



CLEO Cultural Memory in Europe: Commemoration, Memory Making, and Identity in the 21st Century

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Narratives of heroism, narratives of victimhood:
Identity building in Europe's 'post-heroic' society

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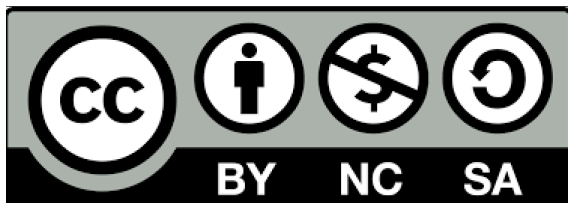
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Heroes and Victims: Comparative Perspectives on Europe’s Multilayered Memory Cultures

Constantin Iordachi

“[A]nybody who has ever lived under another form of government—that is, under a dictatorship which cannot be removed without bloodshed—will know that a democracy, imperfect though it is, is worth fighting for and, I believe, worth dying for.”

Karl Popper¹

The dominant European frameworks governing historical politics, memory-making and commemoration patterns have suffered multiple mutations in the last hundred years, from the Great War to today. The two world wars, the Cold War, the 1968 movements and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe have all impacted the dominant cultures of memory, leading to ideological cleavages and a plurality of inter-generational perspectives. After the temporary triumph of liberalism in international relations in 1918-1919, the interwar period was marked by an acute ideological confrontation between democracy and totalitarianism, generally referred to as a European Civil War. During World War II, the Allies’ anti-Nazi coalition with the Soviet Union obscured, for a while, the ideological divisions between liberal democracies and communism, both parties instead capitalizing on antifascism as a common political ground. Yet, with the defeat of fascism and the imposition of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the conflict between totalitarianism and democracy has been reactivated, in a new key. Although antifascism served as a foundation for historical memory in the East as well as in the West, the politics of history and the official discourses on memory in the two ‘camps’ were markedly different, leading to the creation of distinct “regions of memory.”² In Western Europe, the post-war campaigns of transitional justice and the cultivation of the memory of the Holocaust served as the foundation for a new, democratic, and anti-totalitarian political culture. In Soviet Union, official memory politics attempted to ‘monopolize’ the meaning of antifascism, capitalizing on the paramount role played by the Red Army in defeating Nazi Germany; at the same time, however, the Soviet Union decentered the Jewish tragedy, focusing instead on the fascist terror against the working class in general and its rabid attack on the “first socialist state of the working class” in particular.

The collapse of communism in 1989-1991, and the subsequent processes of historical reconciliation and European unification allowed a retrospective view of the tumultuous short twentieth century in European politics (1918-1989), and created a window of opportunity for the unification of the two distinct regions of memory. On the one hand, the liberalization of historical discourses in Eastern Europe has led to an open societal acknowledgment of the tragedy of the Holocaust and of local responsibility for it in this part of the continent as well, following patterns of memorialization and musealization established in

¹ Popper, K. (1988). “From the archives: The Open Society and its Enemy Revisited,” [From the archives: the open society and its enemies revisited](#) | *The Economist* [April 23, 1988] *The Economist*, accessed Jan 31, 2016.

² “Regions of memory” can be defined as “transnational memory constellations” that transcend the scale of local and national communities but at the same time are narrower than continental or global memory cultures. See Simon, L., Olick, J.K., Wawrzyniak, J. & Pakier, M. (eds.) (2022). *Regions of Memory: Transnational Formations*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham..

Western Europe. On the other hand, the collapse of communist regimes led to a wave of critical inquiry into the history and legacy of communism in Eastern Europe, but also in European and global politics in general (see the issue of Eurocommunism and its attitude toward Stalinism). Yet, continental political integration and convergence did not necessarily lead to a full harmonization of its distinct “regions of memory”, but made possible the emergence of new transnational clusters, cleavages, and increased fragmentation. The instrumentalization of anticommunism as a political weapon in Eastern Europe, in particular, generated a symbolic competition between the legacy of communism versus fascism. This race for “competitive martyrdom” was mostly framed as a moral comparison between Holocaust versus the Gulag, the two being often counterposed against each other in a competition over uncovering the greatest evil in history; oftentimes, this politicized comparison of the so-called “dual genocide” was an attempt at historical exculpation by manipulating an alleged ‘causal relationship’ between fascist and communist atrocities.³

Against this complex and multi-layered historical background, this cluster of essays explores the politics of history and processes of memory-making in post-1989 Europe, focusing on two key inter-related concepts: narratives of heroism versus narratives of victimization. The papers summarize the first preliminary research results of the ERASMUS+ project entitled “Cultural memory in Europe: commemoration, memory making, and identity in the 21st century” (CLEO). Our analysis has been prompted by two major trends that occurred in post-1989 Europe.

First, there are claims that we are living in a post-heroic society. Coined as early as 1860, the concept of post-heroism has a long pedigree in the Western culture⁴ but got a new wind in the last decades, as part of a larger series of “post-” concepts (e.g., post-modern, post-human, etc.). During this time, post-heroism has been defined in a variety of ways, focusing on the emergence of a new consensus on pacifist values in society, on the emergence of technological advanced societies, or a combination of the two. On the one hand, many analysts point out to the changing nature of warfare in post-heroic societies: due to unprecedented technological advances, wars have become hybrid and high-tech, conducted by professionals, and thus sanitized from one-to-one direct manpower combat among ordinary citizens-in-arms.⁵ Sophisticated weaponry and the media portrayal of new wars as mere high-tech military operations has tended to obscure their inherent violent nature and to downplay the role of heroism in society, from citizens’ sacrifice to professional service. On the other hand, the spread of democracy in the post-1918 world led to a growing international consensus over a set of guiding international laws and norms, enhancing the role of international institutions. Since democracies do not go at war with each other, it was hoped that this

³ Shafir, M. (2021) *Four Pitfalls West and East: Universalization, Double Genocide, Obfuscation and Competitive Martyrdom as New Forms of Holocaust Negation*, Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349607954_Four_Pitfalls_West_and_East_Universalization_Double_Genocide_Obfuscation_and_Competitive_Martyrdom_as_New_Forms_of_Holocaust_Negation [accessed Feb 01 2023].

⁴ This shift has a long history in Western culture. Johann Wolfgang Goethe's cult novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), for example, as well as the poetry and tumultuous biography of George Gordon Byron contributed decidedly, each in its specific way, to the decline of the traditional male hero prototypes inherited from the Greco-Roman antiquity. More recently, in the postwar pop culture, new types of rebellious and socially inadequate male heroes emerged, illustrated in cinema by iconic figures such as James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* (1967). See “Post-Heroism?” (2017), *Queen's Quarterly, The Free Library (thefreelibrary.com)*, retrieved Jan 10 2023 from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Post-Heroism%3f-a0488759305>

⁵ Castillo, M. (2017). “Société héroïque et société posthéroïque: quel sens pour l'action?” *Inflexions* 36: 29-37. <https://doi.org/10.3917/infle.036.0029>

system of collective security would slowly but surely eliminate military conflicts as means of solving international disputes, in favor of negotiated solutions. Other analysts go even further and argue that, in line with the precepts of the Enlightenment and Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy of practical rationality, post-heroic societies have succeeded in substituting "passion, sacrifice and honor" as key societal values with "prosperity, temporal pleasures and personal happiness."⁶ The diminishing role of the military in society has led to a redefinition of citizenship away from the sanctity of military duties and the supreme sacrifice for the fatherland to consumerism and the welfare state. It is argued that, since advanced societies managed to rule out war as means of solving inter-state relations, they do not *need* heroes or ultimate sacrifice in combat. Finally, to further substantiate the concept of post-heroic societies, other scholars advanced the concept of "post-heroic" or "servant" leadership, characterized by "empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship."⁷

Second, and equally importantly for our analysis, cultural historians point out that post-heroic societies do not revere heroes and their exceptional deeds anymore but the *victims* of conflicts and wars, a trend leading to a major transformation in memory politics "from heroization to victimization."⁸ This phenomenon was first manifest in Europe after 1945 and had at its forefront the postwar anti-Nazi trials and the transnational formation of the memory of the Holocaust.⁹ The collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War further stimulated this trend, leading to the emergence of novel manifestations of transnational or even continental and global forms of memory, built upon memories of traumatic histories and often emulating the Holocaust memory-formation. This trend stimulated campaigns of retroactive justice, further contributing to political or academic decolonization, the emancipation of marginalized groups, and the rehabilitation of past victims. At the same time, the blatant manipulation of the intense collective emotions associated with conflicts, traumas, and victimhood status created the ground for mimetic competition for symbolic capital and the rise of exclusivist nationalism, with an impact on both domestic and international politics. Recent scholarship explores, in particular, the contemporary rise of "victimhood nationalism" resting on a sharp dichotomy between victims and victimizers.¹⁰ Lim Jie-Hyun, for example, argues that the rise of competing memories of victimhood facilitated the formation of new

⁶ See Fallenangel, "The hero myth in a post-heroic society – seen from a Jungian view," [September 30, 2014](#)

⁷ See Škerlavaj, M. (2022). "What Is Post-Heroic Leadership and Why Do We Need It?" in *Post-Heroic Leadership*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham., https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90820-1_2. On the concept of heroic leadership, see Allison, S. T. & Goethals, G. R. (2013). *Heroic leadership: An influence taxonomy of 100 exceptional individuals*. London: Routledge.

⁸ Sabrow, M. (2011). "The Post-heroic Memory Society". In Blaive, M., Gerbel, C. & Lindenberger, T. (eds). *Clashes in European Memory: The Case of Communist Repression and the Holocaust* (Innsbruck and Vienna: Studien Verlag, 2011) 88–98, here 90.

⁹ On this trend, and its limits, see Zombory, M. (2017). The birth of the memory of Communism: memorial museums in Europe, *Nationalities Papers* 45 (6): 1028–1046; Kovács, É. (2018) Limits of Universalization: The European Memory Sites of Genocide, *Journal of Genocide Research* 20 (4): 490–509. See also Judt, T. (1992) The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe, *Daedalus* 121 (4): 83–118; Müller, J.W. (2010) "On "European Memory": Some Conceptual and Normative Remarks" in Pakier, M. and Stråth, B. (eds.), *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Memory*. New York – Oxford: Berghahn, 25–37; Stone, D. (2012) "Memory Wars in the 'New Europe.'" In Stone, D. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 714–731.

¹⁰ On the concept of victimhood nationalism, see mainly Jie-Hyun, L. (2022) *Global Easts Remembering Imagining Mobilizing*. New York: Columbia University Press. On theories of victimhood, see Jacoby, T. A. (2015). A theory of victimhood: Politics, conflict and the construction of victim-based identity. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43 (2): 511–530; and Rock, P. (2007) "Theoretical Perspectives on Victimisation". In Walklate, S. (ed.), *Handbook of Victims and Victimology*. Devon, 37–61.

transnational "memory communities" based on the intricate connections between collective mourning, anti-colonialism, and authoritarian populism.¹¹ These developments led to an unprecedented exacerbation of political polarization in consolidating but also established democracies. As Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning point out in *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*, the current political polarization between the progressive left and the populist radical right goes well beyond the traditional ideological cleavages between liberals and conservatives or between believers and atheists but are a confrontation between a new moral "victimhood culture" on the one hand, and a traditional "culture of dignity," on the other.¹² Furthermore, new perspectives from the field of international relations show that victimhood nationalisms have the potential "to legitimize the projection of grievances onto third parties, potentially sowing new conflicts."¹³

Structure and Organization of the Cluster

This cluster of essays explores the politics of history and memory after WWII in Europe and beyond it, with an emphasis on war, occupation, and genocide. The essays pay special attention to the main trends and paradigms in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, pointing out to the legacies of the communist politics of history, to the cleavage in historical memories between East and West, but also to attempts of forging a pan-European memory-culture.¹⁴

In the opening essay, "Moral Capital, Heroes and Victim Competition", Jean Michel Chaumont elaborates on the concept of "moral capital" first put forward in his work *The Competition of Victims* (1997). "Moral capital," Chaumont argues, can be subsumed under the general rubric of symbolic capital, as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu, but it is nevertheless a particular kind of capital: one the one hand, just like every type of capital, it serves as a kind of universal currency, whose values fluctuates on the marketplace of symbolic capital. On the other hand, however, it is a special, meritocratic type of capital, one that is accumulated through behavior patterns in certain limit situations. Chaumont focuses in particular on the prevailing modes of *production* of moral capital. He points out that at its origins, moral capital was generated by suffering and resistance to injustice, followed by acknowledgment and rehabilitation in post-dictatorship situations; more recently, however, the moral capital of suffering and victimization has been detached from the idea of instant political "rewards", the emphasis being moved from the meritorious behavior of the victim to the criminalization of the perpetrators' actions. To substantiate these claims, Chaumont focuses on main case studies: the communist anti-fascist resistance in the Nazi occupied France,

¹¹ Jie-Hyun, L. & Rosenhaft, E. (2021). *Mnemonic Solidarity: Global Interventions*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57669-1>

¹² Keith, C. B. & Manning, J. (2018). *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions Safe Spaces and the New Culture Wars*. Cham Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³ Lerner, A. B. (2022) "The uses and abuses of victimhood nationalism in international politics", *European Journal of International Relations* 26 (1): 62-87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119850249>

¹⁴ For the East-West divide in the history of memory, see Blaive, M., Gerbel, C. & Lindenberger, T. (eds.) *Clashes in European Memory: The Case of Communist Repression and the Holocaust*. Innsbruck and Vienna: Studien Verlag, 2011; Ghodsee, K. (2014) "Tale of 'Two Totalitarianisms:' The Crisis of Capitalism and the Historical Memory of Communism", *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 4 (2): 115-42; Dujisin, Z. (2015). Post-Communist Europe: On the Path to a Regional Regime of Remembrance? In Kopeček, M. & Wciślik, P. (eds), *Authoritarian Pasts, Liberal Democracy and Intellectual History in East Central Europe after 1989*. Budapest, New York: CEU Press.

the Holocaust of the Jews during World War II, and discourses on the Ukrainian *holodomor*. Based on common patterns observed in these case studies, Chaumont concludes that the “survivor” of atrocities is the “new hero” of the post-heroic society, rather than combat heroes.

In a remarkably complementary essay to that of Chaumont, Olha Ostrittchouk follows up on the example of the Ukrainian *holodomor* to illustrate the uses and abuses of victimisation as a “winning political strategy” for accumulated moral capital, an issue which was briefly addressed but not explicitly elaborated by Chaumont, who focused mostly on the modes of production of moral capital. Ostrittchouk points out that, in Western European democracies, the postwar trials of Nuremberg and Eichmann trials were not only instruments of transnational justice but also granted recognition and political legitimacy to the status of victim as a platform for identity claims. After the fall of communism, this pattern has been emulated in Central and Eastern Europe, as well, where “it has become fashionable to dress up as a victim.” The victimhood identity was further reinforced in these regions by the strong religious revival that followed the fall of communism and their collective rituals of mourning and repentance. Ostrittchouk points out to the potentially positive aspects of the new victim-centered memory culture, facilitating critical inquiries of the past, uncovering the crimes and abuses of the communist regimes, the restoration of historical justice and the rehabilitation of victims. But she highlights the dark side of these campaigns of victimization, as well, leading to exclusionary identity discourses, national messianism, and ideological polarization.

Markus Meckl explores the main traits of the Latvian national identity in the post-1991 independence period. He points out that the European pattern of investing victims—rather than heroic deeds—with a central symbolic role in the process of nation-building is amply evident in the case of Latvia - and the other Baltic States in general, I would add. Meckl shows that while during the nineteenth-century Latvia’s nation-building process relied on an extensive gallery of national heroes, in the post-independence period narratives of collective identity have not attempted to construct a new pantheon of national heroes but have instead highlighted the suffering the Latvians endured throughout their turbulent twentieth-century history, with a focus on World War Two and the decades-long Soviet occupation (1940/41 and 1944-1990). The new dominant metanarrative on the Latvian nation as a ‘victim of history’ has been expressed and disseminated in academic publications, in innumerable official speeches, monuments, and patterns of commemorations, and has been enshrined in the new “Museum of Occupation” opened in the national capital, Riga, in 1993.

Vukašin Zorić’s essay focuses on the Museum of Genocide Victims, a new cultural institution opened in Belgrade, Republic of Serbia, after the wars on the partition of Yugoslavia, with the mandate to research and nurture the memory of the victims of genocide committed against Serbs in World War II, but also the victims of the Holocaust and other victims of Nazism and Fascism. The article provides an ample overview of the politics of memory in Socialist Yugoslavia and in post-partition Serbia, centered on the multiple ways in which the memory of World War II is used by politicians to legitimize their political agendas by defining and redefining the meaning of heroism and victimhood. Zorić points out to the transformation of the narrative on memory in contemporary Serbia from heroization to the victimization of the Serbian nation. He points out to the multiple agencies behind this agenda, ranging from the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, but also the Serbian Progressive Party and Aleksandar Vučić, the current President of the Republic of Serbia.

Pandelis Kiprianos, Nektarios Stellakis, Thanasis Karalis and Sofia Kasola explore the ways in which the founding event of the modern Greek State, namely the Greek Revolution and the War of Independence

(1821–1828) is portrayed in academic history and in history textbooks and is then perceived in the Greeks' collective memory. In their introduction, the authors tackle the relationship between history and memory, and the political competition for public attention and recognition in the field of historical politics. They point out to a growing tension between academic and public history. As far as the image of the Greek Revolution and the War of Independence are concerned, for example, we are witnessing an ambivalent public perception: heroization, even if toned down, in the public field, but increasingly anti-heroic in academic texts. These two distinct perceptions coexist and “fuel” each other but they are also in conflict. The essay has the merit of highlighting the gap between public perceptions of history and academic research, and the important role school textbooks play in shaping long-lasting perceptions of historical events and in shaping collective memories.

In the final essay to the cluster, Constantin Iordachi uses the exceptional transnational biography of a Hungarian World War II veteran to highlight the concomitant existence of various–overlapping but also rival–transnational communities of memory in Central and Eastern Europe representing common events. Following the veteran's eventful and traumatic journey through Soviet Union, Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia/Serbia, Iordachi highlights the socially-constructed nature of complex notions such as heroes and victims and their constant change over time and space, at both official and grassroots levels. He also points out that official and grass-root notions are oftentimes in tension or even in overt contradiction. In the end, he alludes to the responsibility of transnational entrepreneurs of memory, be they scholars, journalist, politicians, or local community leaders, in giving representation to those who suffered abuses, in raising awareness of historical injustice and in rehabilitating victims.

Conclusions

Overall, the essays included in this cluster point out to the fact that societal discourses focusing on victims and victimizers, on the one hand, and on heroes and martyrs, on the other, are deeply entrenched in social, political, and religious traditions and have routinely served as tools of political mobilization and community-building. If used in the service of campaigns of civic justice and rehabilitations of victims of abuses and injustice, these discourses can foster patriotism, solidarity, and cohesion. Yet, as the contributions to this cluster amply demonstrate, there are many potential traps and dangers involved in the healing of historical traumas, and in the management of feelings of anger and demands of retroactive justice. Discourses of victimization, in particular, have a great potential to divide society into “us” and “them” by fostering historical mythologies based on vision of national uniqueness and on rigid black-and-white or good-versus-bad moral approaches, leading to political polarization and conflicts. For these reasons, public discourses need to foster a critical yet balanced approach to the past, by promoting campaigns of historical justice and rehabilitation to restore truth and justice without demonizing or dehumanizing various other segments of society or neighboring countries, perceived and constructed as enemies.

Russia's recent unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is a sober reminder that the combination of victimhood nationalism, social militarism, and authoritarianism leads almost inevitably to violent wars of aggression. Ukraine's response, and Europe's solidarity in general, have renewed traditional meaning of heroism, citizenship, and patriotism, refuting the image of post-heroic society by bringing again to the fore the image of citizens-in-arms fighting for democratic values. The bleak news is that, against over-

optimistic claims of the advent of the post-heroic society, war—even in its most conventional forms—is still an integral part of our modern, technologically-advanced world.

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Moral Capital, Heroes and Victim Competition¹⁵

Jean-Michel Chaumont

Introduction

What exactly do we mean when we say - and it has been said a lot in recent years - that victims have taken the place of heroes? It certainly does not mean that victims have become as *visible* in the public space as heroes once were. In terms of visibility, neither the heroes nor the victims are on a par with the stars of song, sport, television, modelling, and other celebrities who are "well known for their well-knownness", as Boorstin (1962) famously put it. From the strict point of view of their "visibility capital" (Heinich, 2012), it would even be truer to say that heroes and victims have been largely supplanted by media celebrities. But the latter do not have an important asset that heroes had and that victims now have, namely *moral capital*. It is this asset that is at stake in the victims' competition (Chaumont, 1997) and this text will focus on improving its definition as well as our understanding of its modes of production.¹⁶ For it seems that the mode of production of moral capital has been modified significantly over the last few decades, and we shall try to illustrate and analyze this evolution.

First, we will analyze the creation of moral capital during the Second World War using the archives of the French Communist Party (PCF) because it is the political party in France that benefited the most from the moral capital accumulated during the war. Such capital propelled the PCF to the rank of first party in France after the Liberation in 1944. We will see what normative raw materials were used to obtain victory on the "moral front" by focusing on two examples: the case of communist detainees in internment camps set up by the Vichy regime, and the case of French communist detainees in German concentration camps. We will also see how and why Jewish prisoners saw their moral capital melt away and the reactions that this melting away engendered.

Next, we will look at the new mode of production of moral capital, which was initially implemented more or less consciously to rehabilitate the victims of the Holocaust, but which has since been appropriated by many other victimized collectivities. By focusing on the claim for recognition of the man-made famine in Ukraine in 1933 as being a genocide, we will see the new formula for the production of moral capital and the new dynamics that it triggers.

From symbolic capital to moral capital

Before analyzing our first case study, let's take a closer look at what "moral capital" is.

¹⁵ Many thanks to Katherine Opello for her careful proofreading of the English version of this text.

¹⁶ Rereading excerpts from *The Competition of Victims* (1997), I was surprised to discover, after starting to write this text, that the notion of "moral capital" was already present, borrowed from Edward Alexander in an article significantly entitled "Stealing the Holocaust" published as early as 1980 in the journal *Midstream*. I had already identified this moral capital as one of the main issues in the competition of victims, but I had not elaborated the concept (nor had Edward Alexander) as I try to do in this text. In this sense, I am fortunately doing more than rehashing, even if I am reusing here several analyses already mobilized in *The Competition of Victims*.

French-language sociologists are accustomed to the concept of "symbolic capital" introduced by Pierre Bourdieu. Although moral capital can certainly be considered a variant of "symbolic capital", this concept has become such a "catch-all" (Heinich, 2012: 45) that its heuristic power has been reduced accordingly. We will therefore try to define it more precisely.

Following Heinich's example, let us begin by justifying the very literal use of the notion of "capital" in the concept of "moral capital": capital is defined as "a measurable, accumulable, transmissible, interest-earning, and convertible resource" (Heinich, 2012: 46). *Measuring* the moral capital of communist deportees after the Liberation in France would be done, for example, by comparing the large number of requests to testify about their experience with the small number of requests made at the same time to Jewish survivors. The gap was sometimes noticeable within the same family, where some members had been members of the Resistance and others had not. As Simone Veil wrote bitterly, "One of my sisters was deported to Ravensbrück for acts of resistance. As soon as she returned, she was invited in various forums, like many other resistance fighters, to speak about the resistance and the deportation, but this was never the case for my older sister, also deported to Auschwitz, nor for me. We were only victims, not heroes" (Veil, 1993: 698).

Moral capital is also *accumulable*, and the case of the French Communist Party is particularly striking here, because at the beginning of the war, the German-Soviet pact had considerably diminished its moral capital by making the PCF appear to be a traitor to the Fatherland, which justified its banning in the fall of 1939. It was the cumulative action of thousands of resistance fighters and communist prisoners, backed by the sacrifices of the victorious Red Army, that gradually allowed the lost capital to be reconstituted and then to increase considerably.

Moral capital can be *transmitted*, especially from individuals or small groups of individuals (for example, the "maquisards"¹⁷) to the communities they claim to belong to: sometimes compatriots, more often partisan collectivities such as the Communist Party. Even today, French communist leaders sometimes boast of being from the "Parti des Fusillés", even though there are undoubtedly many French citizens who no longer know what this term refers to. That moral capital *brings in interests* is not debatable: in this case it guarantees the PCF several ministerial positions in the first government of liberated France, and a large number of deputies and local elected officials. Finally, moral capital is *convertible*, as the previous example demonstrates: among other material and immaterial benefits, the moral capital conquered in the maquis and camps was converted after the war into electoral victories and high number of new Communist Party members.

We can therefore conclude that moral capital is, like other types of capital (economic, cultural, social, etc.) a resource that allows the holder -individual or moral person- to improve his¹⁸ position in the social hierarchy with the multiple advantages granted by such a position.

¹⁷ I quote from Wikipedia: ""Maquis" refers to both a group of resistance fighters and the place where they operated during the Second World War. Resistance fighters are nicknamed "maquisards", hiding in sparsely populated areas, forests or mountains. The name refers to a form of Mediterranean vegetation, the maquis, and even more to the original Corsican expression "to take the maquis" ("Piglià a machja"), meaning to take refuge in the forest to avoid the authorities or a vendetta, or to refer to the various armed resistances that have taken place on the island throughout history."

¹⁸ "His" of "her" of course. To facilitate the reading, I propose to keep the grammatical usage where "the masculine prevails" but it goes without saying that all that I say about heroes applies as well to heroines. The same goes for victims or executioners.

There is, however, a difference that distinguishes moral capital from the others. Whereas I can have and benefit from considerable economic capital without it being public knowledge, *moral capital exists only if it is recognized*. It can therefore only produce benefits among those who recognize it. It is therefore a potentially very vulnerable capital that cannot be invested everywhere.

The specificities of moral capital

Having thus determined that moral capital meets the definition of "capital", it is now necessary to evaluate the *specificities* that make it not just any kind of capital but "moral" capital. To do this, let us look at the *Letter to Communist Prisoners* written by the Central Committee of the Party in the spring of 1944. But first let us briefly contextualize the relevant passage of this long clandestine missive.

In the internment camps managed by the Vichy regime, the authorities requested that certain prisoners, particularly those who were communists, to sign a declaration of allegiance to Pétain to facilitate their release. Some suggested that by signing this document, that they did not really commit themselves to Pétain. Instead, they only had to *feign* denial of their Party in order to regain their freedom, their families and possibly even return to the resistance. But, the Central Committee of the Party warned, one should not be caught up in this trap because "to act as a renegade is not to lie to the Hitlerian enemy, it is to lie to one's own past of honor and devotion to the people, it is to try to undermine the *moral capital* of the Resistance organizations, to ruin their authority and prestige, it is to behave as a saboteur of the *moral front of the Resistance*, which is as important as the military front, the information front, etc. Whoever acts in this way behaves no more and no less than a 'donor'. The only difference is that instead of 'giving' a comrade or a group of comrades, he exposes, abandons and betrays his entire Party, as far as he can, paralyzing all those who fight for the sacred cause." (PCF, 1944)

Moral capital is thus a matter of "authority and prestige". As for the "moral front," which the PCF asserts is no less important than the other fronts, it exists among enemies and can therefore result in either defeat or victory. Defeat would be the consequence of the abandonment and betrayal of the Party, in this case through its denial. Betrayal would also mean, from the personal point of view of the renegade militant, "lying to one's own past honor", that is, dishonor.

We can already deduce that *treason* (allegiance to Pétain) and *cowardice* ("abandonment") are the normative qualities that reduce moral capital. They are "weaknesses of the will" and they belong to the moral register, that is good and evil¹⁹. The fact that this capital is fed by virtues justifies its being qualified as "moral". If betrayal and cowardice diminish it, we can suppose that on the contrary *loyalty* and *courage* are the positive qualities -the virtues- that allow it to be increased and accumulated. Accordingly, the *Letter to Communist Prisoners* (PCF, 1944) confirms this: "Communists know that, in the face of the supreme threat itself, there is only one possible attitude: that of Pierre Semard, J. Catelas, G. Péri and so many other *heroes*, making their death a powerful contribution to the *glory* and *authority* of their cause, growing their *Party* and their *Homeland* through their *sacrifice*, serving Communism and France to the end." Semard, Catelas, Péri died without disavowing the cause. They adopted the only possible attitude and their very death represents their "powerful" contribution "to the glory and authority" of the Communist Party and France for which they "sacrificed" themselves. Heroes die rather than deny, and as such, they set an example for those from whom

¹⁹ See Jon Elster (2007) whose title has been opportunely translated *Agir contre soi: la faiblesse de volonté*. By acting cowardly or by betraying, it is *against oneself* that one acts, against the ethical backbone that made you stand.

lesser sacrifices are demanded. The moral capital we are dealing with here is *heroic moral capital*. Let us note however that unlike the ancient heroes, Semard, Catelas and Péri did not die fighting on the battle field because they were executed: instead, they were martyrs. But the martyr does more than undergo -in which case, he would arouse pity without generating moral capital. Rather he *chooses* to undergo, proving through his sacrifice that it is worth dying for his cause. His behavior is exemplary: he inspires the other members of the collectivity and strengthens their resistance.

Thus, in the case of interned communist militants, a surreal scene was witnessed in December 1943: about twenty militants interned in the Pithiviers camp *refused to be released* unless the commandant publicly announced that they were liberated without having signed the slightest allegiance to Pétain. The commandant threatened to expel them *manu militari*, but they did not give in and the next day the authorities gave in to their demands. A witness stated that he did not know why these comrades had been designated, but "in any case, on December 8, at 2:00 a.m., the camp radio announced the names of these comrades, asking them to come to the office in order to be freed. The fellow prisoners did not show up and at 6 o'clock in the evening they negotiated their release with the camp director. The following day, the director publicly announced on the camp address system that all 20 internees would be unconditionally released. The next day at 5 p.m. the 20 expelled internees left the camp accompanied by all their comrades who testified to their confidence and their sympathy." (ADSD, 261J6/40)

Insofar as martyrdom is suffered, however, it places the martyr in the position of *victim*, hands tied behind the post or on the gallows in the case of the above-mentioned heroes. Martyrological victimization does not therefore generate less heroic capital than glorious death in combat. In both cases, moral capital increases or decreases according to the conduct adopted by the individuals, and is therefore *meritocratic* in nature. However, this ideal of meritocratic character must be nuanced because of the transmissible character of moral capital as we will see later.

To deepen our understanding of *heroic moral capital*, let us now turn to the lessons of a second set of examples drawn from the conduct of Communist and Jewish prisoners in German camps.

French communist prisoners in German camps

Our first relevant archival document was written in the Buchenwald camp on March 31, 1945, a few weeks before the German surrender. It is a handwritten notebook of 23 pages written by a member of a legitimate inquiry commission appointed by the clandestine "French Interests Committee" (CIF/Comité des Intérêts Français); its purpose was "to determine the existing moral climate and to situate as accurately as possible the value and the behavior of the French collective and, consequently, the authority enjoyed by this collective in the camp" (ADSD, 261J6/25). Clearly, the author establishes an explicit link of cause and effect between "the value and conduct of the French collective" (i.e., all the French prisoners considered to be patriots) and "the authority enjoyed by this collective in the camp." The author explains that in order to "enhance the value" of the French, a two pronged approach was necessary: one with regard to other nationalities, and in particular with regard to the German prisoners in positions of responsibility and the other with regard to the French themselves, so that their behavior would confirm the pleas made in their favor by their delegates: "Tirelessly, the Committee of French Interests and the communist section worked to destroy any prejudices or mistrust that might exist among the camp officials and the German section with regard to us. *They explained that our defeat, which was so rapid, was not proof of an alleged debasement,*

that France was still a great nation, *that the French were not dirty, thieving, lazy people*, that moreover *these arguments were of Hitlerian origin* and that it was necessary to stop seeing German comrades take them up. At the same time, efforts were redoubled to ensure that the overall attitude of the French collective could no longer be criticized, so that the assertion concerning our moral values could not be accused of being gratuitous, but that it would be confirmed by the facts. The French communist militants, whose conduct was to be irreproachable, tirelessly explained to the whole French collective that each Frenchman represented his country, *that it was through our words and our actions that our country would be judged*, and that this obliged us to severely condemn trafficking as well as personal and selfish schemes. It also required that we be disciplined, attentive to facilitating the work of our comrades in the interned administration, and concerned with maintaining good relations with comrades of other nationalities, and of course, remain united among ourselves."

It is important to underline the primary cause of the low value accorded to the "French collective" in Buchenwald in *early 1945* by the German prisoners: the rapid capitulation of France *in June 1940* - experienced as a cowardly betrayal by the German antifascists - that reduced their moral capital significantly. In addition, the conduct of some in detention left much to be desired: undisciplined, selfish, quarrelsome, dirty, they gave a bad reputation to the whole group. As a result, the French were "considered to be despicable people, whose fate did not matter much and who could be beaten, robbed and insulted". Faced with this deplorable situation, a *pedagogy* and a *practice* were necessary. Establishing a pedagogy meant refuting in words the denigrating judgments and making the German comrades aware that these were fascist prejudices that should not be adopted by enemies of fascism. It was also necessary to promote a *practice* attesting that the French were indeed much better than what was said about them. It was a matter of "demonstrating what we really are and what we are worth." The report does not detail the conduct adopted "after the launch of the counter-offensive intended to 'revalue' the French and improve their living conditions." Instead, it only mentions that it was a "long and difficult action".

The activity report appended to a biographical questionnaire dated June 8, 1946 from a communist activist confronted with a similar situation gives us an idea of what this could mean practically. (ADSD 261J6/28). Madeleine Laroche, born in 1919, a permanent member of the Party in the Grenoble region since April 1943, was transferred to the resistance military command of the southern zone in Lyon and arrested there in May 1944. She was deported in August and found herself in Beendorf, in a subcamp of the Neuengamme camp. It was a former salt mine that had been transformed into an underground factory. She tried to organize the French women "into a homogeneous group" with a "spirit of struggle". Setting an example, she refused to work one day, and the SS Blockführer crushed her hand. As a result, she suffered from a "crushed and stiff left index finger". But her unyielding refusal "*won the respect of the SS, [the] factory workers and [the] deportees*". It made *the honor of France* and our *courage* be recognized and held high, whereas on our arrival we were regarded as representatives of an inferior nation. This attitude had, on the other hand, the following practical results: In the camp: punishments became rarer for French women than for other prisoners, equitable distribution of food for us at least as much as for the others, whereas when we arrived in the camp the French women in particular were beaten, and provided with smaller quantities of food. At the factory: psychological effect of the Krauts and other foremen, especially following the joint refusal of all the French women to accept performance bonuses (which were translated into food

supplements). Results: the least arduous work was reserved for the French women and the tacit complicity of most of the Krauts or other Meisters (foremen) in slowing down production, and even in sabotaging the machines. This had an unexpected psychological effect on the SS Commandant of Neuengamme, who, in his astonishment, asked the French women to explain their refusal of the bonuses, without punishing them."

These examples clearly show that it is necessary to pay the sometimes high price to increase the heroic moral capital but it is translated immediately in material advantages for fellow detainees. In addition, it may result in the creation of an "aura" which benefits the communist cause and the moral person which represents it, the PCF.

Bernard Klieger's plea in favor of the Jews

As we mentioned earlier, while suffering alone can provoke pity, it is not enough to produce moral capital²⁰. But if the *conduct* of the suffering people is dishonorable, that is, if it shows a lack of loyalty, even pity can disappear. As is well known, non-Jewish prisoners were only brought into contact with Jewish prisoners in large numbers after the evacuation of Auschwitz and some other places where they were concentrated. At the end of the death marches and train journeys, which were hardly less deadly, the survivors were in a particularly degraded physical and moral state. Thus, wrote Dr. Fréjafon at Bergen-Belsen, the Jews "would have acquired all the sympathy of the Western prisoners who, in their misery, felt moved by an even deeper misery, if it were not for the excess of their submissiveness and the relentlessness with which they denounced each other." (Fréjafon, 1947: 47) In other words, they showed cowardly servility and betrayed each other, thus contravening the two norms of production of moral capital. Under these conditions, what was the likelihood that they could reevaluate themselves and to reconstitute, in retrospect, a moral capital likely to earn them a share of the aura enjoyed by the survivors of the camps after the Liberation?

