up arms in resistance… We do not know many of their names, while communist lies are still told about others, although they are real heroes.» This statement can only be read as praise and glorification of all anti-communist movements, including those of the valiant radical right and those which are racist. There apparently is no desire to question the anti-communist motives.
The undifferentiated presentation of the fates of individuals blurs the line between perpetrators and victims. This becomes especially apparent in the reconstructed torture cells in the basement. None of the portraits in the cells are accompanied by texts explaining what the person in the picture was accused of, or why he or she was a victim of the terror. The victims whose identities as perpetrators would also have needed an explanation are all from the anti-communist camp. Although the curators venture to portray controversial anti-communist personalities as victims, they fail to do the same with anti-communist perpetrators.

This one-sidedness may also be found in the speeches and comments which were made when the Museum opened. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in his opening speech that Hungary’s dictatorships only managed to come to power with the help of external forces. This is, however, not true for the Hungarian Soviet Republic. And the Hungarian government under Sztójay also enjoyed wide support amongst Hungary’s civil servants. Furthermore, the radicalization of Hungarian politics through anti-semitic laws had nothing to do with pressure from Germany until 1942. Rather, the opposite was true: several anti-semitic measures in Hungary were, in fact, even more radical than those in Germany.

The central cemetery in Rákoskeresztúr
The victims of all the important political trials between 1945 and 1962 are buried in two different plots at the main cemetery in Rákoskeresztúr. Plot 298 is not only designated for people who were executed for war crimes and crimes against humanity between 1945 and 1956, but also for the victims of show trials. Arrow Cross Party members, war criminals, democrats and socialists are all buried in this plot together. The neighbouring plot 301 also contains not only the victims of show trials up to 1956, but also revolutionaries who died after 1956.

After the political shift, the cemetery grounds became a battlefield where different political interpretations of commemoration clashed. In 1989, the alternative group Inconnu also placed several Kopjafas – wooden poles used in pre-Christian Magyar burials – in plot 298. When visitors enter the memorial site, they are greeted with the following text: «Wayfarer, only you who have a Hungarian soul may pass through this gate.» Behind this stands a marble plaque which reads: «They died as martyrs for their Fatherland.»

Statements such as these are born out of the understanding that those buried here were victims of a persecution which specifically targeted the Magyars. That the persecutors (judges, police, officers, politicians, etc.) predominantly saw themselves as Magyars did not seem to bother the architects of this memorial.

For 15 years, the fact that innocent victims lay beside mass criminals in plot 298 – and that many of these mass criminals were not executed for their actions, but rather for fictitious crimes – has not been an issue of discussion. «Purging» these problematic elements from the plots is also hardly possible, as the surviving
families would see this as a desecration. Furthermore, the line between actual and fictive guilt is difficult to draw in many cases. A systematic distinction would therefore result in only a handful of people being left in the plot, if any would be left at all. To make the situation even more complicated, one group is missing from the plot: Communists who were killed during the show trials are either not buried here at all, or they were exhumed in 1956 and ceremoniously reburied. This leaves the right-wing camp with little reason to criticize the plot’s occupancy. And the possibility of replacing the memorial plaques with new ones that shed light on the complexity of the events is apparently inconceivable to political leaders to this day.

Translated from German by Michelle Miles

Włodzimierz Borodziej
The Politics of History in Poland since 1989

Since 1989, Poland has gone through several different phases in the politics of history.

1. In 1990, the so-called Third Polish Republic began to abolish all rituals, holidays and heroic names from the communist Polish People’s Republic. Only a few memorials, primarily dedicated to the Red Army and the Polish communist troops who fought at their side in 1943–45, were spared. In general, the following rule applied: what had been right before 1989 was now wrong, and vice versa. The Second Polish Republic in the interwar period, the non-communist resistance movement which fought the German occupants (Armia Krajowa) and the revolts against state socialism in 1956, 1968, 1970 and 1980 became the founding myths of the new democracy.

The new politics of history also became a useful tool when dealing with Poland’s new neighbours: a more striking category than it may seem. None of the states neighbouring Poland today existed in their present form before the end of communism. Already in August of 1989, the Sejm declared that the involvement of Warsaw Pact countries in Czechoslovakia in 1968 was illegal, and in 1990, the Senate expressed regret for the forced deportation of Polish Ukrainians in 1947. The skeleton in the closet of German-Polish relations became the subject of lively debate in Poland. The government did not take part in this discussion, although the media gave it much attention. Polish-Russian relations seemed also to have addressed the Soviet legacy: Already in the autumn of 1992, the Russian president handed over key documents relating to Katyn to Poland. In the years following, the Third Polish Republic turned the mass graves in Russia and the Ukraine into memorials whose simplicity of form is very moving.
2. The new government had greater difficulties dealing with the files of the communist secret police. It became the subject of a heated discussion in which one side proposed sealing off the poison cabinet, while the other wanted to follow in Germany’s footsteps and open it to look at its contents. The latter won out, and in 2000 the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, hereafter IPN) was born. The IPN was not only given the files of the political police of the Polish People’s Republic, following the German model, but it was also additionally entrusted with public prosecutor functions. Its job was to investigate the Nazi and communist crimes committed in 1939–1990.

