

## Beyond the National Museum Paradigm: Troubled Past Vernacular Representations in Central and Southeastern Europe

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### Abstract

As nationalist and populist rhetorics have gained momentum in Central and Southeastern Europe, there is an urgency to disentangle the historical narratives and political agendas displayed by national museum paradigms. And yet, equally significant is the urgency to illuminate the strategies and mnemonic devices through which the past is rendered worthy of commemoration, both in those memory cultures that come to life in opposition, or those which are complementary to the national museum's paradigms. In line with these considerations, this special issue addresses the vernacular dimension of public memory, with a special focus on those memory cultures instantiated by mnemonic actors who do not necessarily possess the public epistemic authority to materialize their narratives about violent pasts as official memories.

**Keywords:** Southeastern Europe; Central Europe; vernacular memories; national museum; public memory

The aftermath of difficult pasts typically prompts convoluted memory wars on all sides of the political spectrum. These memory clashes reveal that the cultural materializations of collective memory are hardly, if ever, stable and “objective” representations of the past. As we cannot know the past “the way it essentially was” (Griffin 1993), we are left with the hermeneutical task to decipher a palimpsest of representations of a past event that, often, we have not experienced first-hand. When it comes to the difficult past's mnemonic practices and content of memorialization, memory entrepreneurs are expected to consider the imperative to commemorate it by anchoring the memory work in both *expressivist* (to pay respect to the victims) and *consequentialist* (to promote good) philosophical accounts of moral and political obligations. In both cases, the commemorative activities (in both form and content) are instrumentally *presentist*, employing what is often regarded as a “usable past” (Shafir 2018, 33). Thus, memories are not set in stone reflections on the past, but rather, selective reconstructions of it. Not only does this selectivity principle apply to the subject and the manner of remembrance, but also in answering the question, “To what ends?” “What and how is remembered and forgotten also applies to the “to what ends?” question. In this vein, “the only absolutely certain thing is the future, since the past is constantly changing” (Simmonds-Duke 1987, 187).

This special issue engages in a detailed analysis of several instances of cultural vernacular memory formats which have the potential to foster mnemonic communities and additional discursive frames for official memories pertaining to difficult pasts in Central and Southeastern Europe. One of the most authoritative narratives about difficult pasts is revealed by the national museums paradigm through various mnemonic devices. Within these institutional and political

frames, the past is re-presented along national(ist) constrains, generating little space for airing contested memories, and for non-official memory entrepreneurs' narratives and performances to materialize. The argument advanced by one of the most recent studies on the national museums' mission is that these institutions reveal "what sort of community a nation wishes to be today, rather than how and why that nation came into being" (Watson 2020). At the same time, "the ideological function of the Museum depends upon its conscious manipulation of symbols, and its effectiveness as an ideological tool depends upon a clear definition of the nation" (Luck 2009, 35). Troubled pasts are often commemorated in line with the official institutions of remembrance's precincts and mnemonic directives. This does not mean that all cultural representations that recall troubled pasts are exclusively confined to these official institutions and regimes of memory production, preservation, and dissemination. The vernacular instantiations of the troubled pasts' memorialization contribute to extending and diversifying the representations and understandings of political violence and its aftermath to an extent that is seldom addressed in the academic literature devoted to these issues in Central and Southeastern Europe.

The tendency to align to an official line of commemoration and memory regime is nevertheless more conspicuous where museums and other official institutions of remembrance address violent pasts in a specialized language of the 'elites' that speaks to the elites, while concomitantly there is no consistent effort to overcome national(ist) lines of commemoration. At the same time, both in Eastern and Western Europe, national museums are still largely entrusted institutions even though their displayed narratives about the past are usually meant to streamline national identity and pride. Thus, a highly relevant direction of research in both memory studies and museum studies would be to extricate the prerequisites of tightening trust in national museum narratives about troubled pasts, and their role in how the present unfolds past narratives.

What is less explored in the academic literature on the matter is why exactly national museums are largely entrusted institutions of memory when turbulent pasts are at stake, and to what extent the politicization of their epistemic authority hampers individual's autonomy and self-reported testimony. This epistemic reliance on narratives which entail some normative power is sometimes paralleled by the accounts of those who do not conform to trust in the official institutions of remembrance. Yet, what is less addressed, and this special issue aims to thoroughly investigate, is the extent to which these vernacular testimonies complement, divert, or contest the official paradigm of remembering troubled pasts.