A good example of this is the account of Bernard Klieger, an Austrian Jewish journalist deported from Belgium, survivor of Auschwitz and author of a testimonial published in 1946. Like Madeleine Laroche, but detained in a Buchenwald subcamp, he was forced to do hard labor in an underground factory. Not only were the working conditions appalling, but there was also a lack of food and the "Stubendienst" - that is, the deputies of the head of the block - stole so much that the latest arrivals never received food. The daily distribution of soup thus resulted in violence among the prisoners, to the great amusement of the Stubendienst. As Klieger admits, "in our desire to live, we forgot and trampled on the most elementary and primitive laws of comradeship; we delivered others to death to prolong our own lives. There is no point in trying to hide it, we have behaved in an unworthy, shameful way, we have behaved like miserable "bastards"! (Klieger, 1946: 157) The "elementary laws of comradeship" are violated, i.e., the destruction of the normative foundations of moral capital. Since the conditions of survival described prohibit any *practice of solidarity* that could change the image of the Jewish prisoners, Klieger is left with the possibility of *pedagogy*, and he devotes five pages to a long plea explaining to the non-Jews that, as organizers of the famine, they are responsible for the lamentable state to which the Jews had been reduced, and that they themselves would not have acted otherwise if they had been subjected to the same treatment. One finds in

²⁰ In addition, despite the *sympathy* it may provoke, the status of "pitiful victims" is hardly enviable. As proof, in the preface written by Simone de Beauvoir, to Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka* in 1967: "All the accounts Steiner had read presented the millions of Jews who died in the camps - (...) - as *pitiful victims*: should they not have refused this role?"

his plea a more highly developed version of the same kind of arguments made by the Comité des Intérêts Français in Buchenwald (see the analysis in *La concurrence des victimes* (1997: 69-75). It is in keeping with older apologies in favor of the Jews or Black slaves, which blamed their oppressors for their moral decline²¹. But how then could the Jews claim a share of the moral capital that other collectivities were able to accumulate during their deportation²²? Klieger tries to do so in the epilogue of his book, dejectedly noting that after a triumphant return among the others²³, the Jewish survivors were left behind: "Our Jewish people has just lived through the cruelest chapter in its history. Six million Jews have *fallen*! They had done nothing to deserve this fate! The least we survivors can ask for is recognition of the *sacrifices* we and our dead have made! All we ask is that we too be granted a modest place in the sun! Let us never forget what we Jews have endured and let us weigh what we could be blamed for against what we have behind us! The righteous, the one who wants to see, will see which side of the scale will be tilted lower" (Klieger, 1946: 191).

This excerpt is remarkable because it illustrates the difficulty of claiming a moral capital based on suffering alone. Klieger tries rather clumsily to suggest that six million Jews "fell" - implying that they were fallen heroes. But they did not "fall", they were victims of an enterprise of mass destruction. The same goes for the reference to the "sacrifices" made. The object for which the survivors and the dead sacrificed themselves is missing, which alone could justify the use of the word "sacrifice". They died neither for communism, nor for the fatherland, nor even for Judaism. As Klieger notes, "they had done nothing to deserve this fate" and this is precisely what the communist, anti-fascist or patriotic prisoners reproached them for. Moreover, since their conduct in adversity had not allowed them to accumulate moral capital, it is not surprising that, as Simone Veil deplored, they were not invited to the same table as others after the war.

It is known that in order to refute the pseudo-theory of Jewish cowardice - as expressed in the phrase "they let themselves be led to death like sheep to the slaughterhouse" - two discursive strategies were deployed. First, some argued - citing the Warsaw ghetto uprising- that the Jews had fought like lions (Meckl, 2008). However, others argued that they had not been the only "sheep" - almost no real revolt having taken place in the camps (Wellers, 1949; 1966; 1985). The two arguments were perfectly contradictory, so they did not persuade, and it was not until a quarter of a century after the war that a new and more favorable advocacy pedagogy began to take shape. This is the subject of our next section. But first let's summarize what we have learned about the creation of heroic moral capital thus far.

²¹ See Chaumont (2018). Moral decay only *apparent*, their later advocates soon said: while Abbé Grégoire (1988) or Victor Schoelcher (2018) admitted the decay (blaming it on their oppressors), Emil Fackenheim for the Jews (1982) or Aimé Césaire (2018) for the slaves will argue later that behind the *apparent* servility, resistance was manifested through an unabashed celebration of life.

²² While recalling that this moral capital was not only not recognized by everyone, but that it was even sometimes the subject of strong contestation: thus Rassinier (1950), a former deportee, would not have words strong enough to denounce the conduct of the communists in the camps. In the France of that time, his indictment of the Communists had almost no echo. This was the beginning of a path that would lead him to negationism.

²³ "When we were picked up by bus at the Bourget airport and taken to the Lutetia hotel during our trip to Paris, we really believed that the world would never forget *that we were martyrs*. In tight rows, shoulder to shoulder, the Parisians formed a hedge. From the sidewalks, from the boulevards that we walked, the enthusiastic jubulations of the crowd went up towards us. The houses were decorated, in short, *we were received as one would receive an Eisenhower, a Montgomery, a Churchill!*" (Klieger, 1946: 190).

Recap of heroic moral capital

We began by verifying that moral capital did indeed meet the definition of "capital". Like other types of capital, it represents a "measurable, accumulable, transferable, interest-bearing and convertible resource" that modifies the position of its holders in the social hierarchy, either upwards or downwards. It is a factor of distinction that valorizes or devalues depending on whether its balance is positive or negative.

It can be qualified as "moral" insofar as it is moral virtues - admittedly problematic but nevertheless generally considered as such - are its raw material: the practice of loyalty and courage increases it, the practice of treason and cowardice decreases it. The rather rudimentary (but very demanding) moral system that governs it is unified by a central reference point: honor. By questioning the courage (of putting one's life in danger for the cause) or the loyalty (of the member to the group to which they belongs), one's honor is offended. The disloyal member is dishonored and faces banishment. The loyal member (only) does their duty, and the heroes who make the supreme sacrifice will be honored. As loyalty is meaningless in the absence of belonging to a group (Patria, Party, religion, tribe, mafia, etc.), moral capital always concerns a collectivity and its members -for example France and the French- placed under the admiring or contemptuous gaze of other collectivities. The concerned collectivities can be intertwined (the party in the fatherland). The distinction friends/enemies is fundamental here. The negative judgment of enemies is predictable and leaves one indifferent, but it matters when it comes from friends and allies. When the judgments of friends are contaminated by the vision of enemies (the "Hitler prejudices"), apologetic pedagogies are required.

Moral capital is meritocratic and produced by the regular demonstration of courage and loyalty by the members of the collective. Occasional heroic acts - such as Madeleine Laroche's refusal to work and her stoicism in the face of the resulting violence - can boost its production, but it is the regular conduct of the members of the group that is the most decisive. The notion of meritocratic character must however be nuanced as a consequence of its transmissibility to the present and future members of the collectivity. Its moral capital, positive or negative, always precedes it as well as the advantages or disadvantages associated with it. One can therefore suffer the consequences of degraded capital without having had anything to do with its degradation, or the opposite²⁴. In terms of individualistic morality, it is a shocking aspect of the morality of honor that one must answer for acts that one has not committed. Responsibility is collective and extends to all the members of the collectivity both synchronically and diachronically.

The benefits or disadvantages associated with membership in such and such a collectivity are both instantaneous (increased capital translates into direct improvements in the chances of survival in the camp) and deferred: the aura of a collectivity remains long after the circumstances that gave rise to it. Some members may unduly avail themselves of it (for example, a militant who refused solidarity while incarcerated will nevertheless benefit after the Liberation from the respect accorded to communist deportees), while authentic heroes will remain modest in their obscurity. Increasing moral capital may be a conscious objective, especially when the group is proselytizing and seeking to win new adherents to its cause.

Heroic moral capital can go to members of a victimized group if the victimization is endured with courage and loyalty. The martyr then becomes an exemplary figure who is no less heroic than the fighting hero.

²⁴ Cf. Finkelkraut A. (1980: 18): "Others had suffered, and I, because I was their descendant, reaped all the moral benefits."

However, suffering alone is not enough to produce heroic moral capital. Devoid of any sacrificial meaning, it only arouses non-rewarding pity.

Transition: Rehabilitation of the victims of the Holocaust

In the mid-1960s, the moral balance of the holocaust was unchanged, and at a meeting of Jewish intellectuals in New York, Elie Wiesel could still ask as a matter of course why "do we admittedly think of the Holocaust with shame" (Wiesel, 1967: 288)

It should be noted that from the point of view of the creation of moral capital, the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 did not bring any notable changes. Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor of the trial, did not hide his intention to call as witnesses many Jewish survivors who would give proof of their resistance during the war. He thereby demonstrated that the refutation of the accusation of cowardice was still the big issue of the moment. The strategy was no more successful than its predecessors, as shown, for example, by the testimony of Abbe Kovner, one of the leaders of the abortive Jewish uprising in the Vilna ghetto. Far from exalting Jewish resistance, he emphatically sought to answer the "question that haunts us in this courtroom: how come they did not resist?"²⁵ (Kovner, 1961)

Similarly, in France, in 1966, inspired by a text by the same Abbe Kovner on the same topic of cowardice (1964), Jean François Steiner published *Treblinka*, which triggered a very serious debate among the survivors of the deportation about the conduct of the deportees in general, and of the Jewish victims and members of the Sonderkommandos in particular: Had they betrayed? Had their revolt in Treblinka in August 1943 redeemed their treason? The search for a heroic moral capital still animated Steiner and many of the participants in the debate²⁶.

In New York the following year, Elie Wiesel - who had commented harshly on the French controversy -, Emil Fackenheim and a few others took an argumentative path that went against what had been tried until now: "I believe in the necessity of restoring Jewish pride even in relation to the Holocaust. I don't like to think of the Jew as suffering. I prefer thinking of him as *someone who can defeat suffering* - his own and that of others. *For his is a messianic dimension*: he can save the world from a new Auschwitz. As Camus would say: one must create happiness to protest against a universe of unhappiness. But one must create it. And we are creating it. We were creating it. *The Jews got married, celebrated weddings, had children within the ghetto walls*. Their absurd faith in their non-existent future was, despite everything, *af al pi chen*, an affirmation of the spirit. So, pride is theirs; it is not ours. Not yet." (Wiesel, 1967: 291)

The bet was daring: to take pride in the perseverance of an apparently normal life (that is, to celebrate weddings, to have children) while imprisoned in the ghettos. It was well what many authors - including Wiesel himself in *La nuit* (1958)- had considered to be the escape into illusion, the first step in the spiral of survival at any price which would melt their moral capital. Instead wasn't it time for resistance? Bruno

²⁵ A survey of Israeli youth conducted shortly after the trial showed that "thousands of Israeli high school and college students who pupils and students who had visited the Warsaw Ghetto exhibit in the settlement's museum [in a kibbutz established by former Jewish partisans] showed a strong sense of guilt and inferiority because of belonging to a people that were destined to slaughter and went to slaughter" (Krug, 1963: 142).

²⁶ A very well documented book exists on this subject (Moyn, 2005); it suffers, however, from the major defect of not having understood anything about the stake of the polemic. For a detailed analysis of it, see (Chaumont, 2017)

Bettelheim for instance did not have words harsh enough to castigate what he pejoratively called the "ghetto mentality" and its "adherence to the philosophy of business as usual" (Bettelheim, 1991: 316)²⁷. A few years later, Wiesel found an ally in Terence des Pres (1976), the young author of a seminal book at the time: *The Survivor. Anatomy of life and death in Concentration Camps*. The latter, engaged in a polemic with Bettelheim, sought to show that the latter was in the grip of an "old heroic ethic" which, in the camps, had proved its obsolescence. He felt that Bettelheim and many others were guilty of "blaming the victims" and sought to show that in the context of the camps, resistance and courage had changed in meaning: *resistance meant surviving as long as possible, courage meant persevering in existence and not exposing oneself to a useless death*.

It was Emil Fackenheim's task to bring the argument full circle. Since, under the *unique* conditions of the Holocaust, resistance meant trying to survive as long as possible, *all Jews were resisters*. There were no longer insurgents on one side and "passives" on the other; all *celebrated life*: "The Nazi logic of destruction meant to drive the Jewish people into self-loathing and suicide. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a unique affirmation-unique except only for similar, less known uprisings-of Jewish self-respect. (...) What is more, since it was a defiance even of honorable suicide, it was also, and at the same time, during the long, terrible weeks that it lasted, *a unique celebration of Jewish life, and thus of life itself* (...). It emerges, therefore, that the armed Jewish resistance in the Holocaust-world belongs less closely with other European resistance movements than with the prayers of the Hasidim, the solitary struggle of Pelagia Lewinska²⁸ and the mothers who gave birth to children. The Nazi logic of destruction was an assault on the Jewish people without precedent in history. Jewish resistance in all the above forms, all interrelated, was equally unprecedented." (Fackenheim, 1982: 127).

"Unique" became a much-used word: a unique celebration of Jewish life, a unique Jewish resistance, an unique Jewish suffering... For Pastor Roy Eckardt, the word "unique" was not even strong enough: they decided that it was more appropriate to speak of the "unique uniqueness" of the Holocaust. (Eckardt, 1974). Borrowed from *theology*²⁹ to describe the experience of the victims, uniqueness was progressively transposed to the *profane* field of the description of the historical event itself. Given as a matter of course for religious Jews - but only for them - because of the divine election, uniqueness became a claim that was (wrongly) supposed to be empirically demonstrable. Everyone had his own argument, but no one succeeded in making a convincing one. A quarter of a century later, one cannot say that the demonstration has been made. To see the drop in the number of publications on the uniqueness (or not) of the Holocaust, it seems instead that the polemic has become obsolete. Even more so than in the case of the polemics about the supposed cowardice of the Jews, it won't be long before it becomes impossible to understand why so

²⁷ For the same reasons, he deplored the admiration for Anne Frank's family. Anne Frank occupies a special place: the very embodiment of innocence, she was as it were sanctified, and her fate assured the Jewish victims of an enduring outpouring of sympathy that was the closest thing to, but not the most, heroic moral capital.

²⁸ The reference to the work of Pelagia Lewinska (1945) a Polish communist Jewess who wrote the first testimony on Auschwitz published in France, illustrates both the influence of Terence de Pres on Fackenheim, since it was in *The Survivor* that Fackenheim discovered Lewinska, and the aberrant interpretation that Fackenheim makes of Lewinska, whose purpose was precisely to oppose the resistant minority (Jewish or non-Jewish) to the mass of "passive" detainees, who no longer respected themselves. Similarly, how can he speak of the refusal of honorable suicide when it was performed by Anielewicz and his friends?

²⁹ See for instance the last lines of Eckardt's article (1974:35): "The Holocaust is uniquely unique because it is *metanoia*, the climatic turning-around of the entire world. Within the Holocaust the agents of the Devil, *The Deputy*, bring his work to consummation. In this sense the history of man comes up to a fateful watershed. But so does the history of God."

many passions have been invested in it. We shall soon see that other questions have become more pressing, even if they still bear the scars of earlier battles.

The assertion of the uniqueness and incommensurability of the Holocaust to any other past, present or future event was bound to provoke a reaction from other categories of victims of National Socialism and more generally from other categories of victims in history. The trigger of victim competition was pulled, and it would completely shift the locus of controversy. It was no longer a question of the more or less heroic conduct of the victims, but of the more or less genocidal characterization of the events. A new factory of moral capital was set up whereby far from being "a shameful chapter of Jewish history, one that should best be forgotten" (Krug, 1963: 142), the Holocaust became a precious "moral capital" that had to be protected against "theft" (Alexander, 1980).

The new factory of moral capital

For at least the last two decades of the 20th century, sterile and bitter polemics raged in the United States and in Europe between "the" Jews (erroneously homogenized into a unanimous whole) and "the others". Even though for some the uniqueness was better seen as an "axiom" (Novick, 1999: 14) and a "distasteful secular version of chosenness" (Schorsch, 1979: 39³⁰), the struggle for recognition first took on the *appearance* of historical controversies in which, with macabre accounts and characteristics to back them up, Armenians, Gypsies, homosexuals, Ukrainians, anti-fascist resistance fighters, descendants of slaves, descendants of the first peoples on the American continent, Palestinians, representatives of formerly colonized peoples, feminists, etc., never ceased to produce arguments to make the point that what they had undergone was as worse as - or even worse than - what the Jews had undergone. In opposition, a seemingly united front of Jewish intellectuals flanked by a few non-Jewish allies deployed a battery of hackneyed and largely contradictory arguments to prove the contrary: that there was never any question of denying the gravity of what "the others" - a residual category - had endured, but always one or another characteristic made the Holocaust an event *distinct* from its competitors, and the pretenders to the title should, in their view, be dismissed. The positions held - almost in the warlike sense of the word - could vary significantly. One conceded other genocides but not other holocausts (Bauer, 1980), another conceded massacres but not other genocides (Katz, 1994; 2019) ...

As the qualification of "genocide" thus became a major issue, a new shift in the arena of the debates occurred: they became pseudo-legal since the notion of "genocide" has been included in international criminal law since the 1948 Convention. The debate was legal in nature, but it was not necessary to be a jurist to take part in it. As for uniqueness, everyone had their own definition and especially their own opinion. In the wake of this, the notion of "crime against humanity" became in turn, during the Barbie trial in Lyon in 1987 for example, the object of more or less exclusive monopolies. Some argued that only the

³⁰ It is worth quoting at length from Ismar Schorsch, then the provost and professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, whose fears were confirmed later on : "Like the term 'first', unique is a description that responsible historians tend to employ only in a restricted context. Used indiscriminately, it is a *throwback to an age of religious polemics* where commitment was largely a function of uniqueness, and it deserves to be buried with those polemics. Unfortunately, our obsession with the uniqueness of the Holocaust smacks of a distasteful secular version of chosenness. We are still special -by virtue of Hitler's paranoia. If the claim is *historically* unproductive, it is *politically* downright *counterproductive*. It impedes genuine dialogue, because it introduces an extraneous contentious issue that alienates potential allies from among other victims of organized human depravity." (Schorsch, 1981: 39)

Jews had been persecuted for what they were, and therefore only they were victims of a crime against humanity. In a total reversal of the situation in the immediate post-war period, the Jewish victims now had precedence and wanted to dismiss the Resistance "victims" from the tribunal and from the platform it provided for witnesses. The resistance fighters had given the Germans reasons to persecute them, whereas the Jews had done nothing, and therefore did not "deserve" to be persecuted. Was this not the essence of the crime against humanity? Didn't the Armenians on the other hand give the Turkish regime some reason to persecute them? Only victims as innocent as the Jews could claim the title of victims of crimes against humanity without a statute of limitations. The basis of the ancient stigma - having done nothing to (defend the homeland or fight fascism) - had metamorphosed into the basis of a singularity (being persecuted for what one is rather than for what one does) which alone gave access to the title of "victim of a crime against humanity" and to the privileges attached to it. Not only did the Jewish survivors eclipse the Resistance survivors in the public and media space, but they also benefited from financial reparations. Of course, this only served to increase the attractiveness of a kind of unprecedented moral capital that other actors also felt entitled to.

The example of the Holodomor

Like the Armenians, the Ukrainians did not wait until the 21st century to seek official third-party recognition of the atrocities they suffered. Although it must be put into perspective and contextualized, the need for recognition of victims is not an unprecedented phenomenon, even if it has long remained insufficiently conceptualized by philosophy and the social sciences. The states, on the other hand, were very sensitive to these issues of recognition. In Belgium as well as in France the survivors of patriotic deportation were distinguished from the survivors of "racial" deportation. Considered as equal in suffering, they were entitled to the same material benefits, but only the deported resistance fighters were entitled to the honorary title because they suffered in the service of their country.

The Ukrainian case well illustrates the rise in power of the victims, the decline of the heroes, the competition of the victims and the contemporary creation of moral capital. The Ukrainian example is one of many manufactures of contemporary moral capital, and in countries such as Belgium, we know almost nothing about the debates and controversies at the end of which the "Holodomor Genocide" has been promoted as the founding event of the new Ukraine, whose independence was recognized in 1991. This means that moral capital is being invested simultaneously on several national and international stages, and that each one obviously has its own specificities and issues. Currently in Belgium, the supposed rightful beneficiaries are claiming moral capital generated by colonization plus an "hidden holocaust"³¹. In France, the moral debt of slavery is added to that of colonization. It is also possible that moral capital is usurped. Thus the moral heritage of the abolitionist struggle (Brown, 2006) against the slave trade in the first part of the 19th

³¹ See Hochschild (1998) and, on the relationship between the Holocaust and this "forgotten Holocaust", see De Mul (2011 : 589) : "Hochschild indeed refers to the colonial atrocities the Congo Free State as a 'forgotten Holocaust'. While comparisons, juxtapositions, and analogies emphasize that the two catastrophes somehow alike, they are, to Hochschild's mind, perceived and in dissimilar ways in the present: while the Jewish Holocaust remembered, the colonial genocide in the Congo is forgotten." Let us note that there is currently in Belgium a federal parliamentary commission on the "colonial past" where the "hidden genocide" is discussed at length. Thanks to Valérie Rosoux, expert of the commission, for confirming this fact. (See <https://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/showpage.cfm?section=/comm&language=fr&cfm=/site/wwwcfm/comm/com.cfm?com=10219>)

century was largely appropriated at the end of the 19th century by militants fighting against "white slavery". In a future article, we will focus on other contemporary examples of victim competition and this phenomenon of undue appropriation.

Regarding the case of Ukraine, I will draw on Olha Ostriitchouk's remarkable book (2013), *Ukrainians Facing Their Past. Towards a better understanding of the East/West divide*. In addition to expressing my gratitude for her careful rereading of this text, I would like to pay tribute to her foresight: better than anyone else, she anticipated that the wars of memory could one day turn into wars altogether. Even if other factors also intervene, the present unfortunately proves her right.

The fall of the heroes of the "Great Patriotic War"

It was at the end of the de-Stalinization process that Brezhnev instituted the commemorations of the "Great Patriotic War" in 1965. Once the "cult of personality" and the "excesses" of Stalinism had been duly denounced, what remained was a Stalin who won a fight to the death against "fascist barbarism", the one that President Putin still uses to justify the invasion of "Nazi" Ukraine. Until the collapse of the USSR, the commemorations of the heroic battles of the glorious Red Army monopolized the public space under Communist rule: "The memories of the combatants were massively collected and used to feed countless films and novels; and the veterans themselves were regularly invited to schools and workplaces to tell the youngest about their exploits, thus contributing to the revival of a legendary, embellished past, perfectly in line with the official narrative and where victimization had no place." (Ostriitchouk, 2013: 304) In Ukraine as in other Soviet republics and "brother countries", cities as well as the countryside were adorned with memorials visited each year during highly choreographed ceremonies and, in the opinion of Ostriitchouk, well received by the population.

With independence, however, the revision of the past, which had already been underway for several years under the aegis of the Ukrainian branch of the *Memorial* Association, gained momentum. May 9, 1945, far from signifying liberation, became the beginning of the reign of another occupation, by another totalitarianism. The veterans of the Soviet army gradually lost their status as heroes and could only be counted among the countless victims of Stalinism, cannon fodder in a German-Russian war that was not theirs. Of course, this revival did not go without arousing strong resistance from their associations and contributed to reinforcing the divisions between the West of Ukraine, mostly willing to promote nationalist struggles, and the East, mostly attached to the communist heritage.

In France and Belgium, a similar deterioration of the moral capital attached to the communist resistance occurred with the publication of the "Gulag Archipelago" (Solzhenitsyn, 1973). It was recalled that the associations of deportees under Communist rule had put all their moral credit in the 1950s into denying that concentration camps existed in the Soviet Union. Thus, when David Rousset, a survivor of Buchenwald, suggested in 1949 that a commission composed of former deportees investigate the Siberian camps (Rousset, 1990), he was subject to a large-scale smear campaign (Copfermann, 1991). Famous members of the communist resistance such as Marie Claude Vaillant-Couturier or Marcel Paul declared that: "(...) David Rousset did not shrink from the monstrosity of trying to create confusion between the Nazi camps in which we lived and these corrective labor camps which are the honor and pride of the Soviet government and people." (Paul, 1950: 1) At the time such statements could be made without provoking a negative backlash among supporters. Thirty years later, this would no longer be the case, and the moral capital of the anti-

fascist resistance fighters would be greatly diminished to the benefit of the "racial deportees". These deportees fought only for their survival and escaped the delayed consequences of dubious commitments. Here too the innocence of the victims, after having been a black mark or a disadvantage, became an asset. The demand for recognition of the genocide

The history of the recognition of the murderous famine³² of 1932-1933 as genocide is complex, but a simplification is possible to illustrate the contemporary creation of moral capital. First of all, it should be emphasized that this is still a work in progress because official recognition has not been achieved everywhere. To date, some twenty countries have taken the step of recognizing this famine as genocide, and the proponents hope more countries will follow. Secondly, and most importantly, it should be noted that although the claim for the recognition of the famine is almost contemporary with the famine itself, this claim had neither the same objectives nor the same actors. Obviously, there could be no question of claiming the recognition of a "genocide" for the simple reason that the word -which was coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin (1944)- did not yet exist.

More or less until the independence of Ukraine in 1991, the memory of the famine survives almost exclusively in the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada and the United States. At the beginning of the 1930s, this diaspora is strong of several tens of thousands of individuals originating for the majority from the west of the current Ukraine. The majority were nationalist and fiercely anti-communist, and they tried in vain to provide humanitarian aid during the famine but came up against both the denial of the Soviet authorities and the minority of Ukrainian migrants who supported the Soviets. In the following years, the famine became a powerful motive for denouncing the malicious neglect of the Communist regime and pleading the nationalist cause, but the advent of the National Socialist regime and, from 1941 onwards, the USSR's status as an ally in the Second World War, left the nationalist cause without much external support.

The Cold War increased the audience for the nationalists, but both the memory of the massacres of Polish civilians in Volhynia and that of the Ukrainian SS division Halytchyna tainted their cause. From the postwar period, diaspora organizations subsidized Lemkin's research on the history of genocide, but despite the use of his brief set of notes on the famine today, it is remarkable that his most explicit text on the question - perhaps communicated orally at the New York commemorations of the 20th anniversary of the famine in 1953 - was never published by his sponsors (Lemkin, 1953). The question of whether the Great Famine was "genocide" was clearly not as important as it is today.

It was not until the 1980s that the diaspora claimed a categorization of the events. More than the label of "genocide", what was passionately debated in North America in the eighties was whether or not other victimized groups could claim equivalence with the Holocaust. The very name Holodomor, a term modeled after the word "holocaust", testifies to this search for equivalence. According to a common polemical topic at the time, the famine took thus its place in the growing series of "hidden", "forgotten" or "unknown" holocausts in history: the holocaust of the Congolese by the King of the Belgians Leopold II, the persecution of homosexuals by the Nazis, the holocaust of the indigenous peoples by the Americans, the holocaust of

³² Today, the number of victims in Ukraine is estimated at 4 million, 1.5 million in Kazakhstan and the same number in Russia in the North Caucasus (the Kuban region populated mainly by Ukrainians), that is to say 7 million, almost all peasants. Unlike previous famines, climatic conditions had nothing to do with it and it was the policy of forced collectivization that was the cause. For a recent historical review, see Nicolas WERTH (2020). It should be noted that in Kazakhstan no particular commemoration is linked to it (which somewhat relativizes the universality of the "need" of the victims to be recognized).

the Gypsies, the holocaust of the South Sudanese Christians by the North Sudanese Muslims, the holocaust of the Channel Islanders abandoned to the Nazis by the British, the holocaust of the children of the indigenous peoples in Canada, etc. Samantha Power even coined the term "holocaustize" in 1999 in reference to these connections to which, of course, the defenders of the uniqueness of the Holocaust were fiercely opposed (Power, 1999).

It was also in the 1980s that British historian Robert Conquest's book *Harvest of Sorrow* (1986) was published, the first important scholarly work on the Ukrainian "man-made famine". Commissions and hearings took place in the U.S. Congress and the extent of the tragedy was gradually revealed to a wide audience. A few years later, shortly before independence, the link was established between the diaspora and their partners in Ukraine. The collection of survivors' testimonies is organized, in particular thanks to the Manyak couple³³ and the holodomor is quickly elevated to the rank of national tragedy, commemorated for the first time in 1993. Monuments were erected throughout the country competing with the monuments to the glory of Soviet heroes. While the young Ukrainian nation adopted a nation-victim identity (Ostriitchouk, 2009), the holodomor of 1932-1933 is cast as part of a longer series of famines blamed on the Russian occupiers: the term "holodomor" is now used in the plural.

Even if the institutionalization of the Holodomor celebrations sometimes provokes reactions in the East, it should not be forgotten that these memorial battles leave a large part of the population indifferent. The economic situation of the country is so catastrophic that its population has other things to worry about. In 2005, following the Orange Revolution, President Yushchenko was elected. This time, the political-memorial challenge was no longer to validate the equivalence between the Holocaust and the Holodomor, but to have the latter recognized as a genocide. The following year, the parliament decreed that it was a genocide. The regime then worked to ensure that other countries did the same, as recognition by third parties remains a necessary condition for the existence of moral capital³⁴. Intellectuals, historians and publicists engaged in the debate and, as in other cases, lined up their arguments to validate the qualification of genocide, while official visits to Ukraine now began with a moment of silence in front of the imposing monument erected in Kiev. This was followed by a visit to the "memorial to the victims of the Holodomor" built in the former "Park of Glory" dedicated to the heroes of the Great Patriotic War. But the division of memory between East and West remains strong: two competing bills on the holodomor are in under consideration in parliament. The government-backed bill was finally passed, but only barely and with significant compromises.

Things were going well – the "forgotten genocide"³⁵ – was less and less so – when in 2010 Yanukovych, the pro-Russian prime minister, was elected president of the country and immediately reversed the trend. While the holodomor remained a strong symbol, the new government did not consider it a genocide, in return for which its Russian counterpart paid his respects at the memorial of the victims (Ostriitchouk, 2013: 295). In 2014, Yanukovych, claiming to be the victim of a Nazi coup d'état, was deposed and went into exile

³³ Cf. Ostriitchouk (2013: 258). Some of these testimonies have been translated into French: see Solokoff, 2000.

³⁴ So far, about twenty countries have declared it a genocide, but they are characterized by the presence of an organized Ukrainian community and it is therefore a somewhat biased recognition: among them the United States, Canada, the Estonian, Georgian, Lithuanian, Hungarian and Polish parliaments. It should be noted that Argentina, Australia and UNESCO have paid tribute to the victims without using the term. (Guillemoles, 2008: 291)

³⁵ According to the title of the film by the Frenchwoman Bénédicte BANET in 2013: *Holodomor. The Forgotten Genocide* (see <https://www.revue-projet.com/comptes-rendus/2013-11-film-holodomor-le-genocide-oublie/9349>)

in Russia. In 2015, a new campaign started in Brussels to promote the recognition of the Holodomor as genocide³⁶ ...

As Ohla Ostriitchouk herself pointed out to me, the evolution of the very name of the museum-memorial is very significant: "National Museum 'Memorial to the Victims of Holodomors in Ukraine'" (a phrase used until 2015), then renamed "National Museum of Holodomor Victims" (Holodomor is changed to singular and capitalized); to become, as of August 2019, the "National Museum of Holodomor-Genocide."

Two major changes seem notable to me: to the holodomors -which included the previous and subsequent famines (in 1947)- the authorities now prefer *the* Holodomor, singling out the famine of 1932/3 as a symbol of all the suffering and injustice suffered by the Ukrainian nation. The second change - the inclusion of the word "genocide" - attests to the extent to which it has become the key to the production of moral capital. The word "victims", present in the two previous designations is no longer even necessary as the word "genocide" presupposes it and above all widens it to all members of the collectivity: not only to the actual victims of the holodomors or of the Holodomor, but also, in this precise capacity, all members of the Ukrainian nation potentially threatened by the destruction of their collective identity³⁷.

In view of all of the above, it is significant that in early April 2022, while visiting a suburb of Kiev where civilians were executed, President Zelensky denounced genocide and called for the establishment of an international criminal tribunal. A few days later, President Biden agreed with him and described the Russian actions in Ukraine as "genocide". French President Macron, on the other hand, cautiously warned against "escalating words". President Zelensky declared himself "offended" by this refusal of recognition and invited Macron to come and see for himself the reality of the genocide in progress.

Let us remember that during the production of heroic moral capital, offense was felt when the loyalty of a resistance fighter was -unjustifiably in the eyes of the offended- questioned. Here it is the questioning of the relevance of the designations of the actions carried out by the enemy – i.e. "genocide"- that provokes the offense. One could not better summarize the evolution that has taken place.

The uses of victim moral capital

It is not easy to understand the moral sensibilities that are offended by the labeling of a hostile act. We can compare it to the moral pain that a rape victim would feel if the court convicted the accused of a lesser offence or granted extenuating circumstances. This would indeed add insult to injury. Those demanding recognition of the famine as "genocide" must likewise consider it an insult to the victims as well as their descendants to deny that they suffered the crime of crimes.

In genocide, as in rape, the violence suffered is out of all proportion to the conduct of the victims. Nothing they did or did not do can justify the aggression. In this case, it is the collective entity, the "Ukrainian nation", that is supposed to have been attacked and injured. Thus, anyone who, even if he was not present or alive at the time, participates in the Ukrainian national identity, can legitimately declare himself a victim

³⁶ See <https://www.brusselstimes.com/35671/campaign-launched-to-gain-international-recognition-for-the-holodomor-genocide>

³⁷ In an editorial coincidence, it is exactly in 2019 that the indefatigable Steven Katz published a collection of articles among one of which challenges the genocidal qualification to "this vast collective tragedy" (2019: 39) : « There can be no doubt about the horror of this vast collective tragedy. But even 5 million deaths do not constitute in this case the technical crime of genocide and, for all of its murderous ferocity and demographic enormity, the event is not comparable to the Holocaust. »

of the aggression, of a genocide in this case. It is deduced that the acts carried out in the name of the Ukrainian nation are acts of resistance *retrospectively* justified by its threatened survival. For instance, the engagement of Ukrainians in the SS division to fight against the "genocidal" Soviets or the murderous ethnic cleansing perpetrated in Volhynia to return their territory to the Ukrainians. The members of a nation that discovered itself more than half a century later to have been "genocided" had considerable extenuating circumstances since their own survival was at stake. In other words, victim moral capital confers *impunity* similar to that enjoyed by holders of heroic moral capital. Of course, this impunity only applies to those who subscribe to the genocidal interpretation of the past events: the actors of the nationalist struggle and the third parties who recognized the event as genocide. Their opponents or enemies will refuse to subscribe to it, or even deny the very existence of the facts, or will counter-attack by arguing that it was the nationalists who perpetrated genocide in Volhynia³⁸ or were accomplices to the Holocaust.

A collectivity can have many reasons to be proud: technical prowess, economic success, sporting achievements, artistic masterpieces, scientific discoveries, etc. Sometimes these reasons for pride are weighed against human suffering. Thus, it was sometimes said that the famine was the price to be paid for the industrialization of the Soviet Union, the price of progress. But to clear *moral* debts, it is better to use *moral* credit. Let us remember what Bernard Klieger wrote: "Let no one ever forget what we Jews have endured, and let us weigh what we could be blamed for against what we have behind us" (1946: 191). For any collectivity whose moral capital matters, a rough moral balance sheet exists, each time attached to certain relationships. For example, the moral balance sheet of Belgium in its relations with the United States is not at all identical to its balance sheet in connection with the Congo. If in the latter case the balance sheet is negative - one can almost speak of a moral bankruptcy - one understands the temptation to assert moral credit to restore the balance. This is why the accumulated moral capital, whether heroic or victimized, is often invested in dubious causes, such as the denial of the Soviet gulag or the rehabilitation of the Ukrainian SS. This is also why the instrumentalization of moral capital, because it was so dearly paid for, often leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of its drafters.