Since its founding, the Institute has helped to screen (lustracja) all civil service employees and prominent public figures. In its basic logic it resembled the background check of civil service employees in Germany (for affiliations with the East German secret police), although in Poland only some, rather than all, public-sector officials were screened. In answer to the question of possible collaboration with the communist political police, roughly 23,000 civil servants – from members of parliament to senators, cabinet-rank officials and their immediate subordinates, top people in the state-run media, local officials, judges and state attorneys – had to declare that they had not been involved. If the public prosecutor designated for this task found fault with a particular statement, the case was investigated on the basis of the archives of the IPN. The IPN’s public prosecutor’s office has taken over the investigations and the filing of actions in these cases since the amendment in 2007.

From 2000 to 2005, when the Institute’s first director, the lawyer Leon Kieres, was in office, the IPN more or less successfully pursued its many different goals acting as public prosecutor, managing cases and providing political education. It was the research staff of this agency who produced a comprehensive, professionally immaculate study – saturated with references – regarding the murder of the Jews in Jedwabne in 1941.

Under the leadership of the Institute’s second director, the historian Janusz Kurtyka, who died in the plane crash near Smolensk on 10 April 2010, the IPN developed into a state office which openly intervened and took sides in debates within Poland. From 2005 to 2007, numerous charges were brought against members of parliament and constitutional judges who opposed the government coalition of centre-right parties. Members of the press who had close ties to the coalition contributed to the charges by launching attacks based on documentation provided by the IPN. Neither the charges nor the documents leaked in the press resulted in the accused being sentenced or condemned. The Institute did, however, destroy the public reputations of a few Roman Catholic dignitaries.

A spiteful critic once said that for each case the public prosecutor has won, taxpayers paid an average of one million euros. The IPN’s budget is roughly 60 million euros – approximately one-third of the budget for the largest Polish
university, the University of Warsaw, which has 60,000 students and thousands of employees. With its dozens of learning and research institutions, it makes sense that the University of Warsaw can only dedicate a fraction of its budget to modern history.

3. The period from 2005 to 2007 has signified a change in the politics of history in many regards. The Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) party won the elections in 2005 and shortly after the presidency. As one of the founding principles of its political programme, the PiS Party reinforced the call to strengthen Poland’s national identity and disassociate it from «the others». This implied a considerable distance between Poland and the European West as well as the basic principles and goals of the Third Polish Republic. The PiS had already gathered experience with the Warsaw Rising Museum, which was built by its young political activists. The museum is dedicated to the uprising in Warsaw and quickly attracted a huge audience after opening in 2004. It is a modern site of cultural exposition, avoiding all discussions regarding the signification and end result of the uprising in the summer of 1944. It radiates confidence in one’s own actions and in the victims’ moral superiority. During its time in government, the PiS tried to capitalize on this success in other areas. What happened is a long story, but it may be summarized in one sentence. In June 2007, the PiS prime minister argued that Poland should be given a larger vote in the EU based on its sacrifices in the Second World War: «We only want back now what has been taken from us. If Poland had not been put through 1939 to 1945, it would be a country with 66 million citizens today.»

This demand, which was directed more at the Member States than at Brussels, marked a new peak in the instrumentalization of history, after it had already become a controversial subject in Polish politics. The PiS lost the elections three months later. The Platforma Obywatelska (PO), the party which has been in office since autumn 2007, does not use history as political arguments in Poland or abroad. It showcase project – a Second World War museum which will open in Danzig in 2014 – also strives to be a contemporary cultural institution like the Warsaw Uprising Museum, but otherwise has nothing in common with that institution. And although the current prime minister, who has been in office since 2007, has been known to rely on history to appeal to his audience’s emotions, such as on 1 September 2009 at the Westerplatte peninsula in Danzig (where a small group of Polish soldiers heroically fought back German attacks in September 1939) or on 7 April 2010 in Katyn, he does not use them to create a chasm between Poland and its neighbours.

4. And what is the role of historians? First of all, we should note that contemporary history is what interests people most, as is the case all over the world. For Poland, this means that the historians at the IPN, who focus exclusively on history after
1939, are in the spotlight; they produce many more publications than universities or other academic historians.