In this vein, this special issue focuses on Central East and Southeastern Europe because the regions have experienced multifarious difficult pasts of which deleterious legacies are still traceable on the symbolic map of the unescapable sets of concerns that this region must face and deal with. These troubled pasts involve ethno-nationalistic wars and ethnic cleansing, forced labor, World War II and Cold War related atrocities, painful and forced transitions to capitalist hegemony, as well as various forms of racism and xenophobia. It was not until recently that cultural and artistic memory representations dealing with "troubled pasts" have started to emerge in what can be geographically framed as Central East and Southeastern Europe. There is no set-in-stone explanation for this deferral, but social scientists mention the lingering legacy of communist centralized politics of memory that leave little room for "unofficial" representations of the past to materialize in the region. However, countries like Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania and Slovenia, to name at least some of those presented in this issue, are by no means bound by the same political past. Still, their cultural memory of and dealing with troubled pasts show remarkably similar patterns.

Body-sensual, conceptual, and emotional engagements and re-enactments of difficult pasts are recurrently displayed through artistic practice, popular culture, private museum initiatives, grassroots enterprises, and cultural/ political entrepreneurs' online and offline platforms of engagement to various political ends. To mention just an example, only recently (since the collapse of socialist regimes in the 1990s) have the historians of Central and South-Eastern Europe started to write comprehensive accounts of the Holocaust and "Eastern European Jewry," which for decades were absorbed by the narrative of national victimhood. While some Eastern European sites of memory

exhibit the excruciating heritage of communism and state socialism in other regions and commemorative landscapes the Holocaust remains absent. When mentioned and materialized in cultural formats, it is treated as “one massacre among others, and one that was imposed from outside” (Droit 2007, 120). Furthermore, in narratives of various national groups who underline their own collective trauma a “competition in suffering” can be detected, belittling the suffering of others.

This special issue addresses the multifarious representations of troubled pasts in Central East and Southeastern Europe, revealed outside the officially sanctioned institutions of memory (sometimes in opposition and sometimes complementary to the national museum paradigm). The national museum pattern of historical memorialization and its institutionalized pedagogy of commemorating troubled pasts are currently being mirrored by unofficial formats of cultural and social remembering, fostering genuine solidarity against oblivion, racism, discrimination, and rampant right-wing populist politics. This national and trans-national solidarity against past and present wrongs cannot be enforced from above through instructions on the fitting way to engage with the memory of troubled pasts if conflicts of memory and power relationships between various mnemonic actors are not addressed simultaneously. Thus, the contributors to this special issue explore the mechanisms, intricacies, and outcomes of the vernacular representations of the troubled pasts that do not conform to “collective” (national) memory renderings, but rather circumvent them to make room for representations that are not merely “held in common” by national mnemonic actors but are self-reflectively shared and employed by trans-national or rememberers who are left outside collective memory framed by methodological nationalism.

As Siniša Malešević and Lea David point out, the official prescriptions and policies of memorialization fuel “nationalist doctrines into violent acts” and forced oblivion (Malešević 2013). This is the case as often the out-groups’ memories of their ordeals during repressive regimes – e.g., ethnic, religious, sexual and other minorities excluded from public discourse about the past – are subsumed to the grand narrative of the “whole nation.” National museums, textbooks, “official” monuments, and even legal battles over the right to memory usually refer to the “entire nation,” and are meant to recall how the “entire nation” suffered collectively from foreign invasions of “enemy nations.” Thus, cultural memory practices should be understood in ethical terms as well, since memory is a facet of justice, especially in the process of redress from historical injustice and political violence.

As normative perspectives on the ethics of memory suggest, the value of memory work needs to be assessed in terms of its propensity to benefit others and promote justice (Bell 2009). In this framework, changing the way the past is remembered can supplement transitional justice mechanisms. We aim to elaborate on these theoretical and normative perspectives and propose to illuminate the tension between the ethics of memory and politics of memory in concrete circumstances, supplementing theoretical insights of philosophers and social scientists with concrete empirical cases from the region.