As we have seen, moral capital is closely associated with the us/them distinction, they the allies, they the enemies, they the third parties... With each "them", a moral balance sheet can be established, and it is up to the "us" to balance it, or even better to appear as creditors. This is the "foreign affairs" dimension of moral capital. But the "Home Office" dimension is no less important, and one can thus speak of the use of moral capital for identity purposes domestically.

The first rule of the morality of honor that was governing the conduct of resistance fighters was to be ready to sacrifice their lives to protect their groups threatened with extinction and therefore their collective identity. It was in the commemoration of these sacrificial heroes' actions that their descendants grounded their common identity. Veterans honored these ceremonies with their presence. In the new economy of moral capital, we find a similar effect of consolidating weakened collective identities. The commemoration of the Holodomor was supposed to bring all Ukrainians together in remembering the tragedy and the threat that the former executioners still pose to their existence. Here too, the restoration of the collective identity was left to the action of the executioners, with the important restriction that while the commemoration of the "tragedy" could have been consensual, the commemoration of the "genocide" had, on the contrary, a disintegrating effect. But in the case of Jewish identity, the reference to the Holocaust had the intended

³⁸ It will not surprise us to learn that the Polish parliament has decreed in 2016 that the massacres committed by Ukrainian nationalists from 1943 onwards were genocide.

overall unifying effect, and it can be predicted that after the current war, Ukrainian national identity will emerge stronger than before, for better or for worse.

Conclusion: from heroes to survivors

The question of the uses of moral capital is not the object of this text. Instead, we have focused on analyzing its creation. We can now summarize how it was produced today. The main difference with the manufacture of heroic moral capital is that the manufacture of victim moral capital is completely dissociated from the conduct of the victims: any meritocratic dimension has been eliminated. From now on, it is the legal description of the executioners' actions - and its recognition by third parties - that is decisive. "Genocide" is the qualification that generates the most moral capital, followed by "crime against humanity". It is therefore not surprising that these *qualifications* are the subject of such passionate controversy when the *conduct* of the victims was debated³⁹. These controversies are all the more aporetic since the definitions of the two emblematic crimes are still problematic and subject to scholarly debate. Manufacturers of moral capital can therefore challenge the accepted definitions to propose ones that better fit the cause they want to defend. There is no shortage of intellectuals doing this⁴⁰.

The debates and polemics about the conduct of the victims - such as the "Treblinka affair" - were a kind of competition among victims for the redistribution of heroic moral capital more favorable to the "Jewish" collectivity. However - and this is another notable difference - other categories of victims did not publicly argue that the conduct of the detained Jews precluded them from claiming it.

The polemics later generated by the claim that the Holocaust was unique brought the competition of *victims* into the spotlight. When the issue became the legal qualification of the events, the front lines changed. Scholars within a logic of competition of victims still exist like a Steven Katz who denies that the great famine was a genocide. But now resistance comes mostly on the behalf of the presumed "*executioners*", in this case Russian historians, something that would have been unthinkable in the case of the Holocaust⁴¹. In this sense, the polemics feed the inherited conflicts and the risk of their degenerating is considerably higher.

Competition between victims is one thing, settling scores between former enemies is another. In this case, it is remarkable that this opposition between (former) enemies manifests itself in the form of a competition between victims. Ukrainian nationalists have their victims, pro-Russians and Russians have theirs. In this opposition, one should not be surprised by the absence of Jewish victims, although they were massive in Ukraine during the Holocaust. Having disappeared as an important community in Ukraine, they are not really involved in this conflict concerning the future of the country. Once again, as Ohla Ostiitchouk (2009:

³⁹ We can better understand the escalation of victimhood: a massacre is not enough, a genocide is needed. A war crime is not enough, a crime against humanity is needed. A space for dramatization, both qualitative (intensity of suffering) and quantitative (number of victims) is thus opened up. At the same time, there is a trivialization of crimes that cannot claim the coveted titles. We will come back to this in a later text.

⁴⁰ Many historians, not only Ukrainians, engage in this debate as historically uninteresting as the debates on the uniqueness of the Shoah were. Pieter Lagrou (2013) has rightly warned against this drift.

⁴¹ But happens in Belgium: "Although it would nowadays be hard to find full-blown revisionist voices disputing that massive Congolese deaths took place under Leopold's rule, discussions [in Belgium] have been dominated considerably by disagreement on issues such as the exact number of deaths, the validity of the words genocide or Holocaust, the degree of personal responsibility of Leopold II, and the deliberate intent of the perpetrators" (De Mul, 2011: 592).

149) had foresight to point out, “we have today three categories of victims who have been superimposed on the victim of Stalinism and whose value fluctuates: for the Ukrainian ethnic group it is *the victim nation*, for Moscow, for the communists and globally for all the anti-nationalist movements it is *the victim of the nationalists*; as for *the victim of the Judeocide*, it seems to pass into the background, even if the model of the Holocaust strongly inspires that of the Holodomor. If the first two share the commemorative space, confronting each other with increasing regularity and violence, mobilizing public opinion and seeking support abroad (Russia, United States, Canada, France), the victim of the Judeocide remains more discreet, enjoying very little visibility in the current situation.”

This last observation illustrates the relativity of moral capital and the need to contextualize its production and uses. Even if the moral capital generated by the Holocaust could, from an "objective" point of view, be considerable (given the large number of Holocaust victims murdered on Ukrainian soil), the virtual disappearance of Jewish communities in Ukraine and the absence of any other community willing to make use of this capital, leave this potential capital untapped. Moreover, as Meckl has analyzed here for Latvia, it is the United States - a territory alien to the Holocaust but where its moral capital is preciously cultivated - that obliges third countries to maintain the memory of the annihilated communities. Therefore, the moral capitalization of the Holocaust may have provided the model for the moral capitalization of the Holodomor, but this is not a sufficient reason for the Holocaust to remain commemorated in Ukraine, quite the contrary. This shows that the memory of the past remains dependent on the issues and priorities of the present. But this we already knew.

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Victimisation as a winning political strategy and means of social recognition in post-communist societies: the example of Ukraine⁴²

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Introduction

We live in an era where 'we only have eyes for the losers, the disenfranchised, the victims', wrote Krzysztof Pomian (Pomian, 2010: 266), in an issue of *Le Débat* devoted to the major discursive categories that have recently become part of our habits for analysing the contemporary world. Indeed, the victim has acquired an unprecedented position in our societies: he or she benefits from an unquestionable credit of social recognition, by the simple fact of his or her status, likely to transform him or her into an effective tool of political demand. His or her suffering is there, offered in the public square, to serve as a lesson to the politician and the educator. Its innocence cannot be questioned. Its effectiveness is such that it is summoned in fiery patriotic speeches, in moments of crisis, venerated in public rituals, and invited to be present, physically or metaphysically, at large collective gatherings.

In recent decades, the phenomenon of victimisation has become so widespread that the French sociologist Guillaume Erner has spoken of a 'society of victims' (Erner, 2006). It is not that everyone has become a victim, but that there is a kind of consensus in our societies that by donning the victim's garb, by raising one's voice in his or her name, one is sure to be heard, one is sure to mobilise opinion, one is sure to obtain support for a just cause; even if this cause may, in turn, lead to the outbreak of new hostilities, new confrontations and new violence, and thus new victims. The proliferation of victims and the valorisation of the victim discourse have made the position of victim, according to the same Erner, if not 'enviable', at least 'envied' (Erner, op. cit.: 13), modifying our relationship with time, making us more sensitive to the injustices of the past than to the glory of our ancestors, and turning 'victimism' into a category of politically correct thought. We now pay less attention to the virtuous hero, who gave his life for the common good (Homeland, nation), and whose sacrifice-exploitation was previously unanimously recognised, than to the victim. Moreover, the figure of the hero has become increasingly controversial: today's heroes are no longer the same as those of yesterday, and the heroes of some may even be qualified as 'executioners' by others, and vice versa.

This phenomenon of highlighting the victim generates another, that of 'victim competition' (Chaumont, 1997). In search of a compassionate gaze, which is now part of the new social norms, the different categories of victims can display their suffering in the public arena and do not hesitate to measure themselves, going so far as to establish a kind of victim hierarchy, with the credit for social recognition being proportional to the extent of the suffering. Some see this victim polyphony as the hallmark of a democratic mode of governance, where the idea of inequality in recognition, regardless of social category, becomes intolerable, and where individuals demand the same indignation in the face of present and past injustices. Memory laws themselves initially appear as a means of establishing this recognition as a societal achievement, an irrevocable right. Societies that emerge from authoritarian, even totalitarian, modes of governance and embark on the development of democratic modes of operation, as is the case with post-

⁴² This text was originally published in French in 2011 in the journal *MARTOR The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review*

communist societies, are as much as others, and perhaps even more than others, affected by this phenomenon.

At the root of the phenomenon of victimisation

To understand the origin of the quest for social recognition through victimisation, it is necessary to go back in time. When and under what circumstances did this shift from hero to victim take place? Most researchers attribute it to the Second World War, and more precisely to the great historical trials that followed it. First of all, the Nuremberg Trial, organised to judge the defeated and the initiators of the conflict, the main Nazi leaders, which took place from 18 October 1945 to 1 October 1946, had the ambition to "denazify" Germany and to establish the principles of a new international law concerning war crimes. Already in June of the same year, at the founding of the United Nations, the victors had agreed on the need to take war criminals to trial. But the trial models proposed differed: the Americans called for a public trial, the British and French supported the idea of a trial behind closed doors, and the Soviets advocated the summary execution of 50,000 war criminals without trial. In the end, the American view prevailed. Thus, the Nuremberg trial introduced, at the global level, a very American vision of the relationship between justice and politics, which manifested itself in the criminalisation of the enemy, as noted by Antoine Garapon. This vision makes the victors, and the United States in particular, "the natural prosecutor of the good, the self-appointed advocate of the victims of all the world's persecutions". In short, he concludes that 'America sees itself as a benevolent empire' (Garapon, 2008: 28). By criminalising the enemy through the establishment of various categories of crimes (crimes against peace, war crimes, crimes against humanity), the holding of the trial granted, for the first time, recognition by the international community to the victims and the suffering they had undergone. And to designate the attempted extermination of the Jews, a new term was coined, that of genocide, the use of which would become enshrined in legal language with the adoption of the "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" at the UN General Assembly on December 9, 1948.

With the Eichmann trial (1961), another threshold was crossed in the recognition of victims. This trial was to serve as a reference for all those who claimed victims' rights, and the Shoah was to be set up as a model for the recognition of collective suffering. But the real turning point came in the late 1970s. According to the historian Henry Rousso, this was the beginning of a "return of the repressed" (a term borrowed from Freud), in this case personal memories, which until then had been pushed into the unconscious because they were considered unmentionable in the public arena. In 1967, the Poles had already inaugurated an international memorial at Auschwitz, a place that had become the symbol of mass extermination. Then, little by little, international public opinion, supported by the international (1968) and European (1974) conventions on the non-applicability of the statute of limitations to war crimes and crimes against humanity, became favourable to the release of testimonies. The spokespersons for the victims of the Shoah, such as Elie Wiesel, tried to convince the Jews that the status of victim was not shameful but rewarding, restorative and comforting. From that point on, advocating in the name of a damaged memory was equivalent to regaining dignity and giving meaning to one's existence, both as an individual and as a member of a group (Erner, op. cit.: 55).

However, it was not until the mid-1980s that victims' rights were put on a legal footing and that they were able to take advantage of them. In 1985, the UN General Assembly adopted a declaration

("Declaration on the Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power"), in which it affirmed the need to take international measures capable of ensuring universal and effective recognition of the rights of victims of crime and abuse of power. This declaration heralded a new era for victims, explicitly advocating that they be treated with compassion and respect for their dignity, that they be informed of their rights in order to ensure "fair treatment", including the restitution of their stolen property and the provision of assistance and social benefits. From then on, not only were the new conditions favourable to listening to victims and to be able to provide them with a sense of deliverance from a heavy past and a trauma, but they were also able to be heard and claim compensation of all kinds, both moral and material. What are the consequences of this development? The changes that occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War gradually altered our perception of the past, our relationship to time and history, rearranged our memorial landscapes and restructured our commemorative rituals. Before 1945, there was no example of the construction of a collective/national identity based on the victimisation of its members. This is a consequence of the Shoah, the universal reception of the voices of survivors, the way they are heard and the model that emerged as a result of this reception (Reemtsma, 2002). For the first time in history, the victims were placed in the forefront of the public arena, relegating the heroes to the background. This change also had an impact on collective narratives which, instead of celebrating the exploits of a people, the glorious pages of a national history, focused on collective tragedies, national tragedies, losses suffered during wars, natural disasters... According to Garapon (Garapon, op. cit.: 63), we have moved from a controlled history, based on faith in the idea of progress, to a history in which the victims play the leading role, because of the moral debt we feel towards them:

This new perception of time is the opposite of the one that prevailed just after the war: the latter was based on rupture, on revolution, on a completely controlled history, whereas this one focuses on the victims without taking sides on the causes in the name of which the crimes were perpetrated. This new regime of historicity takes the opposite view of the rupture so much magnified by the previous one: it wants to reconnect with the previous generations to whom our contemporaries feel a strong sense of debt: this is perhaps the most profound driving force behind these actions.

Thus, the mobilisation of public opinion for the recognition of the wrongs inflicted on the victims has transformed them as holders of the 'historical truth'. International legal support has empowered the victim to claim rights and reparations. Together they have resulted in the sanctification of the victim's suffering in the public arena. From the 1980s, victims were able to continue to act individually, as was the case in the trials, but also led collective struggles as groups united around the same cause, within movements, associations, and any other organisation. The number of such organisations has been increasing ever since.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the last lock on the heroic narrative maintained by the official celebrations of the communist regime, and its victims can now enter the stage of history, whether they are victims of persecution for ideological reasons, victims of the Great Terror, victims of famine, victims of forced exile, victims of policies of displacement of persons or even entire groups of people... The successful process of the recognition of the Shoah serves as a model for those who, for a very long time, have remained in the

shadows of history, or were even consciously left out of the official narrative, or presented in an unfavourable light as "enemies of the people".

The Ukrainian nationalist movement in exile also took the opportunity to claim the responsibility of the Stalinist regime for the physical and moral damage inflicted on the Ukrainians. In the early 1980s, public hearings on the "man-made famine" in the United States led to the recognition of the regime's responsibility for the deaths of several millions of Ukrainians in the years 1932-1933. The plaintiffs argued their case, on behalf of the entire Ukrainian people alienated by Soviet Russia, and obtained a first moral compensation: recognition of the wrongs suffered as a nation. The independence of the Ukrainian SSR in 1991 allowed them to continue to promote their cause, attracting the attention of ex-Soviet Ukrainians living on the Ukrainian state territory, as well as the international community on the need for awareness of the nature and extent of this tragedy. Even if interpretations of the famine differ, both among historians and among Ukrainians themselves ("genocide", "crime against humanity", "national tragedy", "collateral damage of collectivisation"), the extent of the tragedy alone is enough to transform this event- which affected virtually the entire rural population in central and eastern Ukraine (western Ukraine was under Polish rule) in the 1930s - into an inescapable foundation of national identity, modelled on genocidal memories. Thus, the Holodomor (the term used to name this tragic event is increasingly used⁴³) is much more than a famine. For its promoters, it is a genocide perpetrated by the Stalinist regime against the Ukrainian nation.

The judicialization of history and the status of the victim as a 'rightful claimant' have, in turn, reinforced the conviction of his or her innocence (ibid.: 15), without making him or her bear any responsibility for the past; this is what makes his or her position so coveted today. The sanctification of the victim grants him/her a moral dignity that allows him/her to erase his/her past altogether, apart from his/her victimised past, and forbids him/her to question it (Pomian, op. cit.: 267). For it is the victim - directly or by proxy - who chooses the framework into which he or she wants to insert his/her narrative, the episodes or aspects he or she wishes to insist on and those he or she decides to avoid (notably the embarrassing details that do not fit in with his/her victim status).

In a way, it can be said that victimisation has become a true religion of our time. It is therefore not surprising that the vocabulary of the victim and that of religion use the same categories of 'fault', 'guilt' and 'repentance', which the ethnologist Emmanuel Terray explains by the moral judgement that weighs on the aggressor, the executioner (Terray, 2006: 63). By testifying to his/her suffering, the victim reconnects with the perpetrator of the crime, whether he is the planner or the mere executor. And his or her public testimony, when heard, creates a collective expectation that the facts will be re-established ('the restoration of historical truth'), which can only be followed by reparation (judgment, trial, public apology, moral restitution, material compensation), at least on a symbolic level, which victims and their spokespersons generally refer to as 'restoring the dignity of victims'. Thus, the condemnation of crimes and the revaluation of victims - whether at the level of the state or within a group of remembrance activists - are only two facets

⁴³ It is a term coined in the mid-1980s, born from the fusion of two components: *holod* - hunger and *mor*, which is the root of the verb *moryty* (or *zamoryty*), "to exhaust, to leave to suffer without intervening, to cause to die"; this gives the whole the literal meaning of "to cause to die of hunger". In this term, therefore, are potentially gathered all the ingredients allowing its current translation (by those who claim it) as "extermination by starvation", i.e. a criminal action, planned by the Stalinist regime, directed against the Ukrainian nation and to better enslave it. With its capital letter, "Holodomor" becomes synonymous with "Ukrainian genocide", in the same way as the Holocaust is for the Jews.

of the same process: that of social recognition of the suffering unjustly inflicted on victims and the need for reparation. For there can be no full recognition without condemnation and repentance. This is why it is not uncommon for victims' spokespersons to demand a trial for the perpetrators of the crime and their accomplices or, at the very least, a public condemnation a posteriori (most of them no longer being in the mood) of their highly criminal acts.

Moreover, the unquestioned credibility of the victim discourse has allowed nations, historically dominated by powerful neighbours, to extend victimhood to the nation as a whole. This is the case of Ukraine whose historical legacy abounds in episodes of political and economic dependence and foreign occupations. Although the early years of independence were focused on the common category of victim of Stalinism, by the seventieth anniversary of the Holodomor (2003), there was a shift towards a more specific category, that of victim nation (Ostriitchouk, 2009: 141-151). Beyond the reparation of an injustice suffered in the past, and a necessary work of memory, the position of nation-victim is likely to lead to a complete revision of the historical narrative, allowing those to escape any responsibility for the past: complicity with different political regimes, voluntary or forced participation in events, political movements, economic reforms and cultural life.

In Ukraine, under Yushchenko's presidency, the desire to base national identity on the model of the victim nation, promoted by nationalist activists and spokespersons (authorised or not) of the victims of communism, made it possible to build a new social link based on the enhancement of national liberation struggles (which were also struggles of resistance to the communist regime, 1920-1950), while at the same time concealing the darker, less glorious aspects of the nationalist experience: the obligation to flee the country, suspicions of complicity with the German occupation regime, direct or indirect participation in the Judeocide, or atrocities committed against the Polish civilian population. On the other hand, for the militants of the opposing camp, whether they were designated as "pro-Russian" or "pro-Soviet", the emphasis on the complicity of local collaborators, with nationalist affiliations, in Nazi crimes, allowed the experience of the Great Patriotic War to be reevaluated in the name of victory over fascism, and at the same time, the dark aspects of the communist experience to be mitigated: repressive measures, persecutions of all kinds, executions without trial, etc. In both cases, a category of crimes is condemned without considering the question of individual or group responsibility or the complexity of historical contexts, which implies in a large number of cases, shared responsibilities and mutual wrongs.

On 28 November 2006, the Ukrainian parliament passed the first memorial law ('Holodomor Law') in Ukraine, which defines the Holodomor as genocide perpetrated against the Ukrainian people. The legal characterisation of this historical event, 'removed' from its historical context (Jewsiewicki, 2008: 8), consecrates its unquestionable character. The law gave the signal for a large-scale heritage campaign in the form of numerous official and semi-official publications (by the Institute of National Memory and the Association of Holodomor Researchers), testimonies and archival documents, the inauguration of an imposing memorial in Kiev and numerous commemorative signs or monuments in the regions, and a vast programme of commemorations on different scales. From that moment on, the entire nation acquired the status of a victim-nation (victim of the Stalinist genocide), and any interpretation that deviates from this can be qualified as negationist and anti-Ukrainian chauvinist, and is liable to legal action.

Finally, while the position of victim may have many advantages, victimisation as a phenomenon is not without ethical problems, and may even have perverse effects that raise questions. Indeed, the plaintiffs of history are guided more by 'an ethic of conviction' than by that of 'responsibility', and may want to

replace justice with simple revenge, rightly notes G. Erner, specifying that 'victimism is not a humanism' (Erner, op. cit: 186-189, 192). For politicians and intellectuals alike, it induces a compassionate, moralising attitude in the name of the Good, which can prove harmful to critical work, leading them to defend some to the detriment of others. All the more so since the associations that decided to promote the cause of the victims, in the name of historical truth, tend to ask, more and more often and urgently, for the help of the research community, to establish it scientifically (in particular by means of international scientific meetings that they take on entirely), in order to put pressure, afterwards, on the politicians, so that this truth is placed under the protection of the law. How then can we remain fair in the face of pressure from different groups? How can we distance ourselves from the narrative that the victims impose, at the risk of being misunderstood?

The victim and the sacred

In order to fully understand what makes the victim so consensual and socially recognised, we must also question the essence of the commemorative rites that stage it and invest in its sacralisation. In this respect, it seems useful to us to resort to the anthropological approach, which is interested in the symbolism surrounding commemorations and the ritual gestures of collective mourning that refer to the meaning of human existence itself: since 'a deceased person is a sacred being' (Durkheim, 1976 (1915): 390).

In this sense, it is worth recalling that in primitive societies, rites were associated with cultural practices, sacred or profane. This is why some have been quick to announce their decline in the contemporary world, particularly in the West. Others, such as Martine Segalen (Segalen, 2010 (1998): 27), have recognised that contemporary rites, although increasingly dissociated from religious bodies and ties of kinship, are entering new fields (politics, sport, the workplace, etc.), and even moving into new territory. We decided to check whether Martine Segalen's remark could be applied to post-communist contexts, but what can be observed there is rather contrary to what is happening in Western democracies. Current trends favour the desacralisation of old symbols (in the sense of the loss of their former meanings), built during the Soviet era and purged of their religious meaning, on the one hand, and the introduction and sacralisation of new symbols and rituals, very similar to religious ceremonials, on the other.

How can we explain the vivacity of religious sentiment, the extension and diversification of its practices in the states of the post-communist space? Is there a link between this phenomenon and the way in which collective memory and national identity are practised by the political and intellectual elites? Each religion presupposes a specific mobilisation of collective memory", argues Danielle Hervieu-Léger (Hervieu-Léger, 1993: 178). But the opposite is also true: religion could be considered as a stable space of common reference, transcending borders and times, capable of providing at any time a support for the reconstruction of a collective memory. Thus, religious frameworks of memory seem to be among the most available and consensual for replacing old temporalities with new ones in these societies. Finally, as Eastern and Western Ukraine do not have the same perception of the past, and their collective sense is built on different sensitivities, their sharing of Christian principles leads them to adopt a similar position towards tragic moments of the past, such as the Holodomor, and even to give the impression of reconciling, in the public

arena, the proponents of the two antagonistic memories, divided by their contrasting historical experiences⁴⁴.

Another explanation for the importance of the sacred in contemporary rites is to be found on the anthropological level of the construction of collective meaning: rites are universal since each community needs symbols. According to Marcel Mauss, the rite is where meaning is produced (Segalen, op. cit.: 24), and meaning is constantly being produced, and humans have always needed rites for their existential needs; however, the nature of these rites has evolved over time, according to the tastes and expectations of groups and individuals. The state (as well as active communities and their leaders) has the task of instituting, keeping alive and passing on to posterity a certain representation of the past. To this end, it develops rites of collective remembrance to make a lasting impression on people's minds and thus help to strengthen national unity. Contemporary rites, which are highly formalised and codified ceremonies, play this role as consolidators of collective meaning. They do so in different ways: 1) by sanctifying collective pain and restoring the link between the dead and the living 2) by compassionate discourse and mediation 3) by the collective emotion that emerges thanks to the effectiveness of the rituals.

The sanctification of pain and the worship of the dead

According to G. Erner, 'If our society has adopted the religion of victims, it is because it lends suffering the ability to make things sacred' (Erner, op. cit.: 25). The suffering of the victim, when it is recognised as unjust, cannot be questioned, because there is a tacit consensus within the entire community of commemorators, and even beyond, on its authenticity, whereas the victorious hero may be open to suspicion, and his sacrifice, in order to be understood, requires a clearly formulated justification: in the name of what ideal did he fight? Unlike the hero who assumes his choices, the victim is passive: he has not chosen to suffer, he has suffered an injustice without having any control over the situation in which this suffering was inflicted, while he was defenceless: he was there at the wrong time, in the wrong place. It is also this status of innocent victim that obliges 'to take these words as pure and simple truth' (Pomian, op. cit.: 267) and to point the finger at his or her torturer.

The example of the Holodomor is quite telling in this respect. The first commemorative rites of this tragedy date back to the late 1930s. Emerging as a painful memory among the survivors of the 1932-1933 famine, the memory of the terrible famine appeared first as a vivid memory that could testify in favour of the ultimate degree of suffering of the Ukrainian nation, "dominated", "colonised", "dispossessed" since the beginning of time. Some survivors, who became political refugees after fleeing the territories occupied by the communist regime and emigrating to Western countries, were encouraged by their host communities within the Ukrainian diaspora to recount the horrors they had experienced in the form of written testimony (memoirs) or oral testimony (stories, interviews, meetings within various organisations sensitive to their cause). Symbolic places were set up by these same communities to mourn, meditate and pray for the salvation of innocent souls, attesting to the desire to transform this event into a ritualised object of commemoration.

It must be said that when the memorial rite emerged, the independent Ukrainian state did not exist. The only authorities that could legitimise the rite were the political and religious organisations in

⁴⁴ These include memory disputes between veterans of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which is dominant in the West, and those of the Great Patriotic War, which is dominant in the rest of the country, particularly in the eastern and southern regions.

exile. From the very beginning, churches participated in the worship of the Great Famine victims, celebrating mourning masses, delivering speeches in their memory, using religious symbols (crosses, icons, etc.) for the design of memorial sites. These ceremonies and ritual gestures helped to re-establish the symbolic link between the dead and the living, and even more so, between those who still lived in Soviet Ukraine and those who had decided, or been forced, to go into exile in the West. The role of the churches was intended to bring people together: as Metropolitan Mstyslav proclaimed at one of the largest commemorative ceremonies in North America in 1983, 'Churches should unite us all' (Zarycky, 1983: 1).

In the 1980s, these private memories were misused to serve a political purpose: to gain international recognition of the evils inflicted on the Ukrainian nation by the communist regime, in the name of universal values of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The survivors' testimonies were then used in public hearings aimed at condemning the communist crimes on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR. They appeared as the symbolic capital of the national tragedy, in contrast to the official narrative, still in use at that time, which emphasised the great achievements of the Soviet regime, without saying a word about the enormous price that Soviet citizens had to pay for them. Those who collected the testimonies of the exiled survivors seized on the most tragic episodes, emphasising the short- and long-term trauma that these experiences had caused to Ukrainians (abandonment of the mother tongue, 'deformations of the nation's genetic heritage'). But although transcribing the living memory was a chance to perpetuate it, it was also a chance to 'mutilate' it, to 'freeze' it (Tarot, 2008: 227), to divert it.

At the same time, the commemoration of the Great Famine became a highly codified political event in symbolic terms: through the memory of its victims, it was supposed to strengthen the bonds between the demonstrators, to consolidate their common interpretation of the past, and to reinforce the determination of the entire Ukrainian community in exile to liberate the Ukrainian nation from the communist regime and to allow it to achieve independence. Brian Mulroney, the leader of the Canadian Conservative Party, the official opposition party at the time, and guest of honour at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Great Famine, comments (Zarycky, op. cit.: 4): 'We rejoice in the rich memories and traditions of those Ukrainians who took their burning ideals of freedom and liberty, their qualities of independence and individualism from Ukraine and gave them to us in Canada... (I was) touched and overwhelmed by the sanctity of this occasion and by the strong and determined bonds which bring so many people together in common purpose of remembrance.'

Later, when the Holodomor commemoration was introduced in independent Ukraine, it already had the tradition of a strong political sense and well-established commemorative rituals based on religious rites (the commemorative candles used in Orthodox ceremonies to symbolise the restoration of the link between the dead and the living, the commemorative wreaths, the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic crosses, etc.). Ukrainians in Ukraine, then rediscovering religious practices, will have no difficulty in reviving the tradition of the cult of the dead. They took part in collective mourning liturgies, took care of grooming the burial sites of their relatives who had died during the famine, and built symbolic graves topped with an Orthodox cross in their villages. Finally, the religious dimension, mobilised during the commemorative rite, will facilitate its acceptance by the majority (although the perpetrator is not named on the monuments dedicated to the famine in the east of the country). The emphasis will be on the victim, or rather on the suffering of millions of victims who, taken together, represent a colossal loss to the Ukrainian nation and who, by their demographic weight, accuse the Stalinist regime of having sought to break the resistance of the Ukrainian nation through the threat of their physical extermination and thus to eradicate any spirit of

independence among Ukrainians. As for the churches, which were also victims of repressive measures under the communist regime, they will have no difficulty in making people admit the tragic nature of the famine and the need to pray for the souls of all the victims of the regime.

Thus, the collective pain, through the horror it inspires, acquires a sacred meaning. The tragedy was consecrated by all Ukrainian churches, and the leaders of the nationalist movement invested it with a patrimonial, patriotic value, and made it a major symbol of the nation, thus transforming an 'impure' thing (the crime of destroying the Ukrainian nation) into a 'pure' thing (the salvation of the martyr nation).

Compassionate attitude and mediation

Compassion (in the sense of 'shared suffering', emotional capacity to empathise or sympathise with others) dominates the victimhood discourse. Furthermore, the compassionate attitude implies respect for all victims, regardless of the reasons why they became victims. In many religions, compassion has always been considered a virtue, an integral part of God's love. In contemporary societies, it has also become a political virtue. We can no longer imagine a head of state who is insensitive to the misfortunes of his or her fellow citizens or to those of other peoples, and who is unaware of the codes of compassionate behaviour prescribed by today's standards. It has become commonplace for the inaugural ritual of official visits to begin with the laying of a wreath at victims' memorial. But to acknowledge the victims commemorated by the state we visit is not only to demonstrate a compassionate attitude towards them, it is to acknowledge, through them, the very existence of the nation-state for which their suffering has acquired a sacred meaning and has been transformed into the foundation of identity. Moreover, official recollection in the presence of foreign heads of state and the host country's head of state, broadcast on all screens, is also a gesture of good faith, predisposing to the smooth running of the negotiations and other official meetings that follow. It is therefore not surprising that when a high-level official visits a country, he or she is expected to adopt the same or a similar stance on remembrance and recognition of victims as that practised in that country. However, he or she can just as easily do the opposite: seize on a memorial issue to provoke the state that fails to respect the victims of the crimes for which it is deemed responsible or heir (since there is no crime against humanity that is not a state crime), and push it to acknowledge this heavy responsibility. Thus, when a visit to Moscow by the Prime Minister of Quebec, Jean Charest, was envisaged in December 2009, the question of the attitude to adopt arose (given the divergence of the official positions of Russia and Canada on the qualification of the Holodomor), while the objectives of this meeting were essentially economic. It should be noted that the Holodomor, thanks to powerful Ukrainian lobbying (notably by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress), has already been recognised in Canada as genocide, and that the province of Manitoba, where Ukrainian Canadians are heavily concentrated, has already instituted a memorial day to commemorate the genocide, while the top leadership in Moscow opposes this ethnic reading of the past, claiming that the 1932-33 famine also claimed victims in other regions and among other nationalities, particularly Russians and Kazakhs. The change of power in Ukraine in the presidential elections in 2010⁴⁵ led to the immediate suspension of the Holodomor issue. At the highest-level Ukrainian and Russian positions on the issue seemed to be in agreement at the time. As can be seen, the issue of the recognition of the Ukrainian genocide, referred to as Holodomor, is having an impact not only on Russian-Ukrainian

⁴⁵ In 2010, Yanukovich succeeded to his opponent Yushchenko, who was elected president by the Orange Revolution.

relations but also on the internal affairs of other states and their relations with Ukraine, the victim nation, on the one hand, and with Russia, the heir to the former USSR, on the other.

Compassion, through the principle of respect for all victims, neutralises divergent opinions and produces social cohesion by strengthening the social bond (Erner, *op.cit.*: 168). It easily finds its place in post-communist societies where social ties have been greatly weakened after the fall of the regime. The community that mourns expresses its deep sorrow for the victims and shares their suffering. It initiates a process of mediation, which begins with the recognition of the wrongs done to the victims and their families, accompanied by the feeling that justice has been done. During the memorial ceremony, the souls of the victims are invited to share the symbolic space of communion with the community of their descendants, participating in the commemoration. The dead are to protect the living from similar disasters ("never again") and to recall the moral duty towards the victims. The link between the dead and the living is restored almost physically, as in this recourse to the symbolic ear of wheat that creates a medium for seeing the invisible and feeling the impalpable: "It burns my fingers. I perceive, through time, the souls of our brothers and sisters stretching their arms towards it, and I feel the warmth that comes from the contact. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid of anything now. Behind you, the dead of the holodomors, stands all our people and your state. We stop time and God listens to you" ⁴⁶. A sort of freeze-frame, the image of a collective gathering, of a restored intergenerational link and of national unity. The patriotic discourse, inserted into the religious frameworks of memory, demands belief in the necessity of this act both for the victims (the salvation of their souls) and for the overall objective of restoring national memory. It is also a way of affirming a religious understanding of national identity that has become common in post-communist societies.

For the compassionate discourse reveals how close the religious interpretation of the past is close to the nationalist interpretation. Both use the metaphor of "purification" that leads to the salvation of the souls of the victims, in the case of the former, and to "national self-healing" for the latter. In the strictest sense of the term, suffering purifies the believers' love of God. In these conditions, to preserve the memory of the victims is to give them back their moral dignity and take them out of their marginality, which gave the impression that they had "lost face" (Bogalska-Martin, 2004: 251). But the suffering can also be used to remind us of a moral debt owed by the community to those who have suffered unjustly, and its responsibility for what has happened. An example of this kind of rhetoric can be found in a speech of Yuhnovsky, director of the Institute of National Memory in 2006, during the debates on the Holodomor law in Parliament: "We must adopt the law in its entirety. Repentance will purify us from the terrible burden of the past, it will heal us, heal our sins, and finally, it will ease our conscience."⁴⁷ Yuhnovsky's speech reminds his fellow citizens of the necessity of a collective examination of conscience regarding the complicity of some Ukrainians with the communist regime, from which the "traumatised society" must be healed. Thus, the purification acts on a double level: the restoration of the dignity of the victims and the purification of the whole nation from a criminal past.

At the same time, the mediation engaged between the dead and the living encourages new generations to think about how everything that has happened is connected to the future of the nation. The lighted candles used during commemorative ceremonies are a manifestation of the power of remembrance.

⁴⁶ Excerpt from lochchenko's speech on November 25, 2006.

⁴⁷ Press release on the proceedings of the of the meeting of 28.11.2006 in the Verkhovna Rada. Website of the Verkhovna Rada: portal.rada.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article/news_let?art_id=80882&cat_id=33449, accessed 14.09.2011.