This also means that research of the period between the two world wars has virtually come to a standstill: only studies relating to the foreign policy, minorities and gender studies of that period play a role in contemporary history. As to the Second World War, we find quite a different picture: First and foremost, there is a great wave of studies about the Soviet occupied region from 1939 to 1941, many studies about the Eastern regions from 1941 to 1944 and mainly about the Polish resistance there, while there is very little research being done about German occupied areas and very much research about the anti-German resistance and the Holocaust. The studies by the IPN regarding the Polish People’s Republic focus on persecution and resistance; the crises of 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976 and 1980; and the 1980s as the decade when the government clashed with Solidarność. On the other hand, we also find, in a sense, contrary narratives about everyday life and the social and cultural history of the People’s Republic, especially – but not exclusively – from the point of view of the «red series» issued by the publisher Trio. Thus, historians do research after all, although they have come to learn that contemporary history remains a political issue, even in a democracy, and that they themselves are pigeonholed according to the jacket cover and publisher rather than the content of their books.

5. This is also true for the greatest debates, which, typically, were initiated not by a historian from Warsaw or Kraków, but rather by a professor from Princeton, Jan Tomasz Gross. His books about the Polish Neighbors (2001) who murdered the Jewish citizens of their town of Jedwabne in July 1941 and the Poles’ Fear (2006) that the Jews would return after 1944 have provoked discussions which have gone beyond contemporary history. Recently, a prominent conservative summed up his disapproval of Poland’s self-critical approach to its national history by calling it a choice between «Westerplatte or Jedwabne», meaning that historians choose either to see the Poles as heroes and victims, which is good and beneficial, or they focus on the Poles’ wrongdoings and mistakes, which weakens the national community. A liberal historian answered with a similarly programmatic statement entitled «Westerplatte and Jedwabne», which suggests that not only the commendable, but also the degrading moments of national history deserve to be researched. However, this did not result in a consensus, despite what was clearly a proposition on the part of the liberals. Talking past one another tends to thwart dialogue, not only concerning the IPN, but in other areas as well.

The situation of historians therefore reflects the existence of two Polands, where one society contains two cultural communities which hardly talk to one another. Similar to the case of the two Spain, the sympathy of the Church lies clearly with one side.
6. Independently of the process described above, another unrelated process is developing which also deserves attention. At its root is the controversy surrounding the death of the Polish Prime Minister in exile, General Władysław Sikorski, who was killed in a plane crash in Gibraltar on 4 July 1943. According to the official British investigation, the accident was caused by technical difficulties. Rumours that the catastrophe had been an assassination began circulating already in the summer of 1943, although it was unclear what motives would have inspired the Soviets, British, Germans or anyone else in such a case. After many decades of research, professional historians still refuse to take these rumours seriously. Nevertheless, a journalist specializing in conspiracy theories has since revived the possibility of assassination in numerous television broadcasts in which he argues that Sikorski was murdered – either shot, strangled or poisoned – before being put on the plane, and that the crash was only a cover-up for the murder.

A private broadcasting company invested a relatively large amount of money in a motion picture which portrayed this nonsense in eye-catching images, and the state-run IPN institute ordered that the body be exhumed in order to investigate the rumour, although experts warned the IPN of the risk that it might discredit itself. The results of the forensic investigation confirmed what historians already knew: the General died in the plane crash. Despite this, the motion picture still had its premiere (and is surely to be shown repeatedly on television), the IPN never commented on the compromising situation to which it had contributed, and the Wikipedia entry for the event only enhances the impression of a mysterious assassination.

This will surely also be the case in the future for the plane crash near Smolensk on 10 April this year, which killed the president and the 95 passengers and crew accompanying him (and which rouses similar emotions in the Poles as 11 September 2001 does in US Americans). Although experts generally regard the crash as an accident (which probably occurred primarily due to human error), conspiracy theories abound on the Internet. There are even «films» showing the Russian secret service – which, of course, is supposedly responsible – executing the survivors by gun shot. The historians who will one day replace the aviation security experts as interpreters of 10 April 2010 will be just as powerless as they are today in the case of Gibraltar 1943. The forerunner for all this is TWA Flight 800. In other words, the Internet and the alternative media, which are blissfully uncensored, know better.

7. The dawning of postmodernism is painful. On the one hand, we have a state-run institute which tries to integrate its right to interpret police files from the era of state socialism into the internal debates of a democratic Poland, despite intense public criticism. Moreover, the Institute has also been known to do nonsensical things, such as launching an investigation of Adolf Hitler and his consortia, which it did not discontinue until recently. On the other hand, the Internet has become a
breeding ground for suspicions, lies and distortions which are void of all professional expertise, but which perhaps explains. There are two common denominators here: anything goes, and the historians from the last decades – with their professional doubts and reservations – are nothing but a nuisance when trying to come to terms with the 20th century.

*Translated from German by Michelle Miles*