Beside the official sites of memory – which may or may not be self-reflectively accepted by people as truly *collective* mnemonic places – there are also vernacular sites of memory (Bodnar 2011) where unofficial actors of memory perform their memorial work either in opposition to official memory narratives or by leaving these narratives unchallenged. Pierre Nora explains that *lieux de mémoire* are “sites of memory,” both physical and non-physical. Among physical *lieux de mémoire*, he mentions monuments, museums, and memorials. However, not only physical objects are *lieux de mémoire* but also are the “soft” sites of memory (e.g., literary, and historical characters). In this special issue, we aim to explore both official and unofficial practices and spaces of memory which are not necessarily linked to conventional sites of memory (official *lieux de mémoire*) or to canonical ways of representing troubled pasts, their victims, and perpetrators. Thus, the general frame of studies this special issue encapsulates are the conflicting representations of both hegemonic and inhibited narratives. The conflict of institutionalized and alternative memorial culture in the region has not yet been sufficiently explored, and the demarcation of borders between them (especially the sustainable ones) is very fluid.

The impetus for exploring these memory practices rests in Tomas Sniegón’s contention that it is not enough to encourage and support “centralized initiatives governed from above” if the attitudes

of “ordinary citizens” towards the remembrance of a “troubled past” are not considered (Sniegon 2014). While we acknowledge that enacting cultural and memory policies are of the most significant instruments regarding the lasting effect of the remembrance and commemoration of troubled pasts, this process ought to be investigated “from below” as well if we want to understand the dynamics between cultural and social memory, local and national identity, and political power both at the national and supra-national level. To this end, this special issue aims to bring together a range of case studies which document and problematize the cultural vernacular of remembering various troubled pasts in Central East and Southeastern Europe. The articles in this special issue will enable us to better understand how the historical past and its grand narratives have been used to legitimize overlapping injustices (economic, social, epistemic) and abuses of power or – on the contrary – to envision tolerant societies, commemorating the victims of human rights abuses and re-establishing truth and justice. Rethinking the habits of historical, cultural, and social remembrance determines how we make sense of our past in Central East and Southeastern Europe, and how we imagine the future at the grass roots level.

In line with these concerns, the special issue aims to address questions like the following: To what extent does memorial culture look towards the future rather than solely commemorating troubled pasts? To what extent can these types of cultural memory foster new solidarity and forms of historical knowledge about the past? Who are the entrepreneurs of memory and what are their aims? When does *lieu de mémoire* become futile? Can a memory practice operate as a form of symbolic reparation for those who have suffered injustices and violence? To what extent and ends can a vernacular, grass-roots memorial initiative be shifted towards an institutionalized culture of remembrance?

To unpack these questions the contributors explore both physical and non-physical places of memory that exceed the confinement of the national museum paradigm of remembering troubled pasts. Correspondingly, the main goal of the special issue the contributions will explore are cultural materializations revealed through several repositories of “unofficial” memory of troubled pasts, such as: mnemonic literary culture, the vernacular tattoo culture of remembrance, non-state/ non-national museums, artistic memory work, and online commemorative cultures (blog posts, advertising campaigns and so on).

Oszkár Roginer analyzes the literary afterlife of the troubled past(s) memories in a transnational perspective. Following Astrid Erll (2011), his research paper disentangles how the mnemonic literary constructions can foster a critical culture of remembrance that does not necessarily put forth the “nation first” imperative. The article zooms in on several instances of mnemonic choices transcending the “national memory paradigm.” More specifically, his article focuses on literary representations of the Yugoslav wars from the minority perspective of Hungarians in the (post-) Yugoslav space.

Caterina Preda’s contribution to the special issue tackles the artistic memory of troubled pasts in the Eastern European mnemonic and political context. The focus is on sculptures conceptualized as “living monuments” and memorial sites of the post-socialist moment in Central East and Southeastern Europe. Employing the theoretical frameworks of arts and politics and memory studies, the contribution aims to focus on the artistic renderings of the socialist past that go beyond the national museum paradigm of memory formation. Preda’s article advances an argument according to which certain performative sculptural formats in Romania, Albania, and Bulgaria create a new “corporeal memory” of the communist past that it is seldom addressed in the academic studies dedicated to this topic. The performative dimension of memory work is further explored against a background of political and social concerns.