Each candle is supposed to represent a departed soul. For the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor (2008), an Olympic style candle went around the world, symbolising the duty of memory towards the victims of totalitarianism and the unity of the Ukrainian nation: "Carry this flamme to every people, every person, every heart. And in November this year, this sacred lamp will arrive in Ukraine to become the eternal symbol of our mourning for the millions of our brothers and sisters who perished during the famine. It will become the symbol of our unity and our faith in the invincibility of the Ukrainian people. So that the souls of the innocent victims may find peace and may God remember each of them in his kingdom."

On the other hand, communion with the dead can have a collective therapy effect, since it has all the characteristics of the Durkheimian piacular rite, designed to reinforce the solidarity between the members of a community through the work of mourning, notably the exaltation of the collective sorrow and atonement for sin. The rite creates a mental state where the individual feels morally committed to participate in the collective joys and sorrows: not responding to this duty is equivalent to not address the threat to the whole community, and to attract the curse and the wrath of God: "The truth about the atrocious genocide of the Ukrainian people must ring out loud and clear because the people who do not remember their past is condemned to wander in the future... This truth must unite the Ukrainian people"⁴⁸. As in all mourning rites sadness, the dominant feeling, is mixed with a kind of anger. To escape the curse the dead must be mourned and entitled to ritual lamentations. In a contemporary collective rite of collective mourning, involving millions of dead, the community needs to consolidate and homogenise its collective memory by devoting itself to the cult of the sacred symbol. Thus the compassionate rite "orders disorder and gives meaning to the accidental and the incomprehensible", finally it gives to the community that commemorates the impression of "mastering evil, time and social relations". (Segalen, op. cit.: 26).

Commemorating the Holodomor on a regular basis could also prevent similar tragedies from occurring. "The strength of collective remembrance must be the best guarantee of our autonomous existence," said President Lushchenko in a radio address to the nation. No people can live without memory, without a past, without a future. Otherwise it will be easy to manipulate them, to enslave them"⁴⁹. In this sense, keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive is a sense, keeping the memory of the Holodomor alive acts as a collective protection against future misfortunes, as a way of consolidating the foundations of national identity.

The high efficiency of symbolic objects and collective emotion

If the rite proves to be so effective, it is because the objects and the symbolic gestures that it mobilises are likely to provoke an important emotional charge, generating mental states of strong collective sharing in those who participate. In Ukraine, these objects come from different traditions, some being closer to the religious imaginary (candles, crosses), others of the national or even nationalistic imaginary (ear of wheat, guelder rose). Their proximity could be explained, on the one hand, by the fact that the pro-Ukrainian churches have always supported the national liberation struggles, blessed their leaders and their

⁴⁸ Statement signed by the leaders of the main Ukrainian churches, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the commemoration of the Holodomor, 23 November 2007, http://www.risu.org.ua/ukr/resourses/religdoc/ecumen_doc/statement_noagit/, last consultation 30.09.09.

⁴⁹ Radio speech of President Lushchenko of 26.11.2005. Website of the President of Ukraine: www.president.gov.ua/news/data/25_4446.html, last consultation 30.06.2007.

symbols, encouraged their attempts to achieve independence. On the other hand, nationalists have always cultivated a metaphysical, spiritual and irrational vision of the nation. And in Ukraine, the Christian faith (together with attachment to the land and family) is a pillar on which national identity is built.

The following examples can provide verification to the high effectiveness of certain symbols and their links with religious practices or practices of the cult of the nation. Let's take the guelder rose, a shrub that has always been, in Ukraine, endowed with a communal, unifying and patriotic meaning. Traditionally used during family rituals such as weddings or funerals, it has accumulated several meanings: purity, beauty, resistance, like these bunches that freeze and bend but do not break. The guelder rose is also the symbol of "occupied Ukraine" in the patriotic song, which became the anthem of the national liberation struggles of the 1920s. In 2005, President Yushchenko decided to plant a grove of 10,000 guelder rose trees in Kiev, next to the newly built memorial complex. Each one is to symbolise a Ukrainian village victim of the famine. This commemorative event gives substance to the traumatic memory in a metaphorical way. It symbolises the magnitude of the tragedy, encourages mourning for the dead, and sees the grove as a symbol of national unity. Ironically, The Grove of Guelder Roses was also the name of the play by Olexander Kornychuk (1950), an official playwright of the Stalinist regime, who was able to recuperate the national meaning of this symbol to legitimise the Soviet Ukrainian identity (an episode that has been completely forgotten). Nowadays, guelder rose berries are often used to decorate monuments dedicated to the victims of all totalitarian regimes.

Another symbol frequently used in connection with famines and Ukrainian identity is the ear of wheat, both singular and plural. It can take on different meanings depending on the context. Wheat being the classical symbol of Ukraine, a land of wheat, represented by the yellow colour of the flag, it can easily take on a unifying meaning. A large quantity of wheat (a crown of wheat ears, a wheat germ) would rather evoke prosperity (ease, good harvest) and thus the strength of the nation. Surrounded by a black ribbon, it emphasises deprivation and famine and the need for mourning, the only way to recover the sense of national pride that has faded in the past. It testifies to the debt owed to the dead, whom it reminds that they had been living (Ricoeur, 1996 (1991): 194) and that today's Ukrainians have the duty not to forget. In Paris, in 2003, during the commemoration of the Holodomor, a sheaf of wheat tied with a black ribbon was laid under the Arc de Triomphe. The participants interpreted it "as the memory of the wheat exported abroad and taken away from those who had grown it, the symbol of life overcoming death, the memory of those ears of wheat gathered from the kolkhoz fields for which "the enemies of the people" were shot" (Lazarijeva, 2003). Another example: as an awareness campaign to draw attention to the importance of recognising the Holodomor as an act of genocide, some deputies took it upon themselves to give each of their less convinced colleagues an ear of wheat tied with a black ribbon (as a reminder of a duty to remember). The ears of wheat can be found on many monuments dedicated to the victims of the famines. Their iconographic representation can be seen on posters, clips⁵⁰, exhibition materials⁵¹, trailers. In short, the effectiveness of this symbol increases as its uses multiply and diversify.

Finally, some rituals encourage the commemorating community to "slip into the skin" of the victims, making the participants experience sensations similar to those of the victims, such as eating a soup

⁵⁰ The clip of Oksana Bilozir, entitled Svicha transl. the candle, is a good example to observe the symbolism: <http://video.i.ua/user/34416/3255/24123/>

⁵¹ As was, in 2007, the exhibition "Executed by hunger: the unknown genocide of the Ukrainians", organised in several European capitals (Brussels, Geneva, London, Minsk, Washington) to raise public awareness of the Holodomor.

made of wild herbs accompanied by bread made of straw and bark, during the symbolic meal organised by the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church in the United States in October 2007, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor (Houdzyk, 2007). Each of the guests at this symbolic meal had to light his or her candle and take a few sips of the soup in silence, thinking of all those parents who had to feed their children during the famine with something similar. The dinner ended with a collective walk, candle in hand, to the Church of Memory, built in memory of the victims, where a mass was planned. This materialisation of the famine through commemorative staging testifies to a desire to strike the spirits and make them really experience the famine, in order to anchor its memory better. Contrary to the other rites, this one is more participative than contemplative. It encourages participants to commune with the victims, provoking the resurgence, suddenly materialised, of the inhuman conditions that the victims had to face, sharing their sufferings, in a kind of self-flagellation that removes the temporal distance between the dead and the living, and investing in the cult of traumatic memory.

Conclusion

Thus, the victim as a new social category, and victimisation as a burgeoning societal phenomenon, provide historical plaintiffs with powerful political tools to effectively wage their collective struggles for social recognition both within their own communities and with the international community. Official condemnation of perpetrators of past crimes, public apologies and collective repentance are now becoming common practice. The new place that the victim has gradually acquired, including in collective narratives, is due to the evolution of international law accompanied by a wave of public interest in the testimonies of victims, whose voices have finally been heard in the public arena. All this contributed to the emergence of traumatic memories and to the effectiveness of the victim model, forged on the example of the Holocaust at the end of the Second World War, and applied to other contexts as soon as the Cold War ended and the communist regime fell. Its main appeal is compassion, which produces societal cohesion at the national level.

Our analysis has also shown that not only is the victimisation model perfectly exported to post-totalitarian societies, but that it becomes dominant there, going so far as to claim victim status for the entire nation. Here two processes converge and reinforce each other: the recognition of the wrongs inflicted on the victims and the sacralisation of collective punishment, which together encourage communion with the dead through rituals of recollection, provoking strong emotion in the participants. Moreover, the operability of victimhood memories is not limited to the commemorative domain, but can also be attested to in the political sphere and in international relations, since a question of remembrance can become an affair of state or even an affair between states.

But one question remains. Is operability synonymous with success? Many historians and other memory specialists constantly warn against the misuse of victimised memories and the perverse effects of victimisation, because "purifying oneself of the burden of the past", in the anthropological sense of the term, does not mean fully assuming it. However, collective mourning rituals, if they do not raise the question of critical scrutiny and self-examination, respond to other universal needs, such as the construction of collective meaning and societal cohesion, and do so with remarkable effectiveness.

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Latvian National Identity in the post-heroic era⁵²

Markus Meckl

Introduction

In recent years, commemorative practices in Europe have changed and historiography uses the term "post-heroic" to describe this transformation in memory-making. Post-heroism signifies the change when public recognition is no longer attributed to heroic deeds, but to the victims of conflicts and wars, therefore representing a "shift from heroization to victimization" (Sabrow, 2011: 90).

Trying to gain public recognition through narratives of victimhood is historically a new strategy used by disadvantaged groups or in social movements. For example, when Franz Werfel wrote about the suffering of the Armenian genocide in 1915, he did so by recounting the heroic resistance of one Armenian village for 40 days (Werfel, 1933). The same happened after the Second World War in countries that had been occupied by Nazi Germany. Those countries commemorated their occupation and suffering by underlining their heroic deeds and opened museums to commemorate the resistance.

In the 21st century, the heroes have gone. Post-heroic commemorative practices become apparent when Germany erects a monument for soldiers who died on foreign missions, and when the German President Horst Köhler feels obliged to point out during his speech at the inauguration: "The Bundeswehr memorial does not promote false hero worship, it does not serve any sacrificial cult and it does not glorify war". (Blechs Schmidt, 2009).

These recent transformations in European commemorative practices are a challenge to the idea of a united European identity, since an identity based on a narrative of victimhood creates an identity for the group which has suffered (Assmann, 2006), but leads to a "concurrency of victimhood" (Chaumont, 2001), as it is exclusive and does not allow the ideal of a European identity to thrive.

The construction of Latvia's collective memory after the country regained independence in the year 1990 is a good example to describe post-heroic identity; with this example one can illustrate the consequences and challenges for a society which embraces such a self-image. Collective memory is understood here as the memory policy put forward by the state through commemoration days, monuments, museums and public rites (Assmann, 2006: 35).

Of course, one might take for granted that the grievance of a nation or group should be commemorated through the emphasis of suffering in collective memory, but this is not the case. For example, the holocaust did not draw on such emphasis (Chaumont, 1997). In 1945, when the survivors of the holocaust returned to their home countries, they quickly realized that being a victim did not give them any social status and that no public recognition was awarded to survivors. Echoing this sentiment and full of bitterness, Bernard Klieger wrote in 1948: "Six million Jews have fallen. They did nothing to deserve this. The last we, the survivors, can ask for it that our victims get recognition. All we demand is that we also given a small place in the sun" (Klieger, 1948: 191).

Klieger is an exception when he asks for recognition since other survivors accepted the judgement that surviving and suffering as such does not constitute a value to be proud of. In "Le Monde Juif" in 1947,

⁵² An earlier version of this text without putting it into the framework of a post-heroic narrative has been published under Meckl, M. (2016). Latvia's Vanished National Heroes. *The European Legacy*, Volume 21, Number 4, pp 408-418.

Chaim Chazaz suggested banning teaching our children “Jewish history, because why on earth should we teach them about the shame of their ancestors” (Chaumont, 2001: 21). This is the context in which the Warsaw ghetto uprising – in strict contrast to the “passive” death in the gas chambers –, became the symbol of the genocide of the Jews (Meckl, 2008). As Isaac Schwarzbart explained at the World Zionist Congress in 1954: “the imagination and hearts of people cling to deeds of courage, sacrifice, heroism, shining examples of self-defense, strength and pride, rather than to mourning over general calamities, passive defeatism, and destruction” (Schwarzbart, 1954: 2). In a world where a group is only considered equal to other people if it engages in armed struggle, it was necessary for the Jews to refer to their contribution during World War II. Hannah Arendt expressed the same idea in 1944: “The Jews in Warsaw couldn’t save themselves, so they wanted at least to save the honor and glory of the Jewish people. They liquidated the pariah position of the Jewish people in Europe and established themselves as equals in the fight for liberation in Europe.” (Arendt, 1944: 147). What Schwarzbart and Arendt assert here was addressed by one commemorative practice after the war; when the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, opened in 1957, its focus was on the resistance of the Jews and not on their role as victims. The same occurred almost forty years later, in 1993, when the Holocaust museum was opened in Washington, as inauguration day was chosen to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the ghetto uprising.

In the 90s, commemorative practices started to change in Europe. In 1996, when the Holocaust memorial day was created in Germany, the date which was chosen to remember this day was no longer the anniversary of the Ghetto uprising but the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27th. This choice, which was adopted by the United Nations and the European Union as well as most countries, demonstrates the shift of paradigm from heroization to victimization. The heroism of the Jews no longer needed to be underlined and instead public recognition shifted towards their suffering, allowing Auschwitz to become its symbol.

This shift in public recognition can also be seen in the decade-old conflict about the memory of the Holocaust between Poland and Israel. Both countries had argued for decades about the appropriation of the memory of the Ghetto uprising since both claimed this event as decisive for their country’s identity (Meckl, 2000). As the uprising lost its symbolic power, both countries issued a common stamp to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the uprising, meanwhile the conflict emerged between both countries about Auschwitz as a symbol of Polish or Jewish suffering.

The shift in public recognition from heroes to victims becomes obvious if we examine the self-representation of Latvia after regaining independence in the 90s. No longer did the country underline its heroic past, but the suffering it had endured throughout twentieth-century history. After the country regained its independence in 1990, no national hero materialized. While nineteenth-century Latvia’s nation-building required a national hero, all possible national heroes that could have unified Latvia’s ethnically diverse society were rejected after 1990. Instead, the ethnic Latvian population unified and strengthened their identity by underlining their role as victims.

After decades of Soviet occupation (1940/41 and 1944-1990), the population of Latvia was split into two linguistic communities: two-thirds of the population were ethnic Latvians who spoke Latvian as their mother tongue; while one-third spoke Russian and belonged to minorities that had either already been living in Latvia during the First Republic (1918-1940), or had moved there during Soviet times. There are some other smaller minority groups, like Polish, Roma, and Livs, but they do not play a significant role in the public debate. The majority of the population were born and raised in the Soviet Republic of Latvia and had not

experienced living in an independent Latvian State. In 1990 this heterogeneous society faced the challenge of having to create a state by becoming a political entity.

As Jan Assmann points out, societies create an image of themselves over generations by “developing a culture of memory”⁵³ (Assman, 2007: 18). However, fifty years of occupation had a strong impact on the process of shaping Latvian identity. Public and private discourses were divided, and the migration of workers from other parts of the Soviet Union altered the country’s demographics. In private, a nostalgic image of prewar Latvia was often cultivated, while the Russian-speaking population remained indifferent to this image.

With the arrival of independence in 1990, Latvia needed a new public culture of memory to create and strengthen a national identity. Traditionally, this could have been achieved by following the process described by Anthony D. Smith: “Every nationalism requires a touchstone of virtue and heroism, to guide and give meaning to the tasks of regeneration. Heroes provide models of virtuous conduct, their deeds of valour inspire faith and courage in their oppressed and decadent descendants.” (Smith, 2007: 65). However, in Latvia no such heroic image emerged⁵⁴; on the contrary, the role of victim throughout the centuries became the emblem of regained Latvian independence. The country did not lack “heroes”: there were in fact many possibilities for the creation of a national hero, but these did not fit the new Latvian state and were ignored. While rejecting the hero, victimhood was cultivated and contributed to writing the history of the country. Latvia’s newly cultivated self-image as a victim found its expression in books, articles, symbolic acts, and speeches constituting the “dominant narrative of the past” (Eglitis & Ardava, 2012: 1035).

Nation-Building and Heroes

In the winter of 1807-8, Johann Gottlieb Fichte gave a series of lectures at Humboldt University in Berlin under the title “Reden an die Deutsche Nation” (Address to the German nation). The lectures were concerned with the awakening of the German nation, and Fichte saw in the education of the youth the key component for the birth of the German Nation. To educate the German youth, he provided them with an ideal to strive towards by introducing Martin Luther as the ideal German hero. Through his life story and deeds, Fichte showed what Germans could achieve, and why Martin Luther was considered the perfect role model for the youth of the country (Fichte, 1997: 629). The role of the hero is also pointed out by Ernest Renan as he saw in the heroic past “the social capital upon which one bases a national idea” (Renan, 1947: 906) every nation-building practice in the 19th century went along with the creation of a national hero. In Latvia this was *Lāčplēsis* (lit. “the bear slayer”), an epic poem written by Andrejs Pumpurs in the 1880s, whose protagonist became Latvia’s heroic figure. *Lāčplēsis* represents the eternity of the nation because he can never die and continues to fight forever in the Daugava River (Smidchens, 2007). The path of Latvian nation-building took a similar route than that of other nations in the late nineteenth century and its national movement successfully led to the declaration of Latvia’s independence on 18 November 1918. Although

⁵³ “Gesellschaften imaginieren Selbstbilder und konstituieren über die Generationsfolge hinweg eine Identität, indem sie eine Kultur der Erinnerung ausbilden; und sie tun das–dieser Punkt ist für uns entscheidend–auf ganz verschiedene Weise.” My translation.

⁵⁴ While teaching in Latvia I would ask my students about their heroes. They all struggled to answer the question.

many historical events contributed to this success, the idea of the nation and its rhetoric were heavily influenced by German Romanticism and German Idealism (Merkel, 1998). National heroes were part of Latvia's First Republic, and in 1923 not only did Lāčplēša receive his own street name in Riga, but several other streets were named after other characters from the heroic epic. Furthermore, as in every other European country, the soldiers who had died for their motherland were honored with a national monument; the Latvian cemetery Rīgas Brāļu kapi (Brothers' Cemetery) in Riga commemorates the soldiers who died in the struggle for the country's independence. During the interwar period, Latvia did not differ from other European nations. However, a significant change occurred in the 1990s when it regained its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union: the national hero, once an essential element in nation-building, disappeared. Although Lāčplēšis continued to exist as a street name in Riga, he suddenly ceased to be the focal point of reference and was no longer invoked in public speeches and memorials to inspire the people (Smidchens, 2007). As one critic commented when the national epic was adapted for a rock opera in 1988: "Could Bearslayer be a typical victim of the cult of Stalin, forced to beg and grovel at the feet of the bureaucracy that had also stolen his sword and golden armor, his will and heroic strength?" (Mazversite, 1989: 43). The shift from hero to victim is symbolised in the transformation of the museum dedicated to the Latvian riflemen into the "Museum of Occupation" (1993). The museum commemorating the official heroes of Soviet Latvia was altered to show the world the suffering of the Latvian nation rather than its heroism. The Museum of Occupation, which is included in the state protocol, is thus a unique case. France also opened museums to commemorate the years of German occupation, and these museums were called "Museums of Resistance". The same occurred in Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands. There are still dozens of museums across Europe that commemorate the resistance to Nazi Germany. Estonia, with its past similar to Latvia, named its museum the "Museum of Occupation and Fight for Freedom."

The awkward Heroes

By the 1990s, it was understandable that the Latvian riflemen, acclaimed heroes of the First World War, no longer fitted the needs of the time, and so the existing museum was converted into the "Museum of the Occupation of Latvia" in 1993. When Latvia was still part of the Russian empire, the riflemen had become heroes during WWI and its leading figures were campaigning for more independence. Following the successive defeats of the Russian army on the Western front and the growing threat of the German army on its borders, the high command in the Russian Army accepted a proposal to create a Latvian unit, "the Latvian riflemen" (Rifle Battalion), which soon became the symbol of Latvia's ambition to gain independence. In his book on the riflemen, Uldis Germanis explains that their popularity met the need of the patriotic propaganda to inspire people with heroic examples (Germanis, 1974: 88). However, many of the Latvian riflemen believed that Lenin was the best option for Latvia and joined him during the October Revolution. Lenin's revolution, in fact, would have ended in Moscow on 6 July 1918 had it not been for the Latvian riflemen. Their commanding officer Jukums Vācietis later became the first commander-in-chief of the Red Army (Germanis, 1974). Consequently, the Soviets built an impressive monument for the riflemen in Riga city centre in 1970, commemorating the men who were Lenin's most loyal revolutionaries. By the 1990s, however, they were no longer considered national heroes, and their museum underwent a radical transformation.

Other options for constructing national heroes that were not tainted by the communist past remained available. The most obvious choice seemed to be the people on the barricades in the 1990s, standing up against the Soviet regime and fighting for their liberation from Soviet occupation. The image of people on barricades has been used many times in the modern western world. Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), with Marianne standing bare breasted on the barricades with the flag of the revolution, has become the French national icon. When six Latvians were killed on 20 January 1991 in Riga by Soviet special forces (OMON) (Bleiere, 2006: 443), the event could have been inscribed into the Western tradition of a heroic act. It was without doubt an act of courage to build barricades in the center of Riga and to defy the Soviet empire, especially after twelve people had just been shot in Vilnius. While it is understandable that the new republic refused to incorporate the Latvian riflemen into its national narrative, it is not so clear why the new state rejected the people giving their lives in the fight for freedom from Soviet rule as heroes *par excellence*. In the *History of Latvia: The 20th Century*, published with the help of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we can read that "about 500,000 people took to the streets to protest. [...] OMON forces attacked the defenders of the barricades multiple times, and during one of these attacks a person was killed. The most significant attack by OMON forces was on the Latvian Ministry of the Interior on January 20, when five people were killed" (Bleiere, 2006: 444). The names of those killed are not mentioned by the authors.

The perspective historians take here is interesting since the event is described from the point of view of the attackers. The OMON forces were fighting, while the people on the barricades were simply killed. It could have also been written from the perspective of the people on the barricades, who might then not only have been killed but would have died for 'something'. There is a difference between "being killed" and "dying for something." One is killed in a traffic accident, but the classic hero dies for a cause. In *A Concise History of the Baltic States* by Latvian-American author Andrejs Plakans, these people are said to have been killed in a "shooting incident". One has to imagine a French history book explaining Delacroix's painting with this phrase, a "shooting incident," with the dead simply lying on the ground as Marianne walks over them. Or imagine a history book on the Warsaw ghetto uprising describing those who lost their lives as dying in a "shooting incident" rather than as the result of their heroic act. Similarly, Achilles did not die in a "fighting incident". He made the decision to go to Troy and did not die there accidentally. Another detail in Plakans's description worth mentioning relates to the "four civilians" who died, while other writers counted six (Plakans, 2011: 398). Plakans is correct insofar as the other two victims were policemen, defending the people against the Soviet Special Forces; imagine a report on 9/11 in which all the firefighters who died on duty at the World Trade Center have been removed from the list of victims.

Latvian historians and writers do not see what happened in Riga on 20 January 1991 as a heroic event. In *Imagining the Nation: Modernity and Revolution in Latvia*, Daina S. Eglitis does not name the victims either, but mentions the ethnicity of the demonstrators, "thousands of unarmed Latvians". On the other hand, Eglitis dedicates half a page of her discussion of Latvian identity to the fact that the Latvian-American Association, at a conference in Jūrmala in Soviet Latvia, provided the American participants "with lapel pins to hand out to people both in and outside the conference; the pins depicted the American flag and the pre-1940, maroon and white Latvian flag joined at the poles. During television coverage of the conference, the pins worn by some delegates were shown up close numerous times for up to ten seconds" (Eglitis, 2002: 59). She also names the American speaker at the conference, Jack Matlock, several times. Such detail over some events and silence over the names of those who were killed can only be deliberate.

On the “Latvian history” website, which is run by a Latvian PhD student in English, some of the names of the six victims are at last mentioned:

“At 21:06 OMON approached the ministry of Interior and opened fire. They hoped for stiff resistance. However, the ministry building was taken with ease. One ministry officer was shot dead. The only serious response was from militiamen who opened fire. This resulted in wild shooting in the parks that caused the deaths of two cameramen, Gunārs Zvaigzne and Andris Slapiņš. Both cameramen filmed their own deaths as bullets hit them. Two militia officers died and schoolmate E. Riekstinš was shot dead. OMON suffered no damage. However, there is a video that shows how an OMON car takes away a dead body at high speed. There is a theory of a so called “third force” that also took part in shootings. They were men wearing camouflage and masks and took part in the shootings” (Ligaru, 2011, accessed 28/7/2022).

This description of the event is as unheroic as possible. The author assumed the attackers were hoping for “stiff resistance” and were disappointed that the “building was taken with ease”. No one heroically resisted the Soviet Special Forces. The act of resistance by the two policemen, which could have easily been described in a heroic narrative, is transformed into a “wild shooting” so that their action appears to have caused the death of five people. We are informed of the names of the three civilians killed, but not the names of the two policemen who died for Latvia.

These two unnamed policemen, killed on duty and left out of Plakans’s list of casualties, were police officers Vladimir Gomanovič and Sergei Konoņenko. Their names indicate that they belong to the Russian-speaking community in Latvia. As Eglitis explains, this does not fit into the narrative since it was “Latvians” who took part in the demonstration; the presence of any ethnic Russians dying for the new state would have contradicted this version of events.

This systematic exclusion of the heroes from the official narrative can also be demonstrated through an important figure of the independence movement: Mavriks Vulfssons. A letter published on 3 February 1990 in the *New York Times* described him as follows: “The Latvian Popular Front, backed by more than 90 percent of Latvians, receives significant support also from Russians (about 50 percent from voting patterns) and other nationalities, especially Jews. One of the chief spokesmen for the Popular Front, Mavriks Vulfsons, is a Jewish journalist, who was elected to the Supreme Soviet in Moscow. In a recent poll, to determine the most trusted public official in Latvia, Mr. Vulfsons was second, behind the president of the Latvian Writers’ Union, but ahead of the chairman of the Latvian Popular Front” (Latvia and the Jews, 1990). Vulfsons’s popularity in Latvia was the result of his intervention at the Latvian Writers’ Union Congress in June 1988, when, facing the TV cameras, he read out the secret content of the Hitler-Stalin pact. As Artis Pabriks and Aldis Purs write, this announcement “could be considered the first official challenge of the legitimacy of Soviet power in Latvia. [...] The announcement triggered tremendous political upheaval that was dubbed the ‘Awakening’ by journalists” (Pabriks & Purs, 2001: 53). Vulfsons himself described the reaction: “During a break in the proceedings, Pugo [Boris Pugo, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Latvian SSR] hurried up to me. Flushed with anger, he hissed: “Do you know what you’ve just done? You killed Soviet Latvia” (Vulfsons, 1998: 81).

Here too we have the elements of a heroic act: a person who dares to stand up alone and defy Soviet power. Although the official, state-sponsored history of Latvia mentions Vulfsons, it does so in a very peculiar way: “Mavriks Vulfsons, a well-known political commentator and active participant in the event of 1940, [said] that a socialist revolution had not taken place in Latvia in 1940” (Bleiere, 1996: 432-433). No further

explanation is given as to his being an “active participant in the event of 1940”, and there is no mention of his reading out the Stalin-Hitler Pact, nor the impact of his speech.

This tendency to ignore a potential national hero is reinforced by historians and by Palkans in his *Concise History of the Baltic States*, who does not find Mavriks Vulfsons worthy of mention –nor does Guntars Ābols in his *Contribution of History to Latvian Identity*. For Ābols, “fear has simply vanished. The process seems to bolster the opinion that fear had been the cement holding the USSR together. If so, the demise of the USSR dates back to the exhortation of John Paul II: Do not fear!” (Ābols, 2003: 255).

There seems to be a divine force at work in Latvia’s history while a Jewish writer does not need to be praised for his courage, and if he is not ignored then he is resented. Džemma Skulme, one of the members of the Popular Front, twenty-five years after the event, still downplayed his contribution: “Mavrik Vulfsons didn’t reveal anything new to us. [...] In my opinion he planned his speech depending on situations which would develop during the plenum” (Slūžas vaļā, 2013). The Museum of the Popular Front dedicated to the times of the barricades and the Popular Front (Latvijas Tautas fronte), which was co-founded by Vulfsons in October 1988, shows footage of the Latvian Writers’ Union Congress in June 1988 but Vulfsons’s historic speech is not shown. In fact, he is not mentioned even once in the whole exhibition. A sentence inscribed on the wall above the museum’s information desk may explain his curious absence: “It was our battle and our victory. We do not owe any thanks to anyone else for it”⁵⁵.

It would seem that the only unifying national figure who remained is Kārlis Ulmanis, who in 1934 assumed power and established an authoritarian rule in Latvia until the Soviet occupation in 1940. A new monument was erected in his honor after 2000 and a large street was named after him. There is, however, one thing that disqualified him from becoming Latvia’s national hero. This was not so much his being a dictator, but his giving Latvia up to the Soviets without any resistance, for it was Ulmanis himself who signed the pact incorporating Latvia into the Soviet Union. While it may have been reasonable, perhaps, not to resist the Soviets like the Finns did in 1940, his choice of submitting to the Soviets could not fit easily into Latvia’s heroic narrative.

As demonstrated by these examples, the nineteenth century was still in need of heroes for nation-building purposes. As Pumpurs (here quoted in Smidchens, 2007: 488) saw it, “The heroes of legends become the heroes of the nation, they struggle and die for the freedom and independence of the Latvian nation”. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, it seemed that ethnic Latvian heroes had fought for the wrong cause, like the riflemen, and that when they fought for the right cause they were not seen as ethnic Latvians.

The question of Latvia’s reluctance to construct a heroic image of itself remains. Eglitis identified in post-Soviet Latvian society a tendency towards normality, which in her opinion was perceived as not being related to any Soviet culture. This suggests that Latvia’s rejection of heroism could be understood as a critique of Soviet culture with its glorification of heroes. The rejection of Soviet heroes, war, revolution or work, could have led to the rejection of heroes as such, and as the saying goes “the baby was thrown out with the bath water”.

Another possible explanation is that postmodern society no longer needs nineteenth-century national heroes (Sedlenieks, 2013), which is why their absence is not necessarily a sign of a lack of unity; on the

⁵⁵ Seen by the author on a visit to the museum in December 2013. The period of “awakening” and the barricades has a strong presence in Latvia’s collective memory; however, as this inscription shows, the contribution of people of non-Latvian origins is simply erased from this memory and nationalised.

contrary, as Brecht's Galileo said: "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero" (Brecht, 1962: 114). Yet these two arguments would have been more convincing had Latvian history not tended to be written only as the story of victims and victimhood. Or, as Eglitis and Ardava put it: "The history and memory of victimhood [...] united, while, perhaps paradoxically, the history and memory of victory [...] divided" (Eglitis & Ardava, 2012: 1045).

A Unifying Victimhood

Once it had regained its independence, Latvia chose to build its national unity based on the victim rather than the hero. In an effort to unite ethnic Latvians, the victim was now cultivated as the protagonist of the country's narrative. Yet the new focus on Latvia's victimhood could neither be explained, as Eglitis argued, as a search for normality, nor, to borrow the words of Brecht's Galileo, did it mean that the Latvians were now happy with their lot.

The focus on the image and role of the victim can be seen during Latvia's memorial days, and in its history books and public speeches. In 1991, for example, the government declared that one week in June would serve as "Memorial week for the Victims of Stalinism". In 1993, the "Museum of the Occupation of Latvia" was opened in Riga to commemorate the victims and to remind the world of the nation's suffering under Soviet occupation. Similarly, the mourning and grief over their losses during Stalin's terror unified the members of the movement for independence; for example, on 14th of June 1988, 100,000 people participated in a memorial march for those who had been deported under Stalin. The Latvian calendar includes three days of commemoration for victims: 25th of March marks The Communist Genocide Commemoration day; 14th of June is The Communist Genocide Commemoration Day; and 2nd of December is the Totalitarian Communist Genocide Victims Memorial Day.

The common motive uniting the theme of victimhood is the emphasis on the protagonists being innocent victims of historical conflicts. Therefore, the contribution of Latvia to the building of the Soviet Union and to the killing of Jews during the German occupation tends to be silenced or explained away⁵⁶. One telling example of this self-image-as-the-victim is found in Andrew Ezergailis's *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941-1944*. In the chapter on police battalions, he comments that "the question here is whether or not any battalions, in addition to regular military assignments, also performed tasks that violated international law [...]—that is committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. [...] A case can be made that they [the Latvians] themselves were victims of a sort" (Ezergailis, 1996: 321). One of the events he discusses to clarify whether they were "victims of a sort" was the police battalion employed in "guarding the Warsaw ghetto in the mid-1942" (Ezergailis, 1996: 327). According to Ezergailis, the Latvian 22nd Daugavas Schutzmannschaft Battalion, 556 strong, and the Latvian 272nd Daugavas Schutzmannschaft Battalion, a 403 strong unit, were employed as guards at the Warsaw ghetto from 1st of August 1942 until mid-September 1942. Ezergailis describes the problems Latvians had with the SS in Warsaw: "The petty offenses and the constant drunkenness must have been part of the reason the Latvians had only a short stay. Another strong possibility is offered in a documentary novel that Jānis Zariņš, a veteran himself, wrote about Latvian

⁵⁶ After teaching for many years in Latvia, I recall that none of my Latvian students seemed to have been aware that the first leader of the Red Army was an ethnic Latvian; on the other hand, whenever we discussed the Holocaust, they often mentioned the high number of Jewish communists, but never mentioned the ethnic Latvians within the Secret Police.

soldiers in World War II" (Ezergailis, 1996: 329). Quoting from the novel, he writes: "Of course we are getting the money from the Jews, but not by stealing, not by robbing them, but by helping them. In this period of time, we have already helped more than forty Jewish families to escape to Palestine" (Ezergailis, 1996: 329). And then concludes: "This does, of course, come from a novel, published in America to boot. Yet there may be a grain of truth. [...] If only a half of Zariņš' tale is true, and we have no evidence of any such help, that alone could explain the quick departure of the Latvians from Warsaw" (Ezergailis, 1996: 329).

In all likelihood, Ezergailis did not know the true reason for the Latvian soldier's departure, or else he could not have used this episode to illustrate their victimhood. The fact is that the Latvian soldiers left Warsaw because their work was done: from the end of July until the middle of September, when the last selection took place, 5,000 to 10,000 Jews were rounded up daily, dragged out of their houses, and beaten into the trains that took them to Treblinka, where, upon arrival, they were exterminated in the gas chambers. By the middle of September, the extermination of the Jews of Warsaw was over: 300,000 of them had been murdered in Treblinka so no extra guards were needed to oversee those few who remained in the ghetto. In other words, the Latvian guards had accomplished their mission. Incidentally, in his later work Ezergailis tries to demonstrate the extent to which Latvia was the victim of Soviet disinformation by examining Latvians' contribution to the Holocaust (Ezergailis, 2005).

A Society without Heroes

There is no doubt that Latvia and its people suffered greatly during the years of Soviet and Nazi occupation. After independence, and for the first time in fifty years, Latvia could at last remember and grieve publicly over the victims of the Soviet occupation. The tens of thousands of Latvians sent to Siberia meant that nearly every family in Latvia had one member deported, and many of those deported never came back. In the nineteenth century the fate of being a victim and the "lack of national self-esteem [...] was to be cured by heroic historical narrative" (Smidchens, 2007: 488). At the end of the twentieth century, Latvia went in the opposite direction and embraced victimhood rather than heroism. This choice had consequences.

One social impact is on the relationship of the state with its ethnic minorities. By definition, these communities are excluded from the Latvian national narrative: if they are Russian-speaking they are seen as part of the legacy of the oppressor; if they belong to any other minority that has suffered under twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, they are seen as competitors for recognition through victimhood. To a certain extent, the feeling of community can be strengthened through a narrative of victimhood, but it is more difficult to build an open and diverse society on such a discourse. As Pieter Lagrou puts it: "A commemorative discourse of victimhood is very much the opposite of a constructive and dynamic engagement with the present, but rather a paralysing regression of democratic debate (Lagrou, 2010: 283). Aleida Assmann came to a similar conclusion in her book *Shadows of Trauma*. She describes a group trying to seek recognition through its suffering in the past but who blocks its own development and becomes immune towards the suffering of other groups (Assmann, 2006: 81). The same sentiments were expressed by the Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry. Being a victim, he writes, nourished a resentment that "nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. [...] and blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future" (Améry, 1980: 68).

As we have seen, the creation of commemorative practices revolving around our own victimhood will always mean that one has to underline his own innocence, or as Assmann puts it, it “consists in its absolute passivity, connoted with innocence and purity” (Assmann 2006: 80). Self-representation as a victim does take away agency and by creating the image of a victim keeps its recipients in a state of helplessness.

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A New Institution for Serbian Memory: the Genocide Victims' Museum

Vukašin Zorić

"Sometimes it is easier to dream the old dreams – even when they are nightmares – than to wake up to unfamiliar realities."

Mark Mazower (1999, p. 395–396)

The nation-states, as dominant mnemonic agents in Europe since the French Revolution, supported narratives that depicted virtuous national heroes and personifications of the nation. Nations were attributed eternal characteristics, uniqueness, and superiority, which overshadowed shared international and European historical experiences and heritage (Berger et al., 2002, p. 9). Heroic national narratives remained dominant after the First World War when the past was functionalized for national integration and political gain even more intensively than in the "long" 19th century (Berger, 2007, p. 30). Following the Second World War, narratives in countries that had been at war with Germany found heroes in the resistance movements, in case their country was occupied (e.g., France and Denmark), or in the nationwide wartime effort (Great Britain) (ibid, p. 48). Simultaneously, the pan-European trauma of the Second World War allowed steps to be taken to formulate a European identity based on shared European memory. Post-war integration of the Western European countries de-emphasized the national framework of the past and allowed a transnational anti-fascist narrative to thrive (ibid, p. 56).

However, the end of the Cold war saw the re-actualization of national narratives, especially in post-socialist societies (ibid, p. 52–53). Different from previous methods of narrating the nation through celebrations of heroism, victimization suited post-Cold war national memories better because "[t]o have been a victim gives you a right to complain, to protest, to make demands.", as noted by French-Bulgarian theorist Tsvetan Todorov (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 86). Thus, victims took the role of heroes as forebearers of the national narrative. The so-called "shift from heroization to victimization" (Sabrow, 2011, p. 90), in its particularity, was more applicable to national memories than to the pan-European one. Thus, various national narratives of victimhood blossomed (Müller, 2004; Meckl, 2016). Victimhood narratives became sources of legitimation (Lagrou, 2011, p. 283), which continues to hinder international dialogue, European integration, and scholarly debate through the sanctification of the victims. Oversaturation of the public discourse with various victimhood narratives created an atmosphere of competition (Chaumont, 2010), where every group struggles for recognition and reparation.

Post-socialist and post-Yugoslav Republic of Serbia offers an illustrative example of the "post-heroic" shift because the processes of transition to capitalism and Yugoslav wars happened simultaneously, thus making the renegotiation of the national narrative an urgent necessity. Additionally, Yugoslavia was a socialist country outside of the Soviet bloc, which was never occupied by the Soviet Union, and where the Soviet Union had no immediate political influence since 1948. Furthermore, the communist regime was not merely installed as a result of the Red Army's advance in 1944/5, but it was a result of a revolutionary resistance movement that spearheaded the anti-occupation uprising since 1941. That meant that Serbian memory lacked the perfect enemy, a foreign oppressor personified by the Soviet Union in the contemporary Eastern European narratives (Ostrittchouk, 2022). The absence of a foreign enemy led Serb mnemonic agents to construct a narrative of Yugoslavia as a mistake whose design was to the detriment of the Serbian

people (Jović, 2016; Nikolić, 2017). Arguments for this thesis were sought in inter-ethnic conflicts that happened in Yugoslavia during the Second World War.

Discussions about the Second World War in the Republic of Serbia are conducted not only at the level of historiography and memory but also at the level of internal and external politics. Serbian historian Dubravka Stojanović points out that the "monopoly over memory" (2011: 247) of the Second World War is critical to Serbian politics. What she noticed eleven years ago – that the Second World War is still the topic of speeches by politicians at all levels in the Serbian government and that it is used for national mobilization – perdures until today. State institutions, especially museums dedicated to contemporary Serbian history, partake in the so-called "battle for the truth about the Second World War" (ibid).

Before we analyze the current role of the Genocide Victims' Museum in Serbia, we ought to take a brief look at the history of the memorialization of the Second World War in Serbia before the Museum was founded in 1992. Then, we will present the politics of memory of the Museum when it was founded and in the last decade, when it became more prominent under the leadership of director Veljko Đurić Mišina and bishop Jovan Ćulibrk, who aimed to fill the gap left by previous scholars on the topic of Serbian memory in post-socialism. In the end, this paper will try to answer two main questions: What are the consequences of the simultaneity of the break-up of socialist Yugoslavia and the beginning of the "post-heroic age" (Sabrow, 2011, p. 92) for memory in contemporary Serbia? How do two main mnemonic actors, the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), cooperate and collide on a shared stage about memory?

Prelude: Heroization (1945–1990)

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) led the partisan movement in occupied Yugoslavia (1941–1945). With the help of the Soviet Red Army, the partisans liberated the territory of Yugoslavia from Nazi control and their allies (a conflict the CPY named "The People's Liberation War"), and the communists took over the monopoly of political power, including the field of politics of memory. Prominent party member Milovan Đilas declared the crucial goal of state propaganda at the Vth Congress of CPY (1948):

"Education of our people in the spirit of boundless love and loyalty to their homeland, on the sources of our glorious revolutionary traditions from the past and in the spirit of the People's Liberation Struggle, always keeping in mind the upbuilding of socialism" (Koljanin, 2013, p. 274).

With the supervision of the party leadership, an official version of the past was created based on the state's founding myth - a heroic and "morally pure" partisan struggle for freedom and revolution (Karge, 2014, p. 11). The partisans, which came from various ethnic groups of Yugoslavia, became a paradigm of "brotherhood and unity" and the ideological pillar of the new socialist federation. The politics of memory that focused on this embellished image of the partisan struggle left no room for a nuanced judicial and historiographical interpretation of the ethnically and ideologically motivated atrocities that took place during the war. As a result, the memories of the war that did not coincide with the state-mandated narrative were silenced for forty years (ibid, pp. 12–13). The victorious had a monopoly on interpreting war events, which they intended to pass on to future generations.

Former partisans used the Alliance of People's Liberation War Veteran Organizations (or SUBNOR, following the organization's acronym in Serbo-Croatian) to meet and formulate interests. SUBNOR was founded in 1947, and it proclaimed preserving and disseminating this desirable memory as one of its primary goals:

"The Alliance will actively work to preserve and refresh the memories of the heroic struggle of our peoples, of the heroes of the People's Liberation War, so that our future generations can be inspired and learn from them. [...] Following the example of the heroes of the People's Liberation War, we need to nurture our youth, who will be imbued with true patriotism and love for their homeland and capable, in case of need, of defending the achievements of the People's Liberation War" (Jović, 1989, p. 119).



The memory of the partisan struggle was intended to be omnipresent. Members of SUBNOR visited schools to tell war stories, and SUBNOR sponsored student literary and art contests with topics on the People's Liberation War. Furthermore, it organized jubilee celebrations and trips and hikes to significant wartime locations (Zorić, 2015, p. 456-460). Additionally, SUBNOR was an active participant in international veteran affairs, being the founding member of the World Veteran Federation (Jović, 1989, p. 104), a worldwide, inter-bloc organization focused on maintaining world peace.

SUBNOR focused on supporting projects celebrating the partisans' victories and sacrifices but did not ignore the remembrance of ethnic violence and genocide, at least from the early sixties. Norwegian historian Pål Kolstø notes that immediately after the Second World War, most European societies "wanted to get on with life and preferred not to remember the hard times they had been through" (Kolstø, 2011, p. 239). The Croatian department of SUBNOR led the initiative of memorializing the site of the Ustaša camp Jasenovac. That initiative resulted in a sculpture by a prominent Yugoslav sculptor, Bogdan Bogdanović, and an exhibition dedicated to the victims of the Ustaša in a museum (ibid). The original permanent exhibition depicting the atrocities by showing instruments and weapons of torture and murder was scattered and destroyed during the War in Croatia, and a new exhibit was unveiled in 2006 (ibid).

Despite its activities, it is hard to argue that SUBNOR succeeded in passing the revolutionary torch. Even though it had state funding and a massive membership (almost 1,5 million members), SUBNOR had little success communicating its message to the post-war generation (Karge, 2014). Their Local units even defied the policy of the main board by building

Jasenovac memorial opening ceremony, 1966
(Spomenik Database)

commemorative plaques for local victims instead of monuments to the victorious partisans (Đureinović, 2020; Zorić, 2015). However, the heroization of partisans remained the main state-sponsored narrative until the late eighties, when SUBNOR was marginalized as an organization. The old memory-bearers were the veterans of the communist revolution and were unfit to tell the new, national, non-communist story (Đureinović, 2020).

At that time, the regime of Slobodan Milošević needed to reinvent national memory in the context of the fall of communism in Europe and the break-up of Yugoslavia. Milošević, even though he rose to power as a

member of the League of Communists, adopted Serbian nationalist rhetoric in late eighties to consolidate power within the Yugoslav federation. The main mnemonic agents of socialist Yugoslavia, the veterans of the revolution were replaced by nationalist intellectuals and the Serbian Orthodox Church, who promoted a new interpretation of the Second World War in Yugoslavia. The "Brotherhood and unity" motto was dismissed, and the genocide against the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia became the focus of the national narrative (Dragović-Soso, 2002). The influential Serbian historian Radovan Samardžić even declared genocide a quintessential part of Serbian history (ibid, p. 114). The stage was set for an institution, rather than an organization, to push this new narrative forward, and a museum overtook the role of fighters.

The Formative Years (1990-2002)

The motion to create the Museum originated outside the Serbian government and outside of historiographic and museologist circles since the idea arose within an amateur community (Đurić Mišina, 2020). In February 1990, the influential weekly newspaper *Politika svet* organized a roundtable about the importance of establishing a Museum of Genocide Victims in the Second World War (Đurić Mišina, 2015). Later, the idea was pushed by an institution whose members were very active in the national mobilization of the Serbs since the late eighties (Milosavljević, 1995), the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. The general-secretary of the Academy wrote directly to the President of the Republic of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević on December 3, 1990, to inform him of the initiative led by Milan Bulajić, a jurist and retired diplomat (Đurić Mišina, 2015). Bulajić was known for his interest in Holocaust and genocide studies. His initiative was presented to Milošević before the beginning of the violent phase of the break-up of Yugoslavia, meaning that the conditions already seemed favorable in Serbia to introduce a new viewpoint on the history of the Second World War.

However, the motion came to fruition after the wars in Croatia and Bosnia broke out. The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia passed a law on the establishment of the Museum of Genocide Victims ("Zakon o osnivanju Muzeja žrtava genocida") and founded the museum on July 16, 1992 (*Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije*, 1992, p. 1644).⁵⁷ The law defined the object and the purpose of the institution in its first Article:

"For the permanent memory of victims of genocide over Serbs, collection, processing, and use of information on them, and fulfillment of obligations under the International Convention on Genocide Prevention and Punishment [...] The Museum can also work on collecting, processing, and using the information on the genocide against the Jews, Roma, and victims who belong to other nationality or ethnic minorities (ibid)".

The same law declared April 22 to be an annual Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Genocide since, on that date in 1945, prisoners in Jasenovac liberated themselves from the Ustaša. Interestingly, there is no mention of a permanent exhibition in the law (ibid). To this day, the Genocide Victims' Museum remains an institution without an exhibition area, and it is more comparable to a documentation center or a research institute rather than a space that aims to represent genocide like elsewhere in Europe (Moradi, 2017; Six-Hohenbalken, 2017; Biwa, 2017). The absence of a permanent exhibition shifts the focus of the analysis

⁵⁷ The Republic of Serbia was a part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was created in april 1992.

from the (nonexistent) visual representation of the genocide in the museum to the textual or discursive representation of the genocide in the museum's publications.

The law was the starting point of a long process of emergence for the Genocide Victims' Museum. The museum was unregistered until January 27, 1995. It required working space which it received in phases (1993–1999). All the offices the museum received were in the same building in central Belgrade, meaning that the museum had no working space in Kragujevac, its official seat (Đurić Mišina, 2015, p. 28). The state, even though it founded the museum, seems to have been passive and uninterested in the functioning of the museum at this time. On the other hand, the enthusiasts that led the museum were reluctant to transfer their activities from Belgrade, the center of political power, to Kragujevac, a town of regional importance and a place of a 1941 massacre the Germans perpetrated on civilians. The absence of the museum from Kragujevac indicates the priorities of its creators. The symbol of German atrocities was put aside, leaving the spotlight solely on the victims of Ustaša.

The first temporary exhibition presented by the Genocide Victims' Museum was created in cooperation with the Museum of Vojvodina, and a striking symbolism was attached to this first event. The exhibition was dedicated to Jasenovac and opened on April 22, 1993, in the Krsmanović's House in central Belgrade. Before analyzing the political dimension of the exhibition's content, it is worth noting that the unification of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes into a common state was proclaimed in Krsmanović's House on December 1, 1918. Therefore, holding the exhibition about Jasenovac Camp in this building was meant to highlight the grim consequences of Yugoslav unification (genocide of the Serbs) and to strengthen the belief that Yugoslavia as a project was a mistake to the detriment of the Serbian people. The director of the Genocide Victims' Museum, the aforementioned Milan Bulajić, wrote in the catalog of the exhibition:

"In discussions about the political resolution of the Yugoslav crisis and the demarcation maps of Croatia, Republika Srpska, and Republika Srpska Krajina, the question of the status of Jasenovac – the Ustaša death camp – must be raised. It must not be allowed that Jasenovac – the Ustaša death camp – is broken up by turning administrative borders into state borders" (*Jasenovac*, 1994, p. 4).

From this quote, one can deduce the point of view of the director of the state institution on the situation on the battlefield at that time and his proposal for a solution to the Yugoslav crisis. Since the Jasenovac camp system extended to the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulajić argued for the dissolution of a border between the Republika Srpska (territory controlled by Bosnian Serbs) and the Republika Srpska Krajina (territory controlled by Croatian Serbs). It is also clear that Bulajić does not recognize the sovereignty of the Republic of Croatia over the territory it treated as occupied. Further in the text, he even states that the exhibition is an appeal for the Jasenovac Memorial Area to be recognized as a United Nations World Cultural Heritage site.

The first exhibition, created partly by the Genocide Victims' Museum, had a multi-layered ideological message. The choice of the location of the exhibition points to the break with Yugoslavia, and the choice of approach to the theme speaks of the need to justify the control of Serbian forces in the area around Jasenovac. The content of the exhibition itself represented the victims and the various ways they were being killed to shock and mobilize the viewers' disgust and empathy. The victims were not "victims of fascist terror," as they had been during the rule of the communists, but mainly ethnically-classified Serbs, Roma, and Jews.

We can agree with the conclusion of Czech historian Karin Hofmeisterová, who wrote that during Bulajić's directorship (1993–2002 - Đurić Mišina, 2015), the Museum "continued to claim Serbian victimhood, even

at the cost of historical inaccuracies and insisted on the similarity of Serbian and Jewish experiences in that period" (Hofmeisterová, 2019, p. 514). Bulajić exhibited problematic and unacademic behavior in his endeavor to prove that more than a million victims, mostly Serbs, died in Jasenovac. Notably, his claims were dismissed at a conference held by the Jasenovac Research Institute in the United States in 1997 (Kolstø, 2011, p. 233). Later, he had to apologize at a conference in Jerusalem in 2002 because he cited anti-Jewish sources in his book on Jasenovac (ibid, p. 231). That same year, Bulajić was dismissed due to political changes after the end of Milošević's regime.

The Renaissance (2013-2022)

During the post-Milošević regime, which started on October 5, 2000, no alteration was made to the discourse from the nineties. On the contrary, the delegitimization of Yugoslavia and the revision of the history of the Second World War were the focus of the state institutions in charge of memory (Đureinović, 2020). However, during the so-called *October 5* and after the dismissal of Bulajić, there was a noticeable shift in the Museum's stance on the number of victims in Jasenovac. In cooperation with Croatian historians, some researchers conducted thorough investigations and estimated the approximate demographically plausible number of victims, about a hundred thousand (Kolstø, 2011). Despite progress in research, from 2003 to 2013, the museum was a less visible mnemonic agent than a body formed by the church: the Jasenovac Committee of the Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), headed by Jovan Ćulibrk. The goals of Ćulibrk and the SOC were already a topic of scholarly interest (Byford, 2007; David, 2013; Hofmeisterová, 2019). Sociologist Lea David pointed out that the SOC gained public trust by the time Milošević fell, but "instead of becoming a leading institution that could approach questions of responsibility, the Serbian Orthodox Church became a leading right-wing nationalist force" (David, 2013, p. 71). The Jasenovac Committee, led by Ćulibrk, received support from the Serbian government and became a mnemonic agent that was internationally recognized, partially owing to Ćulibrk's connections at Yad Vashem (Hofmeisterová, 2019). However, the memory politics of the SOC had shortcomings in terms of internationally recognized goals of the Holocaust and genocide awareness. David warns that the pact between the church and the state perpetuated the claim of the timeless Serbian righteousness and victimhood, which was to be used to turn the public eye away from the Serbian responsibility for crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars (David, 2013). Coincidentally, the Genocide Victims' Museum underwent personnel changes in 2013. Historian Veljko Đurić Mišina became an acting director in June 2013, and bishop Jovan Ćulibrk became a member of the management board of the museum (Đurić Mišina, 2015). The bishop's idea of genocide, embodied in the concept of the New Martyrs of Jasenovac, began its institutional coexistence with a research-based production of museums' associates, including those with a clear pro-Serbian agenda.

Yearbook of Genocide Research

An element of the museum's work intensification was the publication of research results through periodicals. In 2014, the museum established the *Yearbook of the Genocide Victims' Museum (Godišnjak Muzeja žrtava genocida)*. It changed its name to the *Yearbook of Genocide Research (Godišnjak za istraživanje genocida)* the following year. The acting director emphasized in the program in the 2014 issue

that in the absence of a museum exhibit, the museum should have a lively publishing activity and a yearbook. Furthermore, he announced that the texts in the *Yearbook* could also refer to the First World War (Đurić Mišina, 2014).⁵⁸

In the previous period, the museum included the Yugoslav wars and the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in its scope of research, with an exclusive focus on Serbian victims. The *Yearbook* followed this policy. By including the First World War as a theme, the museum joined the mnemonic agents who claim that the twentieth century is the century of futile Serbian sacrifice, the "lost century" for the Serbs (Nikolić, 2017; Jović, 2016).

Another change in scope, which followed in 2019, confirmed the museum's intention to consider the twentieth century as a century of Serbian victimhood. In the second issue of the *Yearbook* for that year, the editor announced that the *Yearbook* would deal with the victims of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), as well as the victims of the partisans (1944–1945) (Đurić Mišina, 2019). Such choices indicate the focus of the museum and its *Yearbook* – the crime's quality and the quantity are of secondary importance if it is about victims to whom the researchers have assigned a Serbian national identity.

It is worth noting that despite placing the Serbian victims at the center of attention, the museum still experienced criticism from the political right. In an emotional text, Đurić Mišina referred to the unnamed critics who condemned the museum for allegedly reducing the number of Serbian victims. He defended the museum's work by stating that "such odium is probably a consequence of the fact that the few employees in this institution look at historical events from a professional and scientific point of view, rejecting mythomania, folklore, and similar "theses." All our research activities are transparent and verifiable, and experts should judge the quality" (Đurić Mišina, 2020, p. 316).

Right-wing criticism of the museum shows the central importance of Jasenovac's abnormal number of victims, ranging from 700 000 to 1,1 million, in contemporary Serbian nationalistic memory.

In 2021, Đurić Mišina's directorship ended, and so did his editorship. Under his leadership, the *Yearbook* became a publication that encouraged knowledge of the genocide against the Serbs, the Holocaust, and the Samudaripen. Historiography presented by the Genocide Victims' Museum did not challenge the state-sponsored narrative.

Topic/Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019/1	2019/2	2020/1	2020/2	2021/1	Total
First World War	1	1	2	/	2	1	/	1	/	1	9
Second World War	9	6	7	6	4	8	2	5	1	4	52
Yugoslav Wars and NATO intervention	2	/	1	3	/	/	/	/	/	2	8
Archival sources	/	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	/	1	10
Other	3	2	6	6	2	4	10	6	4	3	46

⁵⁸ It should be noted that the *Yearbook* is considered to be in continuity with the five previous irregular anthologies published by the museum, so the numbering of the issues starts from number 6.

Table 1: Articles in the *Yearbook* by topic (*Godišnjak Muzeja žrtava genocida*, 2014; *Godišnjak za istraživanje genocida*, 2015–2021).

New Martyrdom: High Clergy and the Museum

"Therefore, no matter how often the world crucified the Serbs, they will resurrect because such is the path of the Serbian cross-bearers, and such is the logic of their cross."

David Petrović, bishop of Kruševac (Petrović, 2019, p. 64)

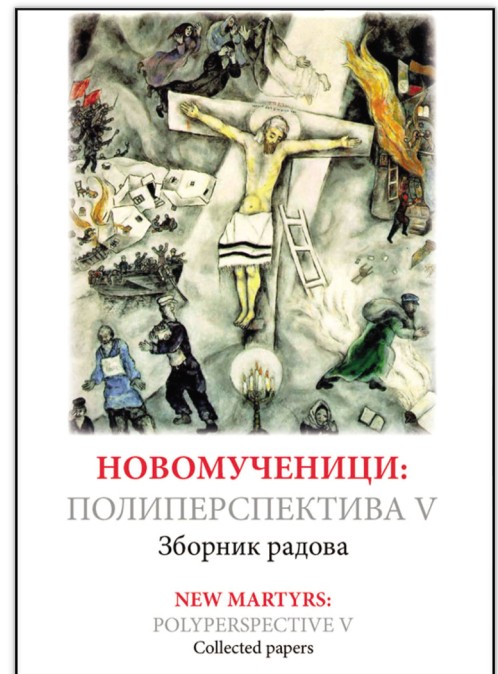
In 2019 and 2021, the Genocide Victims' Museum published the proceedings from two conferences organized in collaboration with the Jasenovac committee. Some participants (Serbian Orthodox bishops) used historiography to support the idea of the Serbian New Martyrs (novomučenici). The editor of both publications was bishop Jovan Ćulibrk, who stated that "rigorously re-examined historical facts are the basis for any (self)understanding of the mass suffering of the "short" yet painful 20th century" (Ćulibrk, 2021, p. 12). However, the content of some papers shows that the (self)understanding consists mainly of (self)victimization used to perpetuate the notion that Serbs are a people chosen by God. That further implies the interdependency of the Serbian nation and the Serbian Orthodox Church and their shared faith as martyrs that await the Messiah's Second coming (Ćulibrk, 2019).

Texts in the 2019 issue are particularly symptomatic. A retired bishop wrote:

"[O]ur biggest Graveyard, the New Serbian Kosovo, our biblical Mesopotamian Babylon – infernal Ustaše labyrinth of "death factory." Jasenovac is the cross-bearing symbol of the True Cross Itself, which extends to all foursome directions of our Motherland Earth, especially in Jasenovac Golgotha on the River Una's confluence to the Sava, the place that teaches remembrance and not malevolence, love for Martyrdom and not revenge. It brings to the memory the testament of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović to build the temple of forgiving in Jasenovac in remembrance of all innocently killed and as a sign of forgiveness to those who committed the crimes" (Jevtić, 2019: 15; typographical errors corrected by V.Z.).

One could unwrap a lot from this passage. First, there is a visible analogy between the suffering of the Serbian and Jewish people. Secondly, the assumption of the Orthodox essence in the Serbian victims of Jasenovac is repeated. Finally, the selective use of the legacy of the problematic bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1880–1956), whose undisguised anti-Semitism was ignored in Church circles (despite the re-actualization of the topic by researchers, see Byford, 2005; David, 2013; Hofmeisterová, 2019), is present as well. The readiness to utilize the Holocaust as a context of genocide against

The front cover of *New Martyrs: Poliperspektiva V* (2021)



the Serbs is once again paired with the unreadiness to face Velimirović's role in interwar and wartime Yugoslavia.⁵⁹

Moderate voices from the Church see the parallels between the suffering of Jews and Serbs as a chance for international recognition while appropriating every Serbian sacrifice to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Immoderate voices discredit the nationhood of neighboring nations and the right to the territory of neighboring states, using the genocide of Serbs in the Second World War as an excuse for new, divinely sanctioned killing (Petrović, 2019).

Conclusion

Polish historian Krzysztof Pomian writes that "[p]olitics is not about the past but about the future. However, one cannot shape the future without taking the past into account, because the past is present" (Pomian, 2009, p. 81). The political dimension of museums and their communication with the past to shape the future has been a topic of scholarly research for some time. Studies have shown that the very first public museums, founded after the French Revolution, had the intention to share "what had previously been private" and to expose "what had been concealed" (Bennet, 1995, p. 89). The Genocide Victims' Museum claims to be an institution to expose the atrocities committed during the Second World War (which evolved to the whole twentieth century) and honor the victims (Đurić Mišina, 2020). This goal is aligned with Chaumont's notion that "behind the pseudo-issue of knowledge was concealed a real issue of recognition" (Chaumont, 2019, p. 50).

The Genocide Victims' Museum example can help to answer the questions posed at the beginning of the article about memory-making in contemporary Serbia. The simultaneity of the disintegration of Yugoslavia at a time when the whole of Europe was dominated by a shift in focus from heroes to victims led to a change in the representation of the victims of the Second World War. The Republic of Serbia shifted its focus from supranational "victims of fascist terror" to Serb victims. As a mnemonic agent, the museum did not write out the minorities, including the Jews, from the national history of the Serbs. However, it focuses on minorities only when they were victims of the same perpetrator as the Serbs. The fact that the museum's publications focused on Serbian victims during the whole of the twentieth century testifies to the museum's bias and emphasis on the concept of victimhood.

To answer the question of the relationship between the state and the church as mnemonic actors, we emphasize that the Serbian Orthodox Church imbued Serbian victimhood with sanctity, appropriating them by doing so. As a secular institution of a secular state, the museum did not offer an alternative to the Church's reading of Serbian twentieth-century history.

The narrative of Serbian victimhood, by insisting on the singularity of the Serbian historical experience, serves as an ideological foundation of perpetuation of Serbian isolation from the European Union. It creates an atmosphere of competition with narratives of victimhood in neighboring, ex-Yugoslav, states and diminishes the results of the reconciliation process in the region. Furthermore, it disqualifies political alternatives to the current regime because the previous ruling options are condemned as neglecting towards the Serbian victims of the 20th century. Previous narrative of partisan heroism was abandoned

⁵⁹ Bishop Jevtić continued to perpetuate positive stereotypes of the Jews as Serbian brothers in suffering while denouncing the Paris commune, French socialism (sic!), the Turks, and the converts to Islam (poturice) (Jevtić, 2019).

because of its ideological incompatibility with the ruling anti-communist ideology, even though some of its elements could be useful in constructing an inclusive, transnational memory. Firstly, members of all nations of former Yugoslavia cooperated in the partisan movement. Secondly, the partisan movement can be understood as one of many European anti-fascist resistance movements, giving Serbia a place in the European memory.

During the redaction of this article, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić inaugurated the restoration of the central tower of the Staro Sajmište Concentration Camp in Belgrade. Vučić declared that he took pride in the fact that he was a part of the generation that liberated (sic!) the Camp (RTS, 2022). Once again, the remembrance of the Holocaust and genocide against the Serbs became a polygon of settling the score with the heritage of socialist Yugoslavia. Those who were victorious and liberated the country in the Second World War were dismissed – and the (self-proclaimed) liberators of memory and representatives of victims were given the spotlight. In contemporary Serbia, victims are not only in focus as a sacralized, and thus untouchable, collective entity, but the previously celebrated heroes are robbed of their primary quality, the achievement of liberation. The "shift from heroization to victimization" in Serbia was not only a triumph of the victimhood narrative and all its negative effects on European integrative processes but also an iconoclasm that intended to punish previously celebrated heroes with oblivion.

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Perceptions on the Greek War of Independence (1821 – 1828): Divergences between academic and public history

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Introduction

The history of Greece is marked by three pivotal events that have fuelled extensive debates. These milestones include the War of Independence from 1821 to 1828, the Asia Minor Catastrophe and WWII, and the subsequent civil war in the 1940s. Among these, the War of Independence holds particular significance as it led to the establishment of the modern Greek State. While the focus of this paper centres on the first milestone, it is crucial to acknowledge the interconnection and impact of all three events on the collective and individual memory of the Greek people. The second milestone, characterized by the Greek army's landing in Smyrna in 1919 with the consent of the Entente allies, notably the British and the French, aimed to safeguard the Greek-Orthodox population estimated at approximately two million individuals. However, the Greek army suffered defeat in September 1922, and the subsequent Lausanne Treaty imposed the compulsory exchange of Christians from Asia Minor with Muslims residing in Greece. This turn of events significantly shaped the historical trajectory of the region. The third milestone encompasses a series of events, including the Greek resistance to Mussolini, the four-year occupation by the Nazis, the subsequent resistance against them, and the three-year Civil War that concluded in 1949 with the defeat of the Left Democratic Army and the victory of the "national" army, supported by British and American forces. These three milestones have become deeply engraved in the collective and individual memory of the Greek people. Their impact permeates various aspects of public life; however, it is evident that different groups have interpreted and recorded these events in distinct ways. This paper specifically concentrates on the War of Independence, which is central to the formation of the modern Greek State. It occurred during a period when the Enlightenment movement waned, and Romanticism gained prominence. These historical circumstances, along with the prevailing ideological views, significantly influenced the contemporary and historical perceptions of this event.

The Greek War of Independence has often been depicted as the epitome of heroic spirit, glorifying the Greek rebels, while demonizing their Muslim Ottoman opponents with dehumanizing portrayals. This dichotomy in perceptions has prevailed both in the public discourse, where the war remains heroic, and in academic texts, where an increasing anti-heroic perspective has emerged. These contrasting interpretations coexist in Greek society, intersecting and influencing one another to a certain extent, while occasionally clashing.

The Greek War of Independence occupies a unique position in Greek collective memory and academic history. This paper will demonstrate that divergent perceptions of the war exist, with the public discourse emphasizing heroism and academia adopting a more critical stance. These contrasting perspectives, influenced by the fading Enlightenment and the rise of Romanticism, shape the understanding and interpretation of the Greek War of Independence. By acknowledging and analyzing these differing perceptions, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of this pivotal event in Greek history.

One event, two perceptions

The Greek War of Independence erupted at a significant juncture in 1821, coinciding with the waning influence of the Enlightenment and the rising prominence of Romanticism. These two intellectual movements had far-reaching and intricate effects, not only in the realm of art but also in intellectual life and politics. They played a crucial role in garnering support for the Greek War of Independence. The Enlightenment, with its ideals of freedom and critical thinking, deeply influenced numerous Greek scholars, particularly those in the Greek Diaspora, as well as bourgeois individuals, primarily merchants, who were active in major European cities. On the other hand, Romanticism elevated Ancient Greece to a position of eminence by exalting heroism, and it contributed to the growth of philhellenism—a movement that supported Greek independence—through various means such as physical involvement on the battlefield, moral or financial support, and advocacy campaigns.

The absence of newspapers and printed media also played a significant role in disseminating narratives about the heroic spirit. This, coupled with the lack of information regarding the ongoing events, led to the monopolization of information by the warriors, while simultaneously depriving scholars and intellectual "journalists" of an opportunity to establish themselves as influential figures alongside the former.

Indeed, when the War of Independence broke out in 1821, there were no written documents available in the areas where the revolt occurred. This naturally raised questions among scholars abroad, given that the second half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century witnessed a proliferation of printed works in Europe. The Greek-speaking communities in the Diaspora were directly affected by these developments, experiencing a remarkable increase in the production of books and documents.

However, the same could not be said for the areas where the revolution was taking place. As Finley wrote in his 1861 work, "History of the Greek Revolution," individuals accustomed to traveling from London to Constantinople within a week would struggle to comprehend the challenges associated with news transmission in the East during the first three decades of the 19th century. The concept of the press was virtually unknown in the East, and private correspondence rarely served as a reliable source of information. Between 1822 and 1824, no newspapers were published. I. Kokkonis, a friend of I. Kapodistrias who oversaw primary schools during the early years of the newly established state, wrote to Al. Mavrokordatos in October 1823 expressing the need for a newspaper, which was essential for enlightening the people and defending national rights in the international arena (Koumariou, 1971).

However, everything changed in 1824, thanks primarily to the contributions of Philhellenes, particularly the Irish officer Stanhope. Three newspapers were published that year: "The Greek Chronicles in Missolonghi" on New Year's Day, "The Friend of the Law in Hydra" in March (which served as an administrative body for a year), and "The Athens Newspaper" in August in Athens. The first and third publications ceased in 1826 due to the occupation of Missolonghi and the siege of the Acropolis of Athens. The circulation of "The Friend of the Law" halted in May 1827. Finally, after enduring numerous setbacks, the "General Newspaper of Greece" was established in October 1825 as an official administrative entity, now known as the Government Gazette.

Public perceptions of the Greek War of Independence

There have been relatively few studies on the current perception of the Greek War of Independence in 1821. Until recently, there was a dominant image in the public consciousness that focused on renowned male

heroes who were considered pioneers and protagonists of the war. This perception mirrored Greek history, which was characterized by the formation of the national state, numerous local and European wars, and domestic political instability. The years 1921 and 1971, which marked the 100th and 150th anniversaries respectively, were marked by other events such as the Greco-Turkish war in 1921 and a military dictatorship in 1971. These events influenced the perception of the war, with a necessary emphasis on heroism after the Greek army's defeat in 1922 and the arrival of over 1,200,000 refugees in Greece.

In recent years, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary, the first public opinion studies on the 1821 event were published, providing insight into how Greeks perceive it today. Two nationwide studies conducted in 2007 and 2019 examined the formation of views on the event. Both studies utilized multistage random sampling, with the second study including a sample of 1200 people.

The studies revealed several common findings, three of which are particularly important. Firstly, the studies highlighted the significant role of education, especially primary and secondary schooling, in shaping the perception of the Greek War of Independence. Despite the influence of media and social media, views on the event were primarily formed within the school environment. In the second study, respondents attributed their knowledge of the war to what they learned in school, supplemented by reading books, watching TV documentaries, and keeping informed through the press and the internet. University studies and attending lectures played a lesser role in their knowledge.

The perception of the Greek War of Independence is largely characterized as heroic, with the heroes being predominantly warriors and military personnel. In recent years, however, this perception has started to change, with notable figures such as military officers, women, and clergymen gaining recognition. These individuals are recognized for their contributions to the war effort, both in preparation and active participation. It is worth noting that the perception of heroes is influenced by the values and perceptions of the present time. For example, the reevaluation of women's roles has contributed to the recognition of female heroes, although they are often attributed with traditionally male characteristics.

The studies also revealed a general lack of confidence in knowledge about the Greek War of Independence. While respondents considered themselves well-informed about the event, they believed that others had little knowledge about it. This lack of confidence can be attributed to various factors, including inadequate education, distrust in the educational system, and the influence of differing historical perspectives. The perception of uncertainty is further influenced by changes in schoolbooks and academic history.