Closely related with the artistic instantiations of the socialist past’s memorialization in the region, Maria Alina Asavei’s article displays a comparative analysis of the vernacular memorials engraved in the skin (as permanent tattoos) of three former socialist leaders: Nicolae Ceaușescu, Josip Broz Tito, and Josif Stalin. The spontaneous forms of vernacular memorial are interpreted as “sublime scars” carried with the body (and, yet ephemeral since they hold only the time of a life). Unlike the memorial tattoos that mark the recognition of a group that suffered the same trauma

(e.g., the commemorative tattoos of the 9/11; the survivors of the Bataclan attack in France) the commemorative tattoos analyzed in this article reflect a centripetal set of identity concerns, ranging from Yugonostalgia to individualized spaces of self-healing. The argument put forth is that tattoos can act as vernacular commemorations collected into a body archive of nostalgia for the ontological security of the past and “great leadership.” The article also suggests prospects for further research on commemorative (political) tattoos, as this topic received little attention in the studies dedicated to vernacular memorials.

Melinda Harlov-Csortán’s contribution explores vernacular memories of the Iron Curtain from a memory studies and heritage studies perspective. The locus of these memory events relates to the border region of the former Iron Curtain between Hungary and Austria, an area that has gone through many stages of heritagization after the political change in 1989. The article tackles the unofficial memories of the Iron Curtain through bringing to the forefront a detailed analysis of two vernacular museums (established by the former border guards) and a memory park. These vernacular and private enactments are then juxtaposed with the official museums of communism in Hungary and their memory politics regarding the Iron Curtain. This multilayered and complex case study illuminates the interplay between vernacular and official memory and how one’s narrative is ignored, suppressed, or recognized by the other.

Ildikó Barna and Árpád Knap’s co-authored article explores memory cultures that exceed the boundaries of national institutions of remembrance by focusing on online platforms of memory (e.g., blog posts, websites) whose main data refer to two different (if not antagonistic) troubled pasts in Hungary: the centenary of the Treaty of Trianon, and the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the death camps and the end of the Holocaust. The authors employ analytical devices to explore and analyze a vast amount of unstructured online textual data through the Natural Language Processing method.

Parallel to the ongoing controversies over institutional commemoration of the Holocaust and World War II in Hungary and Poland, Kateřina Králová and Nikola Karasová’s contribution explores the *rationale* behind establishing the Holocaust Memorial & Human Rights Educational Center in Thessaloniki, Greece. The article’s aim is to illuminate the multilayered, palimpsest-like symbolic memories that are supposed to materialize with the establishment of this institution of remembrance. In line with the main topic of this special issue, Králová and Karasová’s article puts forth an exploratory and explanatory analysis of a site of memory whose “mission” is understood as exceeding the physical and political boundaries of the national museum paradigm. The authors claim that the Holocaust Museum project is the result of a non-committal memory work and of a disintegrated memory representation of the troubled past.

Finally, Helga Embacher’s article zooms in on the “victim myth” hegemonic narrative about the outcome of historical violence, taking as a case study Austria’s controversy about the Nazi past in the aftermath of the Waldheim Affair (1986). The article explores the cultural (and artistic) responses to the Waldheim Affair through the lens of memory studies and cultural history. More specifically, Helga Embacher’s article provides a comprehensive analysis of the so-called “Wehrmacht Exhibition” displayed in Vienna in 1995. The main claim of the article is that the public debate occasioned by the “Wehrmacht Exhibition” and led by intellectuals and artists, as well as by politicians, influenced a broad segment of the population in the way they perceived Austria’s past. Correspondingly, a large segment of the population no longer regarded the Austrian “nation” as entirely innocent and condemned the persecution of the Jews. Yet, at the same time it also defended the German Wehrmacht. The article engages critically with nationalist myths about Austrian history, memory and, more importantly, coming to terms with the violent past. By focusing to a great extent on the “Wehrmacht Exhibition,” Helga Embacher’s article provides a window into how the past is re-enacted through the discursive frameworks of epistemic and historical justice, pinpointing how an “alternative” mnemonic event (a vernacular exhibition) can unfold beyond the national museum paradigm.

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