In conclusion, the studies shed light on the perception of the Greek War of Independence in contemporary Greece. Education, especially primary and secondary schooling, plays a crucial role in shaping these perceptions, although there remains a sense of uncertainty and a need for further investigation into the factors that contribute to this perception.

Public History and schoolbooks

Public history refers to how citizens perceive their own history. In Greece, public history is largely shaped by formal education provided in schools. The National Curricula and textbooks play a significant role in this regard. As Jacques Le Goff points out, "Books are the best observatories to study the historical mentality of an era" (1998:211). This is because books allow us to reflect on and interpret the past. Marc Ferro argues, "Whoever controls the past can define the present" (2001:7).

During the formation of the Greek State from 1821 to 1947, schools played a crucial role in establishing common references for students. This was achieved through the introduction of mandatory textbooks in the

late 19th century. The control over education became even more pronounced after 1937 when I. Metaxas' dictatorship enacted the Compulsory Law of 952/1937, establishing the Organization for the Publication of Schoolbooks. This organization exerted total control over the selection and content of textbooks. This situation persisted until the early 1980s, with some short breaks.

From the studies on public opinion mentioned earlier, it appears that history textbooks have been effective in disseminating the dominant perceptions of the 1821 Greek Revolution. However, this effectiveness cannot be solely attributed to the content, teaching, and school environment. Other fundamental factors should be considered. Modern history, including the 1821 period, is taught in Greek schools for three years: in the sixth grade of primary school, the third grade of junior high school, and the third grade of high school. In other words, students are approximately 12, 15, and 18 years old, respectively. However, until World War II, only a minority of people attended school, with 70% to 80% of children going to primary school, despite it being mandatory since 1834. Only a few continued to junior high school, and even fewer reached high school. It was only in the 1960s that the entire population started attending primary school, followed by the mandatory junior high school in 1964. Since the 1980s, high school has had a large number of students. Therefore, the school system has become a matter of concern for all young people in this age group relatively recently, primarily after World War II.

Despite its recent massification, the school system has had a major influence on the perception of history for two main reasons. Since at least 1890, schools and history textbooks have echoed the official state perceptions of the past, which were shaped through systematic policies of gathering memory through images and rituals, the dominance of academic historiography, and the 1871 rituals commemorating the 50-year anniversary of the 1821 event.

An interpretation of the events of 1821 gradually formed since 1833, with March 25th being established as a national holiday in 1837, and the symbols such as the flag and heroes' symbols being determined. This project was formalized through the dominance of an ethno-romantic perception of history, as formulated by Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, a Professor of History at the University of Athens. According to this perception, the Greek nation is unified, contemporary Greeks are descendants of the ancient Greeks, and Greek history is considered inseparable, divided into three parts: Ancient, Middle or Byzantine, and Contemporary Greece. This perception has been apparent in school textbooks since 1884. Finally, in 1871, a series of rituals during the 50-year anniversary of the 1821 event established certain constants that have been preserved to this day. School essentially validated the existing view and contributed to its effectiveness by repeating and reinforcing the prevailing views outside of school, aligning to a large extent with the prevailing academic historiography.

The situation became more complex after World War II. The Civil War (1946-1949) and the increasing massification of schools changed the status quo. The winners of the Civil War promoted a more patriotic and heroic interpretation of history. The Dictatorship of the Colonels (1967-1974) followed a similar approach, even more forcefully. It is worth noting that with the adoption of Legislative Decree 749/1970 "About school books," only one predetermined book was distributed in primary schools, exclusively within the state's responsibility. Prior to this, private publishing houses were allowed to market their books for three years after obtaining approval from the School Books Directorate of the Ministry of Education. The opinion on the books had to be published on the inside or back cover. Due to the destruction of relevant ministry archives, it is evident that an unspecified number of history books circulated and were taught in Greek schools until 1970. However, the differences identified in these books were minimal and insignificant, as authors were

obligated to adhere faithfully to the National Curricula and guidelines, and make corrections as indicated by the advisory body.

In contrast, the situation became more complicated with the return of the Republic and the liberalization of the regime after 1974. Despite occasional challenges, authors of schoolbooks enjoyed greater degrees of freedom. Additionally, most history book authors are scholars. While problems arose and continue to arise, books that exceeded certain boundaries faced reactions and were excluded from schools.

The aforementioned situation is reflected in the content of history books from 1950 to 2022, as outlined below. There are nine history books for the sixth grade of primary school, five books for junior high school, and eight books from the sixth grade of junior high school to the third grade of high school. The authors of the first group primarily consist of primary and secondary school teachers, except for the last book, which is led by university professors. As for the five history books for the third grade of junior high school, the first book is written by teachers, the second by a historian, and the next three have a scholar or a group of scholars as the lead authors. Finally, of the nine books for the sixth grade of primary school to high school, five are written by teacher-historians, one by a historian, and the authors of the last two books are university professors.

It is challenging to interpret general trends regarding the content of the books and their perspective on the 1821 event. It depends on both the authors and the curricula. There is a tendency to entrust book writing to scholars, which has undoubtedly influenced the content of the books. It is now difficult to exclude scientific opinions or opinions that are challenging to support. However, the national curricula are equally important as they establish guidelines and, to some extent, influence the content of the books. From this perspective, it is evident that the book content aligns with the ideological orientations of the Minister of Education, if not the government itself.

To illustrate the ideological dimension, let us consider the aims of the History subject based on the last two national curricula: the one implemented by the previous radical SYRIZA government and the current New Democracy conservative government. According to the first curriculum, "The aims of the subject of History are in line with the ideals of a society, the future it envisions, and the desirable type of person and citizen shaped through education. The development of a genetic historical sense, of a historical thought, of democratic sense and humanistic values as well as the formation of a pluralistic and tolerant national identity are key purposes of the subject of History in contemporary democratic and multicultural societies" (Government Gazette 2020/B/3-6-2019, p.22917). The second curriculum for primary schools states, "History teaching aims to promote the development of critical thinking, self-knowledge, communication and research skills, as well as the activation of students' emotions and imagination. Students should not only acquire the awareness that the modern world is a continuation of the past, but also the perception that the modern historical horizon is directly linked to their own lives. Additionally, the study of the historical course of the Greek World, with an emphasis on primary school, helps students evaluate the historical past of Hellenism and determine their place in the modern European and global environment." In summary, the second curriculum is more normative and ethnocentric in nature.

Despite these differences, we have identified certain consistent trends that support the finding that History curricula and books have gradually become less focused on heroism and more inclined towards anti-heroic narratives over time. One significant observation is that a smaller portion of schoolbooks is dedicated to the events of 1821. This discrepancy is more pronounced in secondary education books compared to primary

school books. This is reasonable due to the broader time periods covered in secondary education books and the addition of new chapters over the years. Furthermore, primary school books traditionally have a stronger focus on Greek history, while secondary education books tend to emphasize the international context, particularly the European milieu. This shift is acceptable given the increased emphasis in recent years on topics like women's emancipation, culture, technology, European integration, and European citizenship. To illustrate this, let's take the example of sixth-grade History books. Almost all the History books dedicated to this grade allocate half of their pages to the events surrounding 1821. For instance, in the early 1950s, I. Kampanas authored a book (exact publication date unknown) that dedicated 68 pages to the period of 1821, featuring 10 images, 8 of which were portraits of heroes. In the current book, "History of the modern and contemporary world," assigned to its collective authors by the Minister of New Democracy, Euripides Stylianides in 2007 without a public tender, the section titled "The Great Revolution" constitutes the third out of five sections and covers 75 out of 224 pages, approximately one-third of the book. This section is further divided into 18 subsections that delve into topics such as the Filiki Eteria, the rebellion in the Danubian Principalities, the Revolution in various Greek regions, and the involvement of the Aegean islands, Epirus, Thessaly, and Macedonia. Some sub-chapters focus on key events, notable individuals, and other aspects like Philhellenism, the political organization of the Liberation Struggle, and the role of the Great Powers of the time. The book is richly illustrated with color images, including portraits, lithographs, oil paintings, and archival material from significant museums and libraries. Each sub-chapter includes a glossary to aid students in understanding key terms, and primary source texts are included to provide a firsthand perspective. Finally, the subsections conclude with questions designed to assess students' comprehension and reinforce their understanding of the content.

In the context of secondary education, the differences in History books are more evident, primarily due to the revised curricula that place greater emphasis on active learning and adopt a less Greek-centered approach, focusing more on the international milieu. To exemplify this, let's consider two books from the third grade of junior high school: one written by teachers Matarasis and Papastamatiou in 1966, which was used until 1975, and another written by Professor Louvi and Historian Xifara, which has been taught since 2007.

The first book (Koliopoulos et al, 2014) devotes a chapter with seven subsections to the 1821 War, featuring 19 images, 15 of which are portraits, three maps, and one painting. Similarly, the second book includes a chapter with seven subsections (5-11) and incorporates 23 images, including 10 portraits, two maps, and 11 paintings. However, the second book has fewer depictions of heroes, and those present are usually presented without detailed comments or specific references. Additionally, there is a notable contrast in the textual content. While the first book focuses on the events of the war, the second book takes a different approach. Particularly significant is the inclusion of one of the most important and tragic events of the 1821 Revolution: the siege and exodus of Missolonghi. This event marked the fall of a crucial city and resulted in the death of thousands, including many Europeans and Americans who had come to defend it. In the 1966 schoolbook, the narrative covers four pages (Matarasis, Papastamatiou, 1966: 143-147), whereas the 2012 book allocates only six lines (Louvi, Xifaras, 2012: 312) to this event.

The decrease in emphasis on heroism in the second book is offset by a focus on new aspects such as the preparation of the Revolution and the role of the Filiki Eteria, the secret society that played a key part in its organization, following Masonic principles prevalent at the time. In the 1966 book, the term "Filiki Eteria" appears twice, once in parentheses (Matarasis, Papastamatiou, 1966: 102 & 114), and there are only two

references to the members of Filiki Eteria (Matarasis, Papastamatiou, 1966: 103-4). In contrast, the 2012 book dedicates a separate subsection, the seventh one (Louvi, Xifaras, 2012: 28-29), to the foundation and role of the Filiki Eteria. Lastly, while the first book primarily centers on Greek history, with a special emphasis on Greek heroism in military victories and defeats against the formidable Ottomans, the second book explores new dimensions, such as the international milieu and the actions taken by Europeans.

Public, School and Academic History

We have observed that the general public's perception of the history of the year 1821 and the history taught in schools are largely similar. This similarity can be attributed to the influence of school history, which strongly reinforces the official historical narrative through textbooks and public ceremonies. However, this identification is not absolute. As we have seen, school history has undergone changes in recent years, offering a different perspective from the past. At first glance, this new perspective does not seem to be reflected in the general public's perception of the history of 1821.

Two questions arise from this observation: why is school history changing, and why is this change not influencing public history? The first question raises the issue of the relationship between school history and academic history. To answer this question, we need to gain insight into academic history and how it analyzes the 1821 Revolution. It is evident that the analysis is not uniform, as different interpretations have existed since the immediate aftermath of the revolution. Intellectuals who witnessed the event promoted alternative versions that were less focused on national identity and more influenced by Enlightenment ideals and Jacobinism. Nikolaos Spiliadis, a notable representative of this perspective, had a significant impact on historians, intellectuals, and politicians (Rotzokos, Tzakis, 2014: 150-162).

Despite the existence of different interpretations, the so-called ethno-romantic perception of history dominated, particularly through the works of Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, a professor at the University of Athens. This perception emphasizes the continuity of the Greek nation throughout history (ancient, Byzantine, and modern Greece) and emphasizes the nation's will for freedom during the 1821 Revolution. This version was introduced into schools in 1884 and has been reproduced with variations since then (Koulouri).

Thanks to school history, Paparrigopoulos' viewpoint still prevails among the perceptions of the 1821 Revolution, although not without some exceptions. Recent opinion studies have shown that a majority of respondents, influenced by this perception, also acknowledge the social dimension of the Revolution. They recognize that it was not solely organized by the Greek nation but involved a socially diverse population with different characteristics and interests (poll). In other words, academic history does have some influence, to some extent, on both school and public history. However, the extent and timing of this influence remain uncertain.

In recent years, academic history has gradually moved away from the dominant ethno-romantic perception of history. Discussions and studies about education since the 1980s, including the "Krifo Scolio" (the Secret School) and the education of enslaved individuals in so-called "Krifa Scolia" (Secret Schools) during Ottoman rule, have contributed to new approaches to understanding the 1821 Revolution (Angelou, 1997). Numerous new studies on the revolution have emerged, especially in the past decade, due to the upcoming 200-year anniversary celebration. These studies have prompted new concerns and perspectives, addressing issues such as gender, international aspects, and the role of ideas.

What are the key elements that differentiate this new perception? A comprehensive understanding is provided in "The Greek Revolution: A Critical Dictionary," edited by P. M. Kitromilides and C. Tsoukalas in 2021 (Harvard University Press). The third chapter, titled "Events and Places," covers 183 out of 770 pages, primarily focusing on events. Additionally, there is a 21-page sub-chapter dedicated to "Military Leaders," while the remaining pages cover other aspects. In summary, greater importance is given to the international context, ideas, organization, administration, as well as domestic differences and conflicts. The revolution is presented more as a European event, associated with broader European movements, particularly influenced by Enlightenment ideals. It is not portrayed as a spontaneous desire for freedom by the Greeks but as the result of ideological and organizational preparations, organized by the Filiki Eteria (Society of Friends), a Society based on the Freemasonry model of the time. The success of the revolution is attributed not only to heroic individuals but also to various groups such as wealthy merchants, scholars, politicians, and administrators. Therefore, contemporary studies emphasize the importance of state organization, including the role of the army, the relationship between heroes and the administration, and the influence of ideas (Rotzokos, 1997; Tzakis, 2021; Bozikis, 2020).

These new perspectives contribute to a diminishing emphasis on heroism. While some events, such as women's participation, are still interpreted within this framework, the heroic aspect has become less prominent. Administrators and highly educated individuals are now recognized alongside the heroes. However, it remains uncertain whether this version accurately reflects the experiences of Greeks in 1821 or if it is our interpretation of the past. Studies suggest that during the Revolution, various processes took place that led to this shift. Initially, the warrior-heroes were the central figures, but over time, the revolutionaries required economic resources, organization, information dissemination (including newspapers), and education. Consequently, new groups emerged, sometimes as rivals and sometimes as companions to the heroes (Kiprianos, 2021, 2022).

Will these views of academic history be adopted by the general public? To what extent will they become part of public history? This depends on various factors, such as the networks available to authors, the attitudes of those in positions of authority, and how public opinion engages with the issue. Both school and school history play crucial roles in shaping public opinion. However, they can also impede the dissemination of alternative perspectives. In recent years, Greek history textbooks have experienced a double phenomenon. On one hand, certain issues that cannot tolerate historical criticism are omitted, while on the other hand, books that go beyond certain limits deemed unacceptable by parts of the population face backlash and are withdrawn from schools (Athanasiadis, 2015).

Therefore, academic history is often delivered in a filtered manner through schools and reaches the public. However, the extent to which these changes occur and challenge the dominant recurring ideas is slow and uncertain. These changes are often complementary or coexisting with the prevailing perspectives, resulting in vague shifts in perceptions.

Conclusions

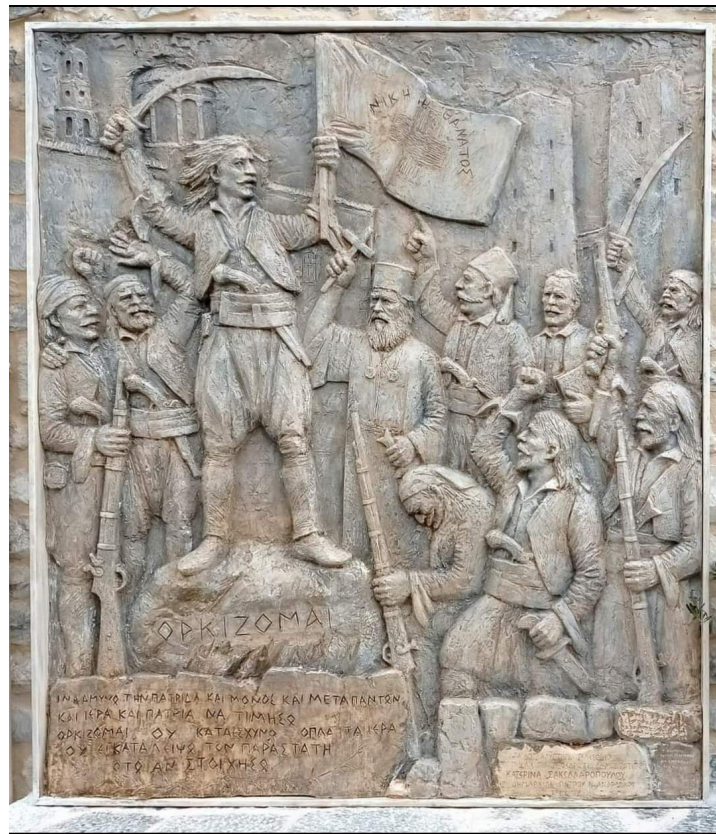
The objective of our study was to examine the changing perceptions of the 1821 War of Independence over time. This war is widely regarded as the most significant event in Modern Greek History, as it led to the establishment of a sovereign state-nation. It is particularly heroic because the Greeks achieved independence from the Ottoman Empire through seven years of intense battles, resulting in numerous

casualties and significant sacrifices. The heroic nature of this achievement is further emphasized when considering the international context of the time, characterized by autocracy and the influence of Romanticism.

The country's history played a vital role in nurturing the heroic spirit. Various war events and political evolutions contributed to its preservation. Notably, the 100th anniversary coincided with the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922) and the Greek army's defeat in Asia Minor in 1922. Similarly, during the 150th anniversary, Greece was under the Dictatorship of the Colonels (1967-1974). In such circumstances, events and rituals like student and military parades were organized, further reinforcing the heroic spirit. Consequently, primary and secondary education history textbooks were developed and taught based on this spirit.

These circumstances are reflected in the public perception of the 1821 War. Drawing from two recent studies, we examined how Greeks perceive this event. The prevailing perception is predominantly heroic, although it has been weakened due to changes in school textbooks and the new directions taken by academic historians. The focus has shifted from heroism to exploring new aspects such as gender, ideas, administration, institutions, and organization. However, these new concerns have not been adequately incorporated into school textbooks or the public's perception of the 1821 war. This discrepancy can be attributed mostly to ideological reasons, as school textbooks tend to either omit or downplay these newer concerns. Consequently, different perspectives and interpretations of the past are not being actively debated.

Will this change in the future? To what extent and in what ways will the old perceptions coexist with the new ones? These questions remain open, and further investigation is required to address them.



Monument at Arepoli, South Peloponnese. The oath at the beginning of the Revolution.



The siege of the Acropolis. Painting by Panagiotis Zografou.



A monument in Pyrgos Dirou, South Peloponnese commemorating a fight against Egyptians in which local women defended themselves and their place.

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On Victims, Heroes, and Gulag Survivors: A Central European Life Story

Constantin Iordachi

To the memory of István Bicskei (1921–2013)

In 2011, I received the stimulating invitation to deliver a *laudatio* at the 90th birthday anniversary of István Bicskei, a Hungarian WWII veteran, prisoner of war, and Gulag survivor, in a village in Vojvodina, Serbia, right across the border with Hungary. The task was challenging on multiple grounds. First, I needed to deliver the speech in Hungarian (which is not my native language), in front of a variegated, Serbian-Hungarian, rural community. Secondly, and most importantly, the veteran's rich life, spanning several historical periods, was an exceptional yet in many ways a typical Central European experience.

István was born on 28 November 1921 in Magyarkanizsa, Vojvodina, in a Hungarian Roman Catholic peasant family, as the seventh child of József Bicskei and Piroska Kovács. The couple had ten children, but only seven lived to adulthood. The geopolitics of this former imperial border region situated for centuries on the *triplex confinium* among three multinational empires (Habsburg, Ottoman and Tsarist, and their successor states), was to shape his destiny: unlike his parents—who lived their early lives as Hungarian citizens within Austria-Hungary—the boy was ascribed at birth the citizenship of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and had to learn to operate in a bilingual, Hungarian-Serbian, schooling system and socio-political environment.⁶⁰

István had a typical rural childhood, attending the local village school and playing in the barn, in the fields, and on the bank of the Tisza River. He graduated the four-class elementary school in the village and then worked in agriculture to help his family. Life was basic and full of hardship in the rural economy of subsistence. István lost his father at the age of six; the children learned the news while planting paprika. His mother raised the children alone for a few years, and then, in 1935, she too, died of tuberculosis. István was the first to learn the news and brought it to his brother and sisters who worked in the cornfield. István was thus orphaned at the age of 14; the elder sister, who was already married, sold the family house and adopted the younger brothers and sisters. István worked as a blacksmith apprentice until 1939. He bitterly remembered those difficult years. Yet, hardship united the siblings, who stucked together for the rest of their lives.

⁶⁰ On the *Triplex Confinium*, see W. Bracewell, "The historiography of the *triplex confinium*: conflict and community on a triple frontier, 16th-18th centuries," in Steven G. Ellis and R. Esser (eds.), *Frontiers and the writing of history, 1500-1850* (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2006), 211-227; and Drago Roksanđić (ed.), *Microhistory of the Triplex Confinium: International Project Conference Papers, Budapest (March 21-22, 1997)* (Budapest: Institute on Southeastern Europe CEU, 1997).



Picture 1: The extended Bicskei family in Adorján, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, 20 July 1922 (see the infant István is in his mother's arms in the first row, left hand side).

In 1941, Vojvodina's Bačka and Baranya regions were annexed by Hungary and István became a Hungarian citizen; he was soon recruited in the Royal Hungarian Army (*Magyar Királyi Honvédség*) and served throughout the war as a river-guard soldier in Hungary's flotilla on the nearby Tisza River (see Picture 2 below). Life in the army during wartime was very taxing, yet István did not participate in direct combat.



Picture 2: István as soldier in the Hungarian flotilla, Magyarkanizsa, 10 July 1942 (left side).

On 26 July 1944, upon the impending occupation of Eastern Hungary by the Soviet troops, István was released from the army in Magyarkanizsa, which was soon to be found, yet again, within the borders of (the second) Yugoslavia (see Picture 3 below).

M. KIR. III. HONVÉD POLYAMÉR PÓTYÁSELŐDALI PARANCSNOKSÁG

KIMÉLTető parancsnokság stb. fejbélyegzője.) A 344530 sorszám

279 (a leszerelési jegy nyilvántartásának folyószáma.)

Leszerelési jegy
Bicskei István kom. részére,
aki a neményleges viszonyba helyeztetett (visszahelyeztetett).

Lakóhelye:
Acsorján község,
város,
vármegye,
ország.

Kelt: Magyaránizsa 44. júl. hó 26. n.
Mucsi István parancsnok (tőnök)

Személyleírás:
Kora: 23 éves Szája: orosz
Testalkata: köcses Orra: nyeres
Arca: kemény Beszélt: magyar nyelv.
Haja: barna Különös ismertető jelek:
Szemei: barna

Nevezett minden illetményrel bezárólag van ellátva.
Kelt: Magyaránizsa 1944. júl. 26.

1) Orvosi megvizsgálom és egészségi állapotom (terület mentem) kitöltöm.
2) Orvosi megvizsgálom és a bevonuláskor megállított alkalmasság-értékelésemet kitöltöm.
3) Orvosi megvizsgálom. A felülvizsgálaton megállapított kóros állapotok az esetek többségében (A utas kivétel pont törölendő).

orvos: Mucsi István
szoferparancsnok

Picture 3: Istvan's discharge from the Hungarian army, 26 July 1944

Most probably, he returned home; however, on 28 November 1944 (on his birthday, as seen in the verso on document in Picture 6, below), he was detained by the Soviet Army, as a Prisoner of War (POW); the official documents issued by the Soviet and Hungarian authorities indicate two different locations for his arrest: Püspöknádasd (nowadays Mecseknádasd), and the nearby Szekszárd, both situated in Hungary, around 150 kilometers from Vojvodina's border (see document in Russian, in Pictures 4-5). The circumstances of his life during this time are not very clear, and oral history sessions did not shed full light on it. We can presume that, most probably, he was arrested by the Soviet troops in Vojvodina and sent to the collecting camps in Püspöknádasd and then Szekszárd to join the sizeable local contingent of prisoners arrested in those cities and rounded up for deportation.

István was then deported to Stalingrad (nowadays Volgograd, in southern Russia, on the bank of the Volga River). He was first kept in a transit camp in Timișoara, Romania, and then taken to Soviet Union by ship across the Black Sea, departing from the Constanța harbor. His stay in the Timișoara camp was a particularly traumatic experience; István found it very difficult to speak about it, but once revealed that the rate of mortality was very high and, since it was difficult to bury the dead in the frozen earth during the winter months, the ground was shaky everywhere they stepped on.

István's displacement was part of the waves of deportations that begun soon after the (gradual) wartime occupation of Hungary between 1944–1945, involving civilians, prisoners of war, and political dissidents.⁶¹ The first wave began in mid-1944 until the end of that year and involved mostly prisoners of war who fought against Soviet Union, such as, and including, István (even if he was not a combatant soldier). A second wave took place in early 1945 and focused on the deportation of ethnic Germans and

⁶¹ Tamás Stark, "Malenki Robot'- Hungarian Forced Labourers in the Soviet Union (1944-1955)," in Győző Cholnoky, ed., *Minorities Research: A Collection of Studies by Hungarian Authors* (Budapest: Lucidus Kiadó, 1999), 155-167.

POWs, but involved Hungarian civilians as well. These deportees were first gathered in transit camps in Romania and Western Ukraine, just like István was, before being taken to camps across the Soviet Union. Official estimates claim that circa 600,000 Hungarians were deported to forced labor camps in the Soviet Union between 1944 and 1953.

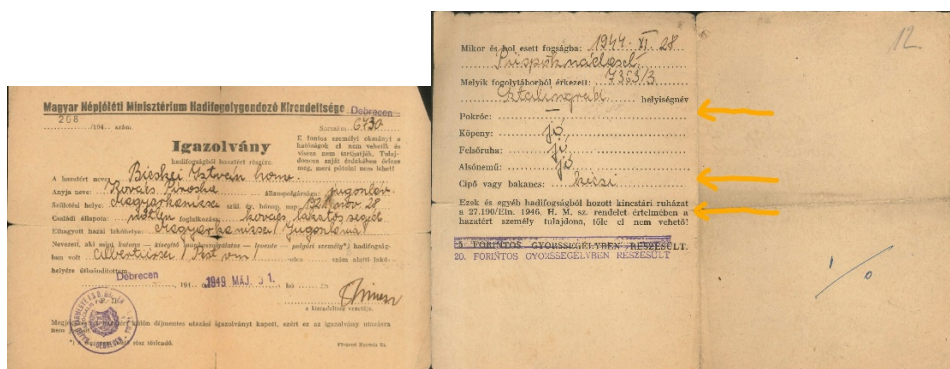
István served forced labor (*málenkij robot* in Hungarian, after the Russian *malenkaya rabota*, or “small work”) in Stalingrad for four years, until the very end of 1948, in the GUPVI (*Glavnoje Upravlenyije po gyelam Vojennoplennih i Internyirovannih*) camp no. 362 (registration number 01359448) together with people of various other nationalities, as part of the so-called ‘GULAG for foreigners.’ Lager conditions were dreadful, but he and two of his comrades survived the labor camp; they subsequently kept in touch for the rest of their lives.



Pictures 4-5: Bicskei István's liberation papers from the L-362 labor camp in Stalingrad issued by the Soviet authorities. Source:

<https://adatbazisokonline.mnl.gov.hu/adatbazis/szovjet-taborok-magyar-foglyai/>

In the meantime, as soon as 1946, Hungarian authorities started negotiations to bring home the deportees. Repatriations started in 1948-49, but it was mostly after Stalin's death, and until 1955, that most deportees were released from the camps and allowed to return to Hungary. The returned prisoners totaled an estimated 330,000–380,000 persons; the fate of the remaining 200,000 is not known; it is generally accepted that they perished in the camps.



Picture 6: Document attesting István's release from forced labor on 31 May 1949 (front and verso). The identification document allows István to travel free of charge within Hungary, from Debrecen to Albertirsa, to meet his sister (who lived in the neighboring village, called Ceglédbercel-Cserő). István used to refer to the day he reached his sister's house as his second birthday.

According to official registration documents, on 29 December 1948 István was moved from camp no. 362 in Stalingrad (which was subsequently transformed into a penal camp), to the prisoner of war repatriation camp no. 35 in Ukraine, subordinated to the Soviet Ministry of the Interior. István attempted to return to Yugoslavia but found out that his Yugoslav citizenship was revoked for enrolling in an enemy army. Consequently, he was temporarily placed in a refugee camp in Sighetu Marmăției, Romania, and then to Debrecen, Eastern Hungary, until his legal status was clarified. After over three years of military service and four years of serving in the Gulag, István thus become a *heimatlos*, a person without a country. He was considered an enemy in Yugoslavia, his native country, as it were, and a *pariah* in Soviet Union and the socialist camp, as a former *Zek* who served time in the Gulag. Fortunately, one of István's sisters—who had married a Hungarian officer from the retreating Hungarian army and settled in Ceglédbercel-Cserő, about 50 km from Budapest—managed to find his whereabouts, with the help of the Red Cross service.

On 31 May 1949, István was finally released from captivity and allowed to join his sister (see Picture 6 above). After an exhausting trip by train and foot from Debrecen in Eastern Hungary, István arrived at his sister's house in Ceglédbercel-Cserő, wearing a soldier's jacket and a worn-out pair of boots, and weighing slightly over 40 kilograms. He remembered eating an entire loaf of bread at once. It was then when he learned that, in fact, the misfortune of serving time in Gulag was most probably also an unexpected chance to escape sure death: in late 1944, after he was taken away by the Soviet Army, his village, as well as the entire Vojvodina, was occupied by Tito's partisans; the new communist authorities placed the province under a regime of military occupation and executed most adult males, including his close relatives, as a retaliation for the massacre committed by the Hungarian military in the region in 1942-43.⁶²

⁶² Tibor Cseres, *Titoist Atrocities in Vojvodina 1944-45 Serbian Vendetta in Bacska* (Buffalo, NY: Hunyadi Publishing, 1993); Aleksandar Kasaš, *Mađari u Vojvodini 1941-1946* (Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet u Novom Sadu, Odsek za istoriju, 1996); Lajos Forró, Tibor Molnár, *Tragikus emberi sorsok 1944-ből a partizániratok tükrében* (Zenta: Zentai Történelmi Levéltár, 2013); for a comprehensive presentation of the conflicting ideological or national perspectives, see Michael Portmann, "Communist Retaliation and Persecution on Yugoslav Territory during and after WWII (1943-1950)," Munich, GRIN Verlag, 2004, <https://www.grin.com/document/49718>. For contemporary Hungarian perspectives, see Ferenc Sullivan, "Commemoration Held On 70th Anniversary of Vojvodina Hungarian Massacre in Szeged," 2015.01.26, *Hungary Today*, <https://hungarytoday.hu/commemoration-held-70th-anniversary-vojvodina-hungarian-massacre-szeged-92948/>



Picture 7-8: István before and after his conscription and Gulag experience. Note the difference between the kind of adolescent innocence displayed in the first picture (Zenta, 1st of September 1941) and the grave pose and depressed allure in the second picture (1949/1950).

At almost 30 years old—eight years after his conscription into the army, five years after his discharge, and after losing his family and country in a series of traumatic experiences that ranged from war to Gulag—István could, at last, commence his adult life, as a blacksmith in a socialist heavy industry factory in Hungary (Ganz, later Ganz-MÁVAG locomotive, wagon and engine factory, Budapest 8th district). Life was bleak but stable and more rewarding; throughout the 1950s, however, his integration into the new fatherland was hampered by the stigma of being a former *Zek*, an anti-social element who served time in prison, as the rumor went. In addition, in after 1953, he was openly bullied by his colleagues for his 'Yugoslav origins;' notwithstanding the fact that István was an ethnic Hungarian who fought in the Hungarian army and was stripped of his Yugoslav citizenship, he found himself at one receiving end of the growing anti-Tito fury in Hungary (and the larger Socialist camp), being openly blamed for Tito's secession from the Soviet camp and treated with suspicion because he was born in Yugoslavia and spoke a bit of Serbo-Croatian. He was routinely discriminated against, being almost invariably assigned hard physical tasks.



Picture 9: New times, new identity, and a clean start: István in the winter of 1952.

One day, István had the chance to visit the factory's administrative offices and was deeply impressed by the fact that there were types of work that could be executed with 'clean hands.' He understood that, in the new socialist world, schooling was an avenue of social mobility. He therefore decided to complete his education and try to advance in his position. He claimed to have attended six grades (rather than four) back in Yugoslavia, so that he had to only attend two more years of adult schooling in Hungary in order to complete his primary education. He then enrolled in the Bláthy Ottó Power-current Industry Vocational Technical Training School to become power current electro-technician. He remembered vividly the experience of buying his first white shirt, which he kept until the end of his life, just as he kept his first long, buttoned-lining leather coat he bought back in the 1950s. In 1958 he married a lady he used to meet every day on the train, while commuting to work from Albertirsa to Budapest, and with whom he made great dance partners. Late adulthood and marriage came with late parenting. The couple had two sons who died immediately after birth (the second death was due to medical malpractice), and a surviving daughter.



Picture 10-11: Integrating in a new society through sports and schooling: graduating the *Ottó Bláthy Erőssáramúipari Technikum*/Industrial Vocational Technical Training School (1965) and playing football in the factory team, 1974.

Under János Kádár's regime of "goulash communism" (*gulyáskommunizmus*), István experienced, for the first time in his life, stability and relative affluence. He advanced in his working place and made extra

money in the secondary economy that flourished in late socialism, fixing neighbors' household electric appliances in addition to his salary. He acquired a valuable, comfortable flat in a green, interwar residential district of Budapest. He was not able to buy a car or travel abroad (although in 1963 he visited Vienna with his wife on an organized guided tour), but he spent short family vacations at Balaton Lake and managed to buy a small house with a plot on a hill on the outskirts of Budapest at the end of the 1970s, where he grew his own vegetables. He retired from ÉPFU but continued to work aside his pension and to work his garden, thus taking part in the general embourgeoisement specific to late Kádárism.

In post-communist times, István was legally rehabilitated and awarded a supplementary pension by the Hungarian state as a WWII veteran and Gulag survivor.¹ At last, the stigma of being an antisocial element was lifted, the tragedies that marked István's life were openly addressed in the public space, and his suffering were acknowledged if not vindicated. In addition, the normalization of diplomatic relations with Tito's Yugoslavia that had occurred after Stalin's death relieved István of the absurd stigma of being a "Titoist" and, most importantly, enabled him to resume ties with his native village (nowadays in Serbia). István travel there many times a year, sometimes even monthly, to meet his friends and relatives and be part of local events and rites of passage. It was not by chance that his *laudatio* was to take place in his village: he was continually striving to reintegrate into his native community, from which he was taken away by external forces, and to recreate the lost paradise of his childhood and the sanctity and safety of his extended family.



Picture 12: Childhood memories: István in front of his birthplace house, Magyarkanizsa, Vojvodina, 2006.

Gulag Survivors and Memory Regimes in Eastern Europe

How can one narrate István's life? Was he a victim, a hero, or, unlikely, a perpetrator? As a historian of Central Europe, socialized for a long time in the political culture of postcommunist Romania and Hungary, my first impulse was to construct a new framework of interpretation—one that was local but also transnational—presenting the veteran's life experience not only as an example of victimhood but mostly of

strength, resilience, and even heroism in surviving hardship and the ‘terror of history.’⁶³ My approach built on the key cultural notion of the *survivor* as an increasingly desirable role in our contemporary culture.⁶⁴ Naturally, I filtered his story through my personal experience of living in Ceaușescu’s Romania as well as my scholarly view of socialism, my oral history research with peasants and former political prisoners, my participation to Romania’s Truth Commission on the Crimes of Communism, and my contribution to its Final Report condemning the communist regime “as criminal and illegitimate.”⁶⁵ It seemed to me that István was a survivor by excellence: his main moral achievement was not just that he endured the privations of the war and of the Gulag but that he managed to prevail upon them, overcoming the status of a victim, building a family and obtaining retroactive justice and rehabilitation.

My attempt to construct a comprehensive framework through which to narrate the experience and suffering of the Gulag survivor was complicated, however, by the transnational character of István’s story, related to the history of communist repression and rehabilitation in Soviet Union/Russia but also in Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia/Serbia. In all post-communist countries, the fall of communism led to massive changes in the field of memory politics, from the Marxism-Leninist politics of history to anti-communism as an official state policy. Yet, the memory of communism in post-communist countries has been far from fixed or immutable. As I have shown elsewhere, the patterns of remembering communism have varied greatly, as function of a plethora of factors of differentiation, such as: the nature of interwar political regimes, the existence (or lack of) local Marxist traditions, the position of the Communist Party in national politics and its relationship to Moscow, the manner of the communist takeover, the depths of the process of de-Stalinization, and the strength of dissent and resistance to communism, the extent of material satisfaction under communism, especially in the 1980s, the violent or negotiated nature of the collapse of communism in 1989–1991, the position of former communist parties in the post-1989 political system, and the degree of material hardship of the population in the transition period.⁶⁶ In addition, the demise of the ideological monopoly of the Communist parties in memory politics opened the floor to a multitude of statist, political and civic actors who vied for political influence and control. The interplay among these factors and actors led to a bewildering variety of forms of remembering communism in Eastern Europe,

⁶³ One way to present this live is through fiction, mostly literature and film. For a striking similarity with István’s story, see Henri Verneuil’s film *The 25th Hour* (1967) starring Anthony Quinn and Virna Lisi, based on Virgil Gheorgiu’s novel, *Ora 25* (1949), translated as *The twenty-fifth hour* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1950), about the misadventures of a supremely naïve—indeed simpleton—peasant from Transylvania who is first deported to a concentration camp for Jews by the hostile local gendarme, escapes the camp but is imprisoned in Horthy’s Hungary and Nazi Germany, is then forcefully recruited into the Waffen-SS as a ‘pure Aryan,’ and is then punished by the Soviets and prosecuted by the Americans as a former Nazi, before returning home to his village to find out his wife has another child from a Russian soldier. The peasant is unable to understand the higher forces that dramatically shaped his destiny but seems to accept everything with resignation and a kind of optimistic fatalism specific to the folk culture.

⁶⁴ See Shani Orgad, “The survivor in contemporary culture and public discourse: a genealogy,” *Communication Review*, 12 ((2009) 2: 132-161. For the societal fascination with the “survivor” as a societal prototype, see the fulminant international success of the *Survivor reality competition* television show, based on the Swedish series *Expedition Robinson*, created in 1997 by [Charlie Parsons](#). Although utterly different, sensational(ised) stories of war or Gulag survivors were often part and parcel of this—increasingly commercialized—fascination.

⁶⁵ See Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, and Cristian Vasile (eds.), *Raport final* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007). On Romania’s Presidential Commission for Studying the Crimes of Communism, see below.

⁶⁶ Constantin Iordachi, “‘Remembering’ versus ‘Condemning’ Communism: Politics of History and ‘Wars on Memory’ in East European Museums,” in Constantin Iordachi, Apor Péter, eds, *Occupation and Communism in Eastern European Museums: Revisualizing the Recent Past* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 15-49.

ranging from current official glorification in the Russian Federation, official civic-liberal condemnation in the Baltic States and Romania, to civic-liberal “governance memory” in Germany, civic-liberal and then conservative-nationalist condemnation in Poland and Hungary, and open yet polarized and rather inconclusive debates in other countries (such as the Republic of Moldova). Due to their paramount importance in articulating political master narratives and in shaping public perceptions, truth commissions, research institutes, museums of communism and public monuments have served as battlegrounds for historical politics in the competition for capturing the symbolic capital associated with condemning communism.

In Soviet Union, after Stalin’s death in 1953 and Khrushchev’s secret speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 25 February 1956—denouncing Stalin’s cult of personality, abuses of power, and campaigns of mass terror—the government took the first measures toward the legal and social rehabilitation of the groups and individuals who had been repressed and prosecuted without a legal basis. That involved liberations from Gulag, acquittals, and posthumous rehabilitation of those who died in labor camps. The government also rehabilitated several ethnic or religious minority populations which had been relocated under Stalin and allowed them to return to their former territories. Another wave of rehabilitations started with the implementation of Mikhail S. Gorbachev’s policy of *perestroika*. In 1987, Gorbachev established a special commission of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to complete the process of rehabilitating the victims of Stalinist repression.⁶⁷ As a result, individuals who were repressed extrajudicially were formally rehabilitated by ordinary courts or by military justice on a rolling basis. This trend continued after the dissolution of Soviet Union in 1991 in most post-Soviet states, including the Russian Federation, being pushed forward by survivors or their descendants, as well as by civic activists. On October 18, 1991, in the last months of the Soviet regime, President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin passed Law 1761-1, “On Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression.” Amended 16 times, the law has remained in force until today and served as a basis for the continued post-Stalinist rehabilitation of victims.⁶⁸ Yet, the process of rehabilitation was protracted, incomplete, and uneven at best, being marked by numerous setbacks, lack of transparency and ‘incomplete truths.’⁶⁹

Under Vladimir Putin’s rule, a process of glorification of the Soviet past occurred, accompanied by a tacit rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin as a great statesman. At the same time, the civic associations and NGOs which were actively involved in uncovering the Stalinist mass terror were pressured and intimidated: see the paramount case of the Memorial Human Rights Centre, declared a “foreign agent” in 2013 and finally banned in December 2021. As a result, the narratives of Stalinist repressions and calls for rehabilitation and transitional justice were not only marginalized but almost fully suppressed, as the state reinstated its monopoly over history writing and memory representation. The last annual “Returning the Names” ceremony of the Memorial, commemorating those who died in Stalin’s purges, took place on 29 October 2021, outside the former KGB headquarters in central Moscow.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ See Cathy A. Frierson, “Russia’s law ‘On Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression:’ 1991 – 2011. An Enduring Artifact of Transitional Justice,” NCEEER Working Paper, 8, https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/2014_827-13h_Frierson_1.pdf

⁶⁸ Frierson, “Russia’s law ‘On Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression:’ 1991 – 2011,” 3.

⁶⁹ See K. Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996); N. Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA/London: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

⁷⁰ “Moscow Commemoration of Stalin’s Victims Returns after Pandemic,” *The Moscow Times* (Oct. 29, 2021), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/29/exiled-lawyer-for-navalny-safronov-says-placed-on-russias-wanted-list-a75436>

In contrast to the Russian Federation, the condemnation of the crimes of Communism was a major axis of the official memory politics in all former Soviet satellite countries. Invariably, these policies involved countering the communist narratives of history by frontally tackling taboo topics such as the Soviet occupation, postwar abuses, and deportations to Gulag. Anticommunist politics of history focused mostly on 1) the rehabilitation of the *victims* of communism (mostly the Gulag deportees, the victims of the collectivization campaign, and political dissidents); 2) implementing forms of *transitional justice*, by bringing former *perpetrators* to justice (communist leadership, the so-called *nomenklatura*, and their collaborators); and 3) documenting and honoring *heroic resistance* against communism. The process of rehabilitating the victims of communism was also part and parcel of the process of rewriting history from a national perspective. Narratives on individual and group victimization were combined with the idea of *national* victimization. Throughout Eastern Europe, communism was denounced as a regime of Soviet occupation: the focus was almost exclusively placed on the Soviet responsibility, while the internal agency for the communist take-over and for building repressive regimes received less attention.

As part of this overall trend, postcommunist Romania and Hungary started a laborious and multifaceted process of rehabilitating the victims of communism, accompanied by measures for undoing past abuses, restitution of expropriated ownership, and retroactive transitional justice. As everywhere else, the public discourses on the communist regime were centered on the themes of victims and perpetrators. To raise public awareness of the harsh repression under the communist rule a plethora of monuments, memorial plaques and crucifixes were erected throughout the country. Influential documentary series such as *Memorialul Durerii* (The Memorial of Suffering), produced by Lucia Hossu-Longin and broadcast by the Romanian Television since 1991, provided emotional witness accounts of Gulag survivors and anti-communist freedom fighters about the labor camp system and the system of surveillance and persecution set up by the Communist Secrete Police. Most importantly, in 1993, the Civic Academy Foundation established *the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance*, in a former communist prison where Romania's interwar political and cultural elites were imprisoned in Sighetu Marmăției and exterminated. The museum received over one million visitors in its two decades of existence.⁷¹ This policy culminated in April 2006 when President Traian Băsescu instituted the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (*Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România*); its *Final Report* was presented to the Romanian Parliament in December 2008, and provided the basis for the condemnation of communism as a "criminal and illegitimate regime."⁷² The rehabilitation of the victims of communism went hand in hand with forms of retroactive justice; numerous perpetrators were brought to justice for human rights abuses, especially after the official adoption of the report of the truth Commission by the Parliament. This process thus led to a complete reversal in Romania's official pantheon of heroes, from communism to post-communism: former high Communist dignitaries who used to be celebrated under the coprevious regime as heroic illegal fighters for the 'socialist cause' were set to public trials as perpetrators, while the victims of communist repression, such as Iuliu Maniu, the founder of the interwar National Peasant Party, who died in 1953 in the Sighetu Marmăției Prison, his personal secretary, Corneliu Coposu, who served seventeen years of heavy

⁷¹ See the Memorial's website at <https://www.memorialsighet.ro/memorial-en/>

⁷² See Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, and Cristian Vasile (eds.), *Raport final* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007). For the legal condemnation of communism in postcommunist Eastern Europe, see Laure Neumayer, *The Criminalisation of Communism in the European Political Space after the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2018).

detention, or the anticommunist fighter Elisabeta Rizea, were rehabilitated and celebrated as democratic role models for the new generation.

In Hungary, the authorities started an equally laborious process of rehabilitating the victims of communism, including material reparation. On June 13, 2000 (see law 58/2000), the Hungarian Parliament proclaimed February 25th as the *Memorial Day for the Victims of Communist Dictatorships* (also “Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism”) (*Kommunizmus Áldozatainak Emléknapja*) as “an annual day of remembrance in secondary educational institutions,” to honor the 100 million victims of the communist terror worldwide.⁷³ The experience of Hungarian detainees in the Soviet Union was musealized in a dense network of local and national museums, among which the most important are the House of Terror open in 2006; the new permanent exhibition site of the Hungarian National Museum called “The Circles of Hell ... Malenki Robot - Forced Labor in the Soviet Union”, which commemorates the large-scale deportation of Hungarian men and women after the Second World War; the *Málenkij Robot* Memorial Site and Museum at the Ferencvárosi Railway Station; the Hortobágy Deportations Memorial (*A Hortobágyi Deportálások Emlékhelye*); the memorial site presenting the history of resettlement camps in Hortobágy;⁷⁴ the *Central Internment Camp - Memorial Hall and Library* in Kistarcsa; and the *Recsk National Memorial Park*, among others. In 2012, Hungarian authorities proclaimed November 25th as an official Memorial Day dedicated to Hungarians deported to the Soviet Union, to commemorate the return of approximately 1,500 Hungarian political prisoners from Soviet camps on that day in 1953. Especially since 2010, this intense campaign has been highly politicized, however, serving as part of the illiberal official political discourse meant to rehabilitate conservative or far-right interwar or wartime politicians and to consolidate feelings of victimhood nationalism among the population.

Unlike postcommunist Romania and Hungary, in Yugoslavia/Serbia, the process of condemning the crimes of communism was slower and more protracted. A state commission for finding the graves of those killed under the Communist rule found that more than 50,000 people fell victim to the Communist repression in Serbia.⁷⁵ Although these victims were formally rehabilitated and a lustration law was finally passed in 2003, attitudes toward Communism, in general, and Tito’s regime, in particular, were mixed and often ambivalent.⁷⁶ In addition, the legacy and historical memory of Tito’s Yugoslavia were deeply tangled with the complex memory of violent inter-ethnic and ideological confrontations during World War II; historical resentments were reactivated, amplified, and further aggravated during the post-1995 wars of partition. These attitudes hampered the societal process of confronting the past in an open, balanced, transparent and critical manner, instead leading to competing victimhood narratives.⁷⁷ Consequently, unlike in other Eastern European countries, the experience of the ‘Gulag’ remained a rather marginalized topic. Especially in village communities, such as István’s, the former ‘Zeks’ who survived Gulag still bore a

⁷³ For the text of the law, see 58/2000. (VI. 16.) OGY határozat, at <https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/2000-58-30-41>.

⁷⁴ See its website at <https://nkk.hu/fejlesztések/a-hortobagyi-deportalasok-emlekhelye/>

⁷⁵ Marija Ristic, “Exposing the Secret Crimes of Communism in Serbia,” *Balkan Transitional Justice*, Belgrade, (September 9, 2013), <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/09/09/serbia-still-unaware-of-communist-era-crimes/>

⁷⁶ It is telling in this respect that, in 2014, the opening of the exhibition titled ‘In the Name of the People’ at the Institute for Contemporary History in Belgrade, documenting the crimes committed by the Yugoslav regime from 1944 until 1953, was disturbed by Communist activists. See Marija Ristic, “Belgrade Exhibition Exposes Yugoslav Communist Crimes,” *Balkan Transitional Justice* (April 21, 2014) <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/04/21/belgrade-hosts-communist-crime-exhibition/>

⁷⁷ On the dynamics of victimhood competition, see Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La Concurrence des Victimes: Génocide Identité Reconnaissance*. Paris: Découverte, 2000), and also his essay in this cluster.

social stigma and oftentimes preferred to suppress or disguise their experience. For István, these different cultures of remembrance were very tangible, because they created markedly different contexts for his life narrative: what was seen as victimhood, resilience, and heroism in Romania and Hungary was still a sensitive, marginalized topic in his Vojvodina family circle and his local community. István acquired during the time many identities, past and present and was forced to switch among them as he crossed the border. In addition, the story of the Hungarian war veteran was closely linked to the tribulations of the Hungarian minority in Serbia and touched upon elements of Hungarian-Serbian inter-ethnic relations that are still delicate in postcommunist Serbia. It is no wonder therefore, in view of these underlying tensions and glaring gaps between official, collective, and individual memories, that István never felt safe enough to speak openly in Serbia about his life experience. Although his extended family and the villagers did know about István's life tribulations, they were not fully aware, if at all, of the existence, history and significance of the Gulag and preferred to perpetuate the false but more "convenient" or "familiar" rumor that he served time 'in prison.' Moreover, the villagers did not use the word Gulag to describe István's experience but those of *börtön* (prison) or—more but not fully appropriately—*fogság* (captivity). The latter term was used in mid-nineteenth century to refer to the experience of the 1848 revolutionary fighters; in the local community, (*hadi*)*fogság* (military captivity) was mainly used to refer to the experience of the Great War, when many men from the Bicskei family fought in the Austrian-Hungarian army and died in combat or were taken prisoners by the Italians.

It was only after the fall of communism, in his Budapest home, that István was more open to speak about his Gulag experience, but even there with great difficulties, due to the stigma that was, for decades, attached to this experience. He felt the need for an open recollection. Yet, societal recognition did not necessarily mean healing. Deep traumas blocked or even obliterated his memories. Sometimes, he started to narrate short episodes in fragmentary sentences: how he stole fish on the boat that carried them to Stalingrad or horse radish while marching in the fields and how critical that proved to his survival; yet his confessions always stopped abruptly without an apparent reason. He once confessed he had nightmares every night for over twenty years, a clear indication that he—surely, just like many of his fellow inmates—suffered from severe post-traumatic stress disorder. This condition was never fully acknowledged or treated by society but was carefully hidden from family or friends for decades, due to the need of social conformity.

After careful thinking, I decided to assume the role of an agent of change and speak openly at the *laudatio* event—yet in a cautious and culturally-sensitive manner—about István's exceptional life journey, but also about the heroism and resilience of the veteran, presenting him as a role model for the local community. My speech was met at first with tears and deep silence, but it soon gave birth to multiple vivid discussions about the various local, inter-generational, political and also inter-ethnic aspects of the story. The encounter between transnational scholarly narratives, oral history research, and the local community culture opened a space for a much-needed re-negotiation of the village's recent past and its traumatic memories. I remember the Hungarian villagers but also waiters in the location interrogating me on how and why I knew that much about post-war executions, for example, and on the nature of my sources. Surely, my story resonated with their repressed family memories. I handed the written speech to István who, after a few days, reached out to me to discuss it. He provided me with further details on his life experience in the most open oral history session to date. He passed away in 2013, aged 92.

Conclusions

István Bicskei's life story highlights the great variations in the politics of memory of World War II and of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, and the differing accents but also tensions and contradictions among various national perspectives (Soviet/Russian, Romanian, Hungarian, and Serbian, in this case) on common regional events. This story illustrates, in a tangible way, the fact that the socially constructed notions of victimhood and heroism are always changing and in motion, as a complex outcome of the interaction of multiple forms of human, institutional and political agencies in an ever-changing historical context and in complex and multi-layered cultural milieux. It shows that these key notions are closely tied to individual, collective, and national identities and understandings of personhood but also with reigning ideologies and political regimes. István was stigmatized as a villain under one regime, and then rehabilitated as a victim under another, and celebrated as a survivor and a role-model. There were synchronic differences in his condition, as well, function of the different societal contexts he found himself in. István originated from a multi-ethnic and multi-religious frontier region and was forced to cross borders his entire life and to continuously adjust to markedly different local conditions and memory regimes. For much of István's lifetime, the multiple facets of his border identity were played against each-other by monolithic, ideologically driven authoritarian regimes, at great personal costs: his Hungarian identity and service into the Hungarian army made him *persona non-grata* in Soviet Union and socialist Yugoslavia, while his Vojvodina roots brought him accusations of Titoism in Hungary. In the increasingly pluralistic and democratic postcommunist society, István could finally reconcile his past and present identities and experiences. Yet, while he was rehabilitated in his adoptive country, important life memories continued to be marginalized and repressed in his native community, which was part of a distinct memory regime.⁷⁸

The story also documents the glaring gap between official, scholarly, and local narratives about the past, especially in marginalized rural communities, pointing out to the conspicuous lack of cultural mediators or intermediators between these distinct political, media, and social spheres, and between official and grassroot memory narratives. It was of course a curious but in a certain way also a symptomatic occurrence that, in our age of increased mobility, this particular local dialogue was initiated by a Romanian historian in a Hungarian village of Serbia's Vojvodina.

⁷⁸ According to the account of István's second wife, who was also a native of Vojvodina, in the last two years of István's life crossing the border to Serbia became a difficult experience: in at least one instance he became utterly confused and needed time to come to his senses and realize where he is. István's first wife passed away in 1986.

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Heroes and Victims: Comparative Perspectives on Europe’s Multilayered Memory Cultures

Constantin Iordachi

“[A]nybody who has ever lived under another form of government—that is, under a dictatorship which cannot be removed without bloodshed—will know that a democracy, imperfect though it is, is worth fighting for and, I believe, worth dying for.”

Karl Popper¹

The dominant European frameworks governing historical politics, memory-making and commemoration patterns have suffered multiple mutations in the last hundred years, from the Great War to today. The two world wars, the Cold War, the 1968 movements and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe have all impacted the dominant cultures of memory, leading to ideological cleavages and a plurality of inter-generational perspectives. After the temporary triumph of liberalism in international relations in 1918-1919, the interwar period was marked by an acute ideological confrontation between democracy and totalitarianism, generally referred to as a European Civil War. During World War II, the Allies’ anti-Nazi coalition with the Soviet Union obscured, for a while, the ideological divisions between liberal democracies and communism, both parties instead capitalizing on antifascism as a common political ground. Yet, with the defeat of fascism and the imposition of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the conflict between totalitarianism and democracy has been reactivated, in a new key. Although antifascism served as a foundation for historical memory in the East as well as in the West, the politics of history and the official discourses on memory in the two ‘camps’ were markedly different, leading to the creation of distinct “regions of memory.”² In Western Europe, the post-war campaigns of transitional justice and the cultivation of the memory of the Holocaust served as the foundation for a new, democratic, and anti-totalitarian political culture. In Soviet Union, official memory politics attempted to ‘monopolize’ the meaning of antifascism, capitalizing on the paramount role played by the Red Army in defeating Nazi Germany; at the same time, however, the Soviet Union decentered the Jewish tragedy, focusing instead on the fascist terror against the working class in general and its rabid attack on the “first socialist state of the working class” in particular.

The collapse of communism in 1989-1991, and the subsequent processes of historical reconciliation and European unification allowed a retrospective view of the tumultuous short twentieth century in European politics (1918-1989), and created a window of opportunity for the unification of the two distinct regions of memory. On the one hand, the liberalization of historical discourses in Eastern Europe has led to an open societal acknowledgment of the tragedy of the Holocaust and of local responsibility for it in this part of the continent as well, following patterns of memorialization and musealization established in

¹ Popper, K. (1988). “From the archives: The Open Society and its Enemy Revisited,” [From the archives: the open society and its enemies revisited](#) | *The Economist* [April 23, 1988] *The Economist*, accessed Jan 31, 2016.

² “Regions of memory” can be defined as “transnational memory constellations” that transcend the scale of local and national communities but at the same time are narrower than continental or global memory cultures. See Simon, L., Olick, J.K., Wawrzyniak, J. & Pakier, M. (eds.) (2022). *Regions of Memory: Transnational Formations*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham..

Western Europe. On the other hand, the collapse of communist regimes led to a wave of critical inquiry into the history and legacy of communism in Eastern Europe, but also in European and global politics in general (see the issue of Eurocommunism and its attitude toward Stalinism). Yet, continental political integration and convergence did not necessarily lead to a full harmonization of its distinct “regions of memory”, but made possible the emergence of new transnational clusters, cleavages, and increased fragmentation. The instrumentalization of anticommunism as a political weapon in Eastern Europe, in particular, generated a symbolic competition between the legacy of communism versus fascism. This race for “competitive martyrdom” was mostly framed as a moral comparison between Holocaust versus the Gulag, the two being often counterposed against each other in a competition over uncovering the greatest evil in history; oftentimes, this politicized comparison of the so-called “dual genocide” was an attempt at historical exculpation by manipulating an alleged ‘causal relationship’ between fascist and communist atrocities.³

Against this complex and multi-layered historical background, this cluster of essays explores the politics of history and processes of memory-making in post-1989 Europe, focusing on two key inter-related concepts: narratives of heroism versus narratives of victimization. The papers summarize the first preliminary research results of the ERASMUS+ project entitled “Cultural memory in Europe: commemoration, memory making, and identity in the 21st century” (CLEO). Our analysis has been prompted by two major trends that occurred in post-1989 Europe.

First, there are claims that we are living in a post-heroic society. Coined as early as 1860, the concept of post-heroism has a long pedigree in the Western culture⁴ but got a new wind in the last decades, as part of a larger series of “post-” concepts (e.g., post-modern, post-human, etc.). During this time, post-heroism has been defined in a variety of ways, focusing on the emergence of a new consensus on pacifist values in society, on the emergence of technological advanced societies, or a combination of the two. On the one hand, many analysts point out to the changing nature of warfare in post-heroic societies: due to unprecedented technological advances, wars have become hybrid and high-tech, conducted by professionals, and thus sanitized from one-to-one direct manpower combat among ordinary citizens-in-arms.⁵ Sophisticated weaponry and the media portrayal of new wars as mere high-tech military operations has tended to obscure their inherent violent nature and to downplay the role of heroism in society, from citizens’ sacrifice to professional service. On the other hand, the spread of democracy in the post-1918 world led to a growing international consensus over a set of guiding international laws and norms, enhancing the role of international institutions. Since democracies do not go at war with each other, it was hoped that this

³ Shafir, M. (2021) *Four Pitfalls West and East: Universalization, Double Genocide, Obfuscation and Competitive Martyrdom as New Forms of Holocaust Negation*, Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349607954_Four_Pitfalls_West_and_East_Universalization_Double_Genocide_Obfuscation_and_Competitive_Martyrdom_as_New_Forms_of_Holocaust_Negation [accessed Feb 01 2023].

⁴ This shift has a long history in Western culture. Johann Wolfgang Goethe's cult novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), for example, as well as the poetry and tumultuous biography of George Gordon Byron contributed decidedly, each in its specific way, to the decline of the traditional male hero prototypes inherited from the Greco-Roman antiquity. More recently, in the postwar pop culture, new types of rebellious and socially inadequate male heroes emerged, illustrated in cinema by iconic figures such as James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* (1967). See “Post-Heroism?” (2017), *Queen's Quarterly, The Free Library (thefreelibrary.com)*, retrieved Jan 10 2023 from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Post-Heroism%3f-a0488759305>

⁵ Castillo, M. (2017). “Société héroïque et société posthéroïque: quel sens pour l'action?” *Inflexions* 36: 29-37. <https://doi.org/10.3917/infle.036.0029>

system of collective security would slowly but surely eliminate military conflicts as means of solving international disputes, in favor of negotiated solutions. Other analysts go even further and argue that, in line with the precepts of the Enlightenment and Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy of practical rationality, post-heroic societies have succeeded in substituting "passion, sacrifice and honor" as key societal values with "prosperity, temporal pleasures and personal happiness."⁶ The diminishing role of the military in society has led to a redefinition of citizenship away from the sanctity of military duties and the supreme sacrifice for the fatherland to consumerism and the welfare state. It is argued that, since advanced societies managed to rule out war as means of solving inter-state relations, they do not *need* heroes or ultimate sacrifice in combat. Finally, to further substantiate the concept of post-heroic societies, other scholars advanced the concept of "post-heroic" or "servant" leadership, characterized by "empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship."⁷

Second, and equally importantly for our analysis, cultural historians point out that post-heroic societies do not revere heroes and their exceptional deeds anymore but the *victims* of conflicts and wars, a trend leading to a major transformation in memory politics "from heroization to victimization."⁸ This phenomenon was first manifest in Europe after 1945 and had at its forefront the postwar anti-Nazi trials and the transnational formation of the memory of the Holocaust.⁹ The collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War further stimulated this trend, leading to the emergence of novel manifestations of transnational or even continental and global forms of memory, built upon memories of traumatic histories and often emulating the Holocaust memory-formation. This trend stimulated campaigns of retroactive justice, further contributing to political or academic decolonization, the emancipation of marginalized groups, and the rehabilitation of past victims. At the same time, the blatant manipulation of the intense collective emotions associated with conflicts, traumas, and victimhood status created the ground for mimetic competition for symbolic capital and the rise of exclusivist nationalism, with an impact on both domestic and international politics. Recent scholarship explores, in particular, the contemporary rise of "victimhood nationalism" resting on a sharp dichotomy between victims and victimizers.¹⁰ Lim Jie-Hyun, for example, argues that the rise of competing memories of victimhood facilitated the formation of new

⁶ See Fallenangel, "The hero myth in a post-heroic society – seen from a Jungian view," [September 30, 2014](#)

⁷ See Škerlavaj, M. (2022). "What Is Post-Heroic Leadership and Why Do We Need It?" in *Post-Heroic Leadership*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham., https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90820-1_2. On the concept of heroic leadership, see Allison, S. T. & Goethals, G. R. (2013). *Heroic leadership: An influence taxonomy of 100 exceptional individuals*. London: Routledge.

⁸ Sabrow, M. (2011). "The Post-heroic Memory Society". In Blaive, M., Gerbel, C. & Lindenberger, T. (eds). *Clashes in European Memory: The Case of Communist Repression and the Holocaust* (Innsbruck and Vienna: Studien Verlag, 2011) 88–98, here 90.

⁹ On this trend, and its limits, see Zombory, M. (2017). The birth of the memory of Communism: memorial museums in Europe, *Nationalities Papers* 45 (6): 1028–1046; Kovács, É. (2018) Limits of Universalization: The European Memory Sites of Genocide, *Journal of Genocide Research* 20 (4): 490–509. See also Judt, T. (1992) The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe, *Daedalus* 121 (4): 83–118; Müller, J.W. (2010) "On "European Memory": Some Conceptual and Normative Remarks" in Pakier, M. and Stråth, B. (eds.), *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Memory*. New York – Oxford: Berghahn, 25–37; Stone, D. (2012) "Memory Wars in the 'New Europe.'" In Stone, D. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 714–731.

¹⁰ On the concept of victimhood nationalism, see mainly Jie-Hyun, L. (2022) *Global Easts Remembering Imagining Mobilizing*. New York: Columbia University Press. On theories of victimhood, see Jacoby, T. A. (2015). A theory of victimhood: Politics, conflict and the construction of victim-based identity. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43 (2): 511–530; and Rock, P. (2007) "Theoretical Perspectives on Victimisation". In Walklate, S. (ed.), *Handbook of Victims and Victimology*. Devon, 37–61.

transnational "memory communities" based on the intricate connections between collective mourning, anti-colonialism, and authoritarian populism.¹¹ These developments led to an unprecedented exacerbation of political polarization in consolidating but also established democracies. As Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning point out in *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*, the current political polarization between the progressive left and the populist radical right goes well beyond the traditional ideological cleavages between liberals and conservatives or between believers and atheists but are a confrontation between a new moral "victimhood culture" on the one hand, and a traditional "culture of dignity," on the other.¹² Furthermore, new perspectives from the field of international relations show that victimhood nationalisms have the potential "to legitimize the projection of grievances onto third parties, potentially sowing new conflicts."¹³

Structure and Organization of the Cluster

This cluster of essays explores the politics of history and memory after WWII in Europe and beyond it, with an emphasis on war, occupation, and genocide. The essays pay special attention to the main trends and paradigms in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, pointing out to the legacies of the communist politics of history, to the cleavage in historical memories between East and West, but also to attempts of forging a pan-European memory-culture.¹⁴

In the opening essay, "Moral Capital, Heroes and Victim Competition", Jean Michel Chaumont elaborates on the concept of "moral capital" first put forward in his work *The Competition of Victims* (1997). "Moral capital," Chaumont argues, can be subsumed under the general rubric of symbolic capital, as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu, but it is nevertheless a particular kind of capital: one the one hand, just like every type of capital, it serves as a kind of universal currency, whose values fluctuates on the marketplace of symbolic capital. On the other hand, however, it is a special, meritocratic type of capital, one that is accumulated through behavior patterns in certain limit situations. Chaumont focuses in particular on the prevailing modes of *production* of moral capital. He points out that at its origins, moral capital was generated by suffering and resistance to injustice, followed by acknowledgment and rehabilitation in post-dictatorship situations; more recently, however, the moral capital of suffering and victimization has been detached from the idea of instant political "rewards", the emphasis being moved from the meritorious behavior of the victim to the criminalization of the perpetrators' actions. To substantiate these claims, Chaumont focuses on main case studies: the communist anti-fascist resistance in the Nazi occupied France,

¹¹ Jie-Hyun, L. & Rosenhaft, E. (2021). *Mnemonic Solidarity: Global Interventions*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57669-1>

¹² Keith, C. B. & Manning, J. (2018). *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions Safe Spaces and the New Culture Wars*. Cham Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³ Lerner, A. B. (2022) "The uses and abuses of victimhood nationalism in international politics", *European Journal of International Relations* 26 (1): 62-87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119850249>

¹⁴ For the East-West divide in the history of memory, see Blaive, M., Gerbel, C. & Lindenberger, T. (eds.) *Clashes in European Memory: The Case of Communist Repression and the Holocaust*. Innsbruck and Vienna: Studien Verlag, 2011; Ghodsee, K. (2014) "Tale of 'Two Totalitarianisms:' The Crisis of Capitalism and the Historical Memory of Communism", *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 4 (2): 115-42; Dujisin, Z. (2015). Post-Communist Europe: On the Path to a Regional Regime of Remembrance? In Kopeček, M. & Wciślik, P. (eds), *Authoritarian Pasts, Liberal Democracy and Intellectual History in East Central Europe after 1989*. Budapest, New York: CEU Press.

the Holocaust of the Jews during World War II, and discourses on the Ukrainian *holodomor*. Based on common patterns observed in these case studies, Chaumont concludes that the “survivor” of atrocities is the “new hero” of the post-heroic society, rather than combat heroes.

In a remarkably complementary essay to that of Chaumont, Olha Ostrittchouk follows up on the example of the Ukrainian *holodomor* to illustrate the uses and abuses of victimisation as a “winning political strategy” for accumulated moral capital, an issue which was briefly addressed but not explicitly elaborated by Chaumont, who focused mostly on the modes of production of moral capital. Ostrittchouk points out that, in Western European democracies, the postwar trials of Nuremberg and Eichmann trials were not only instruments of transnational justice but also granted recognition and political legitimacy to the status of victim as a platform for identity claims. After the fall of communism, this pattern has been emulated in Central and Eastern Europe, as well, where “it has become fashionable to dress up as a victim.” The victimhood identity was further reinforced in these regions by the strong religious revival that followed the fall of communism and their collective rituals of mourning and repentance. Ostrittchouk points out to the potentially positive aspects of the new victim-centered memory culture, facilitating critical inquiries of the past, uncovering the crimes and abuses of the communist regimes, the restoration of historical justice and the rehabilitation of victims. But she highlights the dark side of these campaigns of victimization, as well, leading to exclusionary identity discourses, national messianism, and ideological polarization.

Markus Meckl explores the main traits of the Latvian national identity in the post-1991 independence period. He points out that the European pattern of investing victims—rather than heroic deeds—with a central symbolic role in the process of nation-building is amply evident in the case of Latvia - and the other Baltic States in general, I would add. Meckl shows that while during the nineteenth-century Latvia’s nation-building process relied on an extensive gallery of national heroes, in the post-independence period narratives of collective identity have not attempted to construct a new pantheon of national heroes but have instead highlighted the suffering the Latvians endured throughout their turbulent twentieth-century history, with a focus on World War Two and the decades-long Soviet occupation (1940/41 and 1944-1990). The new dominant metanarrative on the Latvian nation as a ‘victim of history’ has been expressed and disseminated in academic publications, in innumerable official speeches, monuments, and patterns of commemorations, and has been enshrined in the new “Museum of Occupation” opened in the national capital, Riga, in 1993.

Vukašin Zorić’s essay focuses on the Museum of Genocide Victims, a new cultural institution opened in Belgrade, Republic of Serbia, after the wars on the partition of Yugoslavia, with the mandate to research and nurture the memory of the victims of genocide committed against Serbs in World War II, but also the victims of the Holocaust and other victims of Nazism and Fascism. The article provides an ample overview of the politics of memory in Socialist Yugoslavia and in post-partition Serbia, centered on the multiple ways in which the memory of World War II is used by politicians to legitimize their political agendas by defining and redefining the meaning of heroism and victimhood. Zorić points out to the transformation of the narrative on memory in contemporary Serbia from heroization to the victimization of the Serbian nation. He points out to the multiple agencies behind this agenda, ranging from the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, but also the Serbian Progressive Party and Aleksandar Vučić, the current President of the Republic of Serbia.

Pandelis Kiprianos, Nektarios Stellakis, Thanasis Karalis and Sofia Kasola explore the ways in which the founding event of the modern Greek State, namely the Greek Revolution and the War of Independence

(1821–1828) is portrayed in academic history and in history textbooks and is then perceived in the Greeks' collective memory. In their introduction, the authors tackle the relationship between history and memory, and the political competition for public attention and recognition in the field of historical politics. They point out to a growing tension between academic and public history. As far as the image of the Greek Revolution and the War of Independence are concerned, for example, we are witnessing an ambivalent public perception: heroization, even if toned down, in the public field, but increasingly anti-heroic in academic texts. These two distinct perceptions coexist and “fuel” each other but they are also in conflict. The essay has the merit of highlighting the gap between public perceptions of history and academic research, and the important role school textbooks play in shaping long-lasting perceptions of historical events and in shaping collective memories.

In the final essay to the cluster, Constantin Iordachi uses the exceptional transnational biography of a Hungarian World War II veteran to highlight the concomitant existence of various–overlapping but also rival–transnational communities of memory in Central and Eastern Europe representing common events. Following the veteran's eventful and traumatic journey through Soviet Union, Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia/Serbia, Iordachi highlights the socially-constructed nature of complex notions such as heroes and victims and their constant change over time and space, at both official and grassroots levels. He also points out that official and grass-root notions are oftentimes in tension or even in overt contradiction. In the end, he alludes to the responsibility of transnational entrepreneurs of memory, be they scholars, journalist, politicians, or local community leaders, in giving representation to those who suffered abuses, in raising awareness of historical injustice and in rehabilitating victims.

Conclusions

Overall, the essays included in this cluster point out to the fact that societal discourses focusing on victims and victimizers, on the one hand, and on heroes and martyrs, on the other, are deeply entrenched in social, political, and religious traditions and have routinely served as tools of political mobilization and community-building. If used in the service of campaigns of civic justice and rehabilitations of victims of abuses and injustice, these discourses can foster patriotism, solidarity, and cohesion. Yet, as the contributions to this cluster amply demonstrate, there are many potential traps and dangers involved in the healing of historical traumas, and in the management of feelings of anger and demands of retroactive justice. Discourses of victimization, in particular, have a great potential to divide society into “us” and “them” by fostering historical mythologies based on vision of national uniqueness and on rigid black-and-white or good-versus-bad moral approaches, leading to political polarization and conflicts. For these reasons, public discourses need to foster a critical yet balanced approach to the past, by promoting campaigns of historical justice and rehabilitation to restore truth and justice without demonizing or dehumanizing various other segments of society or neighboring countries, perceived and constructed as enemies.

Russia's recent unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is a sober reminder that the combination of victimhood nationalism, social militarism, and authoritarianism leads almost inevitably to violent wars of aggression. Ukraine's response, and Europe's solidarity in general, have renewed traditional meaning of heroism, citizenship, and patriotism, refuting the image of post-heroic society by bringing again to the fore the image of citizens-in-arms fighting for democratic values. The bleak news is that, against over-

optimistic claims of the advent of the post-heroic society, war—even in its most conventional forms—is still an integral part of our modern, technologically-advanced world.

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Moral Capital, Heroes and Victim Competition¹⁵

Jean-Michel Chaumont

Introduction

What exactly do we mean when we say that victims have taken the place of heroes? It certainly does not mean that victims have become as *visible* in the public space as heroes once were. In terms of visibility, neither the heroes nor the victims are on a par with the stars of song, sport, television, modelling and other celebrities who are "well known for their well-knownness", as Boorstin (1962) famously put it. From the strict point of view of their "visibility capital" (Heinich, 2012), it would even be truer to say that heroes and victims have been largely supplanted by media celebrities. But the latter do not have an important asset that heroes had and that victims now have, namely *moral capital*. It is this asset that is at stake in the victims' competition (Chaumont, 1997) and this text will focus on improving its definition as well as our understanding of its modes of production.¹⁶

We will analyze the creation of moral capital during the Second World War using the archives of the French Communist Party (PCF) because it is the political party in France that benefited the most from the moral capital accumulated during the war. Such capital propelled the PCF to the rank of first party in France after the Liberation in 1944. We will see what normative raw materials were used to obtain victory on the "moral front" by focusing on one example: the case of communist detainees in internment camps set up by the Vichy regime. We will also see how and why Jewish prisoners saw their moral capital melt away and the reactions that this melting away engendered.

We will then look at the new mode of production of moral capital, which was initially implemented more or less consciously to rehabilitate the victims of the Holocaust, but which has since been appropriated by many other victimized collectivities.

From symbolic capital to moral capital

French-language sociologists are accustomed to the concept of "symbolic capital" introduced by Pierre Bourdieu. Although moral capital can certainly be considered a variant of "symbolic capital", this concept has become such a "catch-all" (Heinich, 2012: 45) that its heuristic power has been reduced accordingly. We will therefore try to define it more precisely.

Following Heinich's example, let us begin by justifying the very literal use of the notion of "capital" in the concept of "moral capital": capital is defined as "a measurable, accumulable, transmissible, interest-earning, and convertible resource" (Heinich, 2012: 46). *Measuring* the moral capital of communist deportees after the Liberation in France would be done, for example, by comparing the large number of

¹⁵ Many thanks to Katherine Opello for her careful proofreading of the English version of this text.

¹⁶ Rereading excerpts from *The Competition of Victims* (1997), I was surprised to discover, after starting to write this text, that the notion of "moral capital" was already present, borrowed from Edward Alexander in an article significantly entitled "Stealing the Holocaust" published as early as 1980 in the journal *Midstream*. I had already identified this moral capital as one of the main issues in the competition of victims, but I had not elaborated the concept (nor had Edward Alexander) as I try to do in this text. In this sense, I am fortunately doing more than rehashing, even if I am reusing here several analyses already mobilized in *The Competition of Victims*.

requests to testify about their experience with the small number of requests made at the same time to Jewish survivors. As Simone Veil wrote bitterly, "One of my sisters was deported to Ravensbrück for acts of resistance. As soon as she returned, she was invited in various forums, like many other resistance fighters, to speak about the resistance and the deportation, but this was never the case for my older sister, also deported to Auschwitz, nor for me. We were only victims, not heroes" (Veil, 1993: 698).

Moral capital is also *accumulable*, and the case of the French Communist Party is particularly striking here, because at the beginning of the war, the German-Soviet pact had considerably diminished its moral capital by making the PCF appear to be a traitor to the Fatherland, which justified its banning in the fall of 1939. It was the cumulative action of thousands of resistance fighters and communist prisoners, backed by the sacrifices of the victorious Red Army, that gradually allowed the lost capital to be reconstituted and then to increase considerably.

Moral capital can be *transmitted*, especially from individuals or small groups of individuals (for example, the "maquisards"¹⁷) to the communities they claim to belong to: sometimes compatriots, more often partisan collectivities such as the Communist Party. Even today, French communist leaders sometimes boast of being from the "Parti des Fusillés", even though there are undoubtedly many French citizens who no longer know what this term refers to. That moral capital *brings in interests* is not debatable: in this case it guarantees the PCF several ministerial positions in the first government of liberated France, and a large number of deputies and local elected officials. Finally, moral capital is *convertible*, as the previous example demonstrates: among other material and immaterial benefits, the moral capital conquered in the maquis and camps was converted after the war into electoral victories and high number of new Communist Party members.

We can therefore conclude that moral capital is, like other types of capital (economic, cultural, social, etc.) a resource that allows the holder -individual or moral person- to improve his¹⁸ position in the social hierarchy with the multiple advantages granted by such a position.

There is, however, a difference that distinguishes moral capital from the others. Whereas I can have and benefit from considerable economic capital without it being public knowledge, *moral capital exists only if it is recognized*. It can therefore only produce benefits among those who recognize it. It is therefore a potentially very vulnerable capital that cannot be invested everywhere.

The specificities of moral capital

In the internment camps managed by the Vichy regime, the authorities requested that certain prisoners, particularly those who were communists, to sign a declaration of allegiance to Pétain to facilitate their release. Some suggested that by signing this document, that they did not really commit themselves to Pétain. Instead, they only had to *feign* denial of their Party in order to regain their freedom, their families

¹⁷ I quote from Wikipedia: ""Maquis" refers to both a group of resistance fighters and the place where they operated during the Second World War. Resistance fighters are nicknamed "maquisards", hiding in sparsely populated areas, forests or mountains. The name refers to a form of Mediterranean vegetation, the maquis, and even more to the original Corsican expression "to take the maquis" ("Piglià a machja"), meaning to take refuge in the forest to avoid the authorities or a vendetta, or to refer to the various armed resistances that have taken place on the island throughout history."

¹⁸ "His" of "her" of course. To facilitate the reading, I propose to keep the grammatical usage where "the masculine prevails" but it goes without saying that all that I say about heroes applies as well to heroines. The same goes for victims or executioners.

and possibly even return to the resistance. But, the Central Committee of the Party warned, one should not be caught up in this trap because "to act as a renegade is not to lie to the Hitlerian enemy, it is to lie to one's own past of honor and devotion to the people, it is to try to undermine the *moral capital* of the Resistance organizations, to ruin their authority and prestige, it is to behave as a saboteur of the *moral front of the Resistance*, which is as important as the military front, the information front, etc. Whoever acts in this way behaves no more and no less than a 'donor'. The only difference is that instead of 'giving' a comrade or a group of comrades, he exposes, abandons and betrays his entire Party, as far as he can, paralyzing all those who fight for the sacred cause." (PCF, 1944)

Heroic moral capital is thus mainly a matter of loyalty and courage. Courage to maintain that loyalty in times of duress, i.e. when betrayal would be a much easier option. Heroic moral capital can go to members of a victimized group if the victimization is endured with such courage to stay loyal. The martyr then becomes an exemplary figure who is no less heroic than the fighting hero. However, suffering alone is not enough to produce heroic moral capital. Devoid of any sacrificial meaning, it only arouses non-rewarding pity.

As for the "moral front," which the PCF asserts is no less important than the other fronts, it exists among enemies and can therefore result in either defeat or victory. Defeat would be the consequence of the abandonment and betrayal of the Party, in this case through its denial. Betrayal would also mean, from the personal point of view of the renegade militant, "lying to one's own past honor", that is, dishonor.

Bernard Klieger's plea in favor of the Jews

While suffering alone can provoke pity, it is not enough to produce moral capital¹⁹. And if the *conduct* of the suffering people is dishonorable, that is, if it shows a lack of loyalty, even pity can disappear. As is well known, non-Jewish prisoners were only brought into contact with Jewish prisoners in large numbers after the evacuation of Auschwitz and some other places where they were concentrated. At the end of the death marches and train journeys, which were hardly less deadly, the survivors were in a particularly degraded physical and moral state. Thus, wrote Dr. Fréjafon at Bergen-Belsen, the Jews "would have acquired all the sympathy of the Western prisoners who, in their misery, felt moved by an even deeper misery, if it were not for the excess of their submissiveness and the relentlessness with which they denounced each other." (Fréjafon, 1947: 47) In other words, they showed cowardly servility and betrayed each other, thus contravening the two norms of production of moral capital. Under these conditions, what was the likelihood that they could reevaluate themselves and to reconstitute, in retrospect, a moral capital likely to earn them a share of the aura enjoyed by the survivors of the camps after the Liberation?

A good example of this is the account of Bernard Klieger, an Austrian Jewish journalist deported from Belgium, survivor of Auschwitz and author of a testimonial published in 1946. Detained in a Buchenwald subcamp, he was forced to do hard labor in an underground factory. Not only were the working conditions appalling, but there was also a lack of food and the "Stubendienst" - that is, the deputies of the head of the block - stole so much that the latest arrivals never received food. The daily distribution of soup thus resulted in violence among the prisoners, to the great amusement of the Stubendienst. As Klieger

¹⁹ In addition, despite the *sympathy* it may provoke, the status of "pitiful victims" is hardly enviable. As proof, in the preface written by Simone de Beauvoir, to Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka* in 1967: "All the accounts Steiner had read presented the millions of Jews who died in the camps - (...) - as *pitiful victims*: should they not have refused this role?"

admits, "in our desire to live, we forgot and trampled on the most elementary and primitive laws of comradeship; we delivered others to death to prolong our own lives. There is no point in trying to hide it, we have behaved in an unworthy, shameful way, we have behaved like miserable "bastards"! (Klieger, 1946: 157) The "elementary laws of comradeship" are violated, i.e., the destruction of the normative foundations of moral capital. Since the conditions of survival described prohibit any *practice of solidarity* that could change the image of the Jewish prisoners, Klieger is left with the possibility of *pedagogy*, and he devotes five pages to a long plea explaining to the non-Jews that, as organizers of the famine, they are responsible for the lamentable state to which the Jews had been reduced, and that they themselves would not have acted otherwise if they had been subjected to the same treatment. It is in keeping with older apologies in favor of the Jews or Black slaves, which blamed their oppressors for their moral decline²⁰.

But how then could the Jews claim a share of the moral capital that other collectivities were able to accumulate during their deportation? Klieger tries to do so in the epilogue of his book, dejectedly noting that after a triumphant return among the others²¹, the Jewish survivors were left behind: "Our Jewish people has just lived through the cruelest chapter in its history. Six million Jews have *fallen*! They had done nothing to deserve this fate! The least we survivors can ask for is recognition of the *sacrifices* we and our dead have made! All we ask is that we too be granted a modest place in the sun! Let us never forget what we Jews have endured and let us weigh what we could be blamed for against what we have behind us! The righteous, the one who wants to see, will see which side of the scale will be tilted lower" (Klieger, 1946: 191)

This excerpt is remarkable because it illustrates the difficulty of claiming a moral capital based on suffering alone. Klieger tries rather clumsily to suggest that six million Jews "fell" - implying that they were fallen heroes. But they did not "fall", they were victims of an enterprise of mass destruction. The same goes for the reference to the "sacrifices" made. The object for which the survivors and the dead sacrificed themselves is missing, which alone could justify the use of the word "sacrifice". They died neither for communism, nor for the fatherland, nor even for Judaism. As Klieger notes, "they had done nothing to deserve this fate" and this is precisely what the communist, anti-fascist or patriotic prisoners reproached them for. Moreover, since their conduct in adversity had not allowed them to accumulate moral capital, it is not surprising that, as Simone Veil deplored, they were not invited to the same table as others after the war.

Transition: Rehabilitation of the victims of the Holocaust

In the mid-1960s, the moral balance of the holocaust was unchanged, and at a meeting of Jewish intellectuals in New York, Elie Wiesel could still ask as a matter of course why "do we admittedly think of the Holocaust with shame". (Wiesel, 1967: 288) The trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 confirms this

²⁰ See Chaumont (2018). Moral decay only *apparent*, their later advocates soon said: while Abbé Grégoire (1988) or Victor Schoelcher (2018) admitted the decay (blaming it on their oppressors), Emil Fackenheim for the Jews (1982) or Aimé Césaire (2018) for the slaves will argue later that behind the *apparent* servility, resistance was manifested through an unabashed celebration of life.

²¹ "When we were picked up by bus at the Bourget airport and taken to the Lutetia hotel during our trip to Paris, we really believed that the world would never forget *that we were martyrs*. In tight rows, shoulder to shoulder, the Parisians formed a hedge. From the sidewalks, from the boulevards that we walked, the enthusiastic jubulations of the crowd went up towards us. The houses were decorated, in short, *we were received as one would receive an Eisenhower, a Montgomery, a Churchill!* (Klieger, 1946: 190).

as Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor of the trial, did not hide his intention to call as witnesses many Jewish survivors who would give proof of their resistance during the war. He thereby demonstrated that the refutation of the accusation of cowardice was still the big issue of the moment. The strategy was no more successful than its predecessors, as shown, for example, by the testimony of Abbe Kovner, one of the leaders of the abortive Jewish uprising in the Vilna ghetto. Far from exalting Jewish resistance, he emphatically sought to answer the "question that haunts us in this courtroom: how come they did not resist?"²² (Kovner, 1961)

In New York the following year, Elie Wiesel, Emil Fackenheim and a few others took an argumentative path that went against what had been tried until now: "*I believe in the necessity of restoring Jewish pride even in relation to the Holocaust. I don't like to think of the Jew as suffering. I prefer thinking of him as someone who can defeat suffering - his own and that of others. For his is a messianic dimension: he can save the world from a new Auschwitz. As Camus would say: one must create happiness to protest against a universe of unhappiness. But one must create it. And we are creating it. We were creating it. The Jews got married, celebrated weddings, had children within the ghetto walls. Their absurd faith in their non-existent future was, despite everything, af al pi chen, an affirmation of the spirit. So, pride is theirs; it is not ours. Not yet.*" (Wiesel, 1967: 291)

The bet was daring: to take pride in the perseverance of an apparently normal life (that is, to celebrate weddings, to have children) while imprisoned in the ghettos. It was well what many authors - including Wiesel himself in *La nuit* (1958)- had considered to be the escape into illusion, the first step in the spiral of survival at any price which would melt their moral capital. Instead wasn't it time for resistance? Bruno Bettelheim for instance did not have words harsh enough to castigate what he pejoratively called the "ghetto mentality" and its "adherence to the philosophy of business as usual" (Bettelheim, 1991: 316)²³.

A few years later, Wiesel found an ally in Terence des Pres (1976), the young author of a seminal book at the time: *The Survivor. Anatomy of life and death in Concentration Camps*. The latter, engaged in a polemic with Bettelheim, sought to show that the latter was in the grip of an "old heroic ethic" which, in the camps, had proved its obsolescence. He felt that Bettelheim and many others were guilty of "blaming the victims" and sought to show that in the context of the camps, resistance and courage had changed in meaning: *resistance meant surviving as long as possible, courage meant persevering in existence and not exposing oneself to a useless death.*

It was Emil Fackenheim's task to bring the argument full circle. Since, under the *unique* conditions of the Holocaust, resistance meant trying to survive as long as possible, *all Jews were resisters*. There were no longer insurgents on one side and "passives" on the other; all *celebrated life*: "The Nazi logic of destruction meant to drive the Jewish people into self-loathing and suicide. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a unique affirmation-unique except only for similar, less known uprisings-of Jewish self-respect. (...) What is more, since it was a defiance even of honorable suicide, it was also, and at the same time, during

²² A survey of Israeli youth conducted shortly after the trial showed that "thousands of Israeli high school and college students who pupils and students who had visited the Warsaw Ghetto exhibit in the settlement's museum [in a kibbutz established by former Jewish partisans] showed a strong sense of guilt and inferiority because of belonging to a people that were destined to slaughter and went to slaughter" (Krug, 1963: 142).

²³ For the same reasons, he deplored the admiration for Anne Frank's family. Anne Frank occupies a special place: the very embodiment of innocence, she was as it were sanctified, and her fate assured the Jewish victims of an enduring outpouring of sympathy that was the closest thing to, but not the most, heroic moral capital.

the long, terrible weeks that it lasted, *a unique celebration of Jewish life, and thus of life itself* (...). It emerges, therefore, that the armed Jewish resistance in the Holocaust-world belongs less closely with other European resistance movements than with the prayers of the Hasidim, the solitary struggle of Pelagia Lewinska and the mothers who gave birth to children. The Nazi logic of destruction was an assault on the Jewish people without precedent in history. Jewish resistance in all the above forms, all interrelated, was equally unprecedented." (Fackenheim, 1982: 127).

"Unique" became a much used word: a unique celebration of Jewish life, an unique Jewish resistance, an unique Jewish suffering... For Pastor Roy Eckardt, the word "unique" was not even strong enough: they decided that it was more appropriate to speak of the "unique uniqueness" of the Holocaust. (Eckardt, 1974). Borrowed from *theology*²⁴ to describe the experience of the victims, uniqueness was progressively transposed to the *profane* field of the description of the historical event itself. Given as a matter of course for religious Jews - but only for them - because of the divine election, uniqueness became a claim that was (wrongly) supposed to be empirically demonstrable. Everyone had his own argument, but no one succeeded in making a convincing one. A quarter of a century later, one cannot say that the demonstration has been made. To see the drop in the number of publications on the uniqueness (or not) of the Holocaust, it seems instead that the polemic has become obsolete. Even more so than in the case of the polemics about the supposed cowardice of the Jews, it won't be long before it becomes impossible to understand why so many passions have been invested in it. We shall soon see that other questions have become more pressing, even if they still bear the scars of earlier battles.

The assertion of the uniqueness and incommensurability of the Holocaust to any other past, present or future event was bound to provoke a reaction from other categories of victims of National Socialism and more generally from other categories of victims in history. The trigger of victim competition was pulled, and it would completely shift the focus of controversy. It was no longer a question of the more or less heroic conduct of the victims, but of the more or less genocidal characterization of the events. A new factory of moral capital was set up whereby far from being "a shameful chapter of Jewish history, one that should best be forgotten" (Krug, 1963: 142), the Holocaust became a precious "moral capital" that had to be protected against "theft" (Alexander, 1980).

The new factory of moral capital

For at least the last two decades of the 20th century, sterile and bitter polemics raged in the United States and in Europe between "the" Jews (erroneously homogenized into a unanimous whole) and "the others". Even though for some the uniqueness was better seen as an "axiom" (Novick, 1999: 14) and a "distasteful secular version of chosenness" (Schorsch, 1979: 39²⁵), the struggle for recognition first took on

²⁴ See for instance the last lines of Eckardt's article (1974:35): "The Holocaust is uniquely unique because it is *metanoia*, the climatic turning-around of the entire world. Within the Holocaust the agents of the Devil, *The Deputy*, bring his work to consummation. In this sense the history of man comes up to a fateful watershed. But so does the history of God."

²⁵ It is worth quoting at length from Ismar Schorsch, then the provost and professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, whose fears were confirmed later on: "Like the term 'first', unique is a description that responsible historians tend to employ only in a restricted context. Used indiscriminately, it is a *throwback to an age of religious polemics* where commitment was largely a function of uniqueness, and it deserves to be buried with those polemics. Unfortunately, our obsession with the uniqueness of the Holocaust smacks of a distasteful secular version of chosenness. We are still special -by virtue of Hitler's paranoia. If the claim is *historically* unproductive, it is *politically* downright *counterproductive*. It

the *appearance* of historical controversies in which, with macabre accounts and characteristics to back them up, Armenians, Gypsies, homosexuals, Ukrainians, anti-fascist resistance fighters, descendants of slaves, descendants of the first peoples on the American continent, Palestinians, representatives of formerly colonized peoples, feminists, etc., never ceased to produce arguments to make the point that what they had undergone was as worse as - or even worse than - what the Jews had undergone. In opposition, a seemingly united front of Jewish intellectuals flanked by a few non-Jewish allies deployed a battery of hackneyed and largely contradictory arguments to prove the contrary: that there was never any question of denying the gravity of what "the others" - a residual category - had endured, but always one or another characteristic made the Holocaust an event *distinct* from its competitors, and the pretenders to the title should, in their view, be dismissed. The positions held - almost in the warlike sense of the word - could vary significantly. One conceded other genocides but not other holocausts (Bauer, 1980), another conceded massacres but not other genocides (Katz, 1994; 2019) ...

As the qualification of "genocide" thus became a major issue, a new shift in the arena of the debates occurred: they became pseudo-legal since the notion of "genocide" has been included in international criminal law since the 1948 Convention. The debate was legal in nature, but it was not necessary to be a jurist to take part in it. As for uniqueness, everyone had their own definition and especially their own opinion. In the wake of this, the notion of "crime against humanity" became in turn, during the Barbie trial in Lyon in 1987 for example, the object of more or less exclusive monopolies. Some argued that only the Jews had been persecuted for what they were, and therefore only they were victims of a crime against humanity. In a total reversal of the situation in the immediate post-war period, the Jewish victims now had precedence and wanted to dismiss the Resistance "victims" from the tribunal and from the platform it provided for witnesses. The resistance fighters had given the Germans reasons to persecute them, whereas the Jews had done nothing, and therefore did not "deserve" to be persecuted. Was this not the essence of the crime against humanity? Didn't the Armenians on the other hand give the Turkish regime some reason to persecute them? Only victims as innocent as the Jews could claim the title of victims of crimes against humanity without a statute of limitations. The basis of the ancient stigma - having done nothing to (defend the homeland or fight fascism) - had metamorphosed into the basis of a singularity (being persecuted for what one is rather than for what one does) which alone gave access to the title of "victim of a crime against humanity" and to the privileges attached to it. Not only did the Jewish survivors eclipse the Resistance survivors in the public and media space, but they also benefited from financial reparations. Of course, this only served to increase the attractiveness of a kind of unprecedented moral capital that other actors also felt entitled to.

The main difference with the manufacture of heroic moral capital is that the manufacture of victim moral capital is completely dissociated from the conduct of the victims: any meritocratic dimension has been eliminated. From now on, it is the legal description of the executioners' actions - and its recognition by third parties - that is decisive. "Genocide" is the qualification that generates the most moral capital, followed by "crime against humanity". The moral capitalization of the Holocaust has provided the model for the moral capitalization of victimhood.

impedes genuine dialogue, because it introduces an extraneous contentious issue that alienates potential allies from among other victims of organized human depravity." (Schorch, 1981: 39)

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Victimisation as a winning political and means of social recognition in post-communist societies: the example of Ukraine²⁶strategy

Olha Ostrittchouk

Introduction

We live in an era where 'we only have eyes for the losers, the disenfranchised, the victims', wrote Krzysztof Pomian (Pomian, 2010: 266), in an issue of *Le Débat* devoted to the major discursive categories that have recently become part of our habits for analysing the contemporary world. Indeed, the victim has acquired an unprecedented position in our societies: he or she benefits from an unquestionable credit of social recognition, by the simple fact of his or her status, likely to transform him or her into an effective tool of political demand. His or her suffering is there, offered in the public square, to serve as a lesson to the politician and the educator. Its innocence cannot be questioned. Its effectiveness is such that it is summoned in fiery patriotic speeches, in moments of crisis, venerated in public rituals, and invited to be present, physically or metaphysically, at large collective gatherings.

In recent decades, the phenomenon of victimisation has become so widespread that the French sociologist Guillaume Erner has spoken of a 'society of victims' (Erner, 2006). It is not that everyone has become a victim, but that there is a kind of consensus in our societies that by donning the victim's garb, by raising one's voice in his or her name, one is sure to be heard, one is sure to mobilise opinion, one is sure to obtain support for a just cause; even if this cause may, in turn, lead to the outbreak of new hostilities, new confrontations and new violence, and thus new victims. The proliferation of victims and the valorisation of the victim discourse have made the position of victim, according to the same Erner, if not 'enviable', at least 'envied' (Erner, op. cit.: 13), modifying our relationship with time, making us more sensitive to the injustices of the past than to the glory of our ancestors, and turning 'victimism' into a category of politically correct thought. We now pay less attention to the virtuous hero, who gave his life for the common good (Homeland, nation), and whose sacrifice-exploitation was previously unanimously recognised, than to the victim. Moreover, the figure of the hero has become increasingly controversial: today's heroes are no longer the same as those of yesterday, and the heroes of some may even be qualified as 'executioners' by others, and vice versa.

This phenomenon of highlighting the victim generates another, that of 'victim competition' (Chaumont, 1997). In search of a compassionate gaze, which is now part of the new social norms, the different categories of victims can display their suffering in the public arena and do not hesitate to measure themselves, going so far as to establish a kind of victim hierarchy, with the credit for social recognition being proportional to the extent of the suffering. Some see this victim polyphony as the hallmark of a democratic mode of governance, where the idea of inequality in recognition, regardless of social category, becomes intolerable, and where individuals demand the same indignation in the face of present and past injustices. Memory laws themselves initially appear as a means of establishing this recognition as a societal achievement, an irrevocable right. Societies that emerge from authoritarian, even totalitarian, modes of

²⁶ This text was originally published in French in 2011 in the journal *MARTOR The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review*

governance and embark on the development of democratic modes of operation, as is the case with post-communist societies, are as much as others, and perhaps even more than others, affected by this phenomenon.

At the root of the phenomenon of victimisation

To understand the origin of the quest for social recognition through victimisation, it is necessary to go back in time. When and under what circumstances did this shift from hero to victim take place? Most researchers attribute it to the Second World War, and more precisely to the great historical trials that followed it. First of all, the Nuremberg Trial, organised to judge the defeated and the initiators of the conflict, the main Nazi leaders, which took place from 18 October 1945 to 1 October 1946, had the ambition to "denazify" Germany and to establish the principles of a new international law concerning war crimes. Already in June of the same year, at the founding of the United Nations, the victors had agreed on the need to take war criminals to trial. But the trial models proposed differed: the Americans called for a public trial, the British and French supported the idea of a trial behind closed doors, and the Soviets advocated the summary execution of 50,000 war criminals without trial. In the end, the American view prevailed. Thus, the Nuremberg trial introduced, at the global level, a very American vision of the relationship between justice and politics, which manifested itself in the criminalisation of the enemy, as noted by Antoine Garapon. This vision makes the victors, and the United States in particular, "the natural prosecutor of the good, the self-appointed advocate of the victims of all the world's persecutions". In short, he concludes that 'America sees itself as a benevolent empire' (Garapon, 2008: 28). By criminalising the enemy through the establishment of various categories of crimes (crimes against peace, war crimes, crimes against humanity), the holding of the trial granted, for the first time, recognition by the international community to the victims and the suffering they had undergone. And to designate the attempted extermination of the Jews, a new term was coined, that of genocide, the use of which would become enshrined in legal language with the adoption of the "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" at the UN General Assembly on December 9, 1948.

With the Eichmann trial (1961), another threshold was crossed in the recognition of victims. This trial was to serve as a reference for all those who claimed victims' rights, and the Shoah was to be set up as a model for the recognition of collective suffering. But the real turning point came in the late 1970s. According to the historian Henry Rousso, this was the beginning of a "return of the repressed" (a term borrowed from Freud), in this case personal memories, which until then had been pushed into the unconscious because they were considered unmentionable in the public arena. In 1967, the Poles had already inaugurated an international memorial at Auschwitz, a place that had become the symbol of mass extermination. Then, little by little, international public opinion, supported by the international (1968) and European (1974) conventions on the non-applicability of the statute of limitations to war crimes and crimes against humanity, became favourable to the release of testimonies. The spokespersons for the victims of the Shoah, such as Elie Wiesel, tried to convince the Jews that the status of victim was not shameful but rewarding, restorative and comforting. From that point on, advocating in the name of a damaged memory was equivalent to regaining dignity and giving meaning to one's existence, both as an individual and as a member of a group (Erner, op. cit.: 55).

However, it was not until the mid-1980s that victims' rights were put on a legal footing and that they were able to take advantage of them. In 1985, the UN General Assembly adopted a declaration ("Declaration on the Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power"), in which it affirmed the need to take international measures capable of ensuring universal and effective recognition of the rights of victims of crime and abuse of power. This declaration heralded a new era for victims, explicitly advocating that they be treated with compassion and respect for their dignity, that they be informed of their rights in order to ensure "fair treatment", including the restitution of their stolen property and the provision of assistance and social benefits. From then on, not only were the new conditions favourable to listening to victims and to be able to provide them with a sense of deliverance from a heavy past and a trauma, but they were also able to be heard and claim compensation of all kinds, both moral and material. What are the consequences of this development? The changes that occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War gradually altered our perception of the past, our relationship to time and history, rearranged our memorial landscapes and restructured our commemorative rituals. Before 1945, there was no example of the construction of a collective/national identity based on the victimisation of its members. This is a consequence of the Shoah, the universal reception of the voices of survivors, the way they are heard and the model that emerged as a result of this reception (Reemtsma, 2002). For the first time in history, the victims were placed in the forefront of the public arena, relegating the heroes to the background. This change also had an impact on collective narratives which, instead of celebrating the exploits of a people, the glorious pages of a national history, focused on collective tragedies, national tragedies, losses suffered during wars, natural disasters... According to Garapon (Garapon, op. cit.: 63), we have moved from a controlled history, based on faith in the idea of progress, to a history in which the victims play the leading role, because of the moral debt we feel towards them:

This new perception of time is the opposite of the one that prevailed just after the war: the latter was based on rupture, on revolution, on a completely controlled history, whereas this one focuses on the victims without taking sides on the causes in the name of which the crimes were perpetrated. This new regime of historicity takes the opposite view of the rupture so much magnified by the previous one: it wants to reconnect with the previous generations to whom our contemporaries feel a strong sense of debt: this is perhaps the most profound driving force behind these actions.

Thus, the mobilisation of public opinion for the recognition of the wrongs inflicted on the victims has transformed them as holders of the 'historical truth'. International legal support has empowered the victim to claim rights and reparations. Together they have resulted in the sanctification of the victim's suffering in the public arena. From the 1980s, victims were able to continue to act individually, as was the case in the trials, but also led collective struggles as groups united around the same cause, within movements, associations, and any other organisation. The number of such organisations has been increasing ever since.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the last lock on the heroic narrative maintained by the official celebrations of the communist regime, and its victims can now enter the stage of history, whether they are victims of persecution for ideological reasons, victims of the Great Terror, victims of famine, victims of forced exile, victims of policies of displacement of persons or even entire groups of people... The successful process

of the recognition of the Shoah serves as a model for those who, for a very long time, have remained in the shadows of history, or were even consciously left out of the official narrative, or presented in an unfavourable light as "enemies of the people".

The Ukrainian nationalist movement in exile also took the opportunity to claim the responsibility of the Stalinist regime for the physical and moral damage inflicted on the Ukrainians. In the early 1980s, public hearings on the "man-made famine" in the United States led to the recognition of the regime's responsibility for the deaths of several millions of Ukrainians in the years 1932-1933. The plaintiffs argued their case, on behalf of the entire Ukrainian people alienated by Soviet Russia, and obtained a first moral compensation: recognition of the wrongs suffered as a nation. The independence of the Ukrainian SSR in 1991 allowed them to continue to promote their cause, attracting the attention of ex-Soviet Ukrainians living on the Ukrainian state territory, as well as the international community on the need for awareness of the nature and extent of this tragedy. Even if interpretations of the famine differ, both among historians and among Ukrainians themselves ("genocide", "crime against humanity", "national tragedy", "collateral damage of collectivisation"), the extent of the tragedy alone is enough to transform this event- which affected virtually the entire rural population in central and eastern Ukraine (western Ukraine was under Polish rule) in the 1930s - into an inescapable foundation of national identity, modelled on genocidal memories. Thus, the Holodomor (the term used to name this tragic event is increasingly used²⁷) is much more than a famine. For its promoters, it is a genocide perpetrated by the Stalinist regime against the Ukrainian nation.

The judicialization of history and the status of the victim as a 'rightful claimant' have, in turn, reinforced the conviction of his or her innocence (ibid.: 15), without making him or her bear any responsibility for the past; this is what makes his or her position so coveted today. The sanctification of the victim grants him/her a moral dignity that allows him/her to erase his/her past altogether, apart from his/her victimised past, and forbids him/her to question it (Pomian, op. cit.: 267). For it is the victim - directly or by proxy - who chooses the framework into which he or she wants to insert his/her narrative, the episodes or aspects he or she wishes to insist on and those he or she decides to avoid (notably the embarrassing details that do not fit in with his/her victim status).

In a way, it can be said that victimisation has become a true religion of our time. It is therefore not surprising that the vocabulary of the victim and that of religion use the same categories of 'fault', 'guilt' and 'repentance', which the ethnologist Emmanuel Terray explains by the moral judgement that weighs on the aggressor, the executioner (Terray, 2006: 63). By testifying to his/her suffering, the victim reconnects with the perpetrator of the crime, whether he is the planner or the mere executor. And his or her public testimony, when heard, creates a collective expectation that the facts will be re-established ('the restoration of historical truth'), which can only be followed by reparation (judgment, trial, public apology, moral restitution, material compensation), at least on a symbolic level, which victims and their spokespersons generally refer to as 'restoring the dignity of victims'. Thus, the condemnation of crimes and the revaluation

²⁷ It is a term coined in the mid-1980s, born from the fusion of two components: *holod* - hunger and *mor*, which is the root of the verb *moryty* (or *zamoryty*), "to exhaust, to leave to suffer without intervening, to cause to die"; this gives the whole the literal meaning of "to cause to die of hunger". In this term, therefore, are potentially gathered all the ingredients allowing its current translation (by those who claim it) as "extermination by starvation", i.e. a criminal action, planned by the Stalinist regime, directed against the Ukrainian nation and to better enslave it. With its capital letter, "Holodomor" becomes synonymous with "Ukrainian genocide", in the same way as the Holocaust is for the Jews.

of victims - whether at the level of the state or within a group of remembrance activists - are only two facets of the same process: that of social recognition of the suffering unjustly inflicted on victims and the need for reparation. For there can be no full recognition without condemnation and repentance. This is why it is not uncommon for victims' spokespersons to demand a trial for the perpetrators of the crime and their accomplices or, at the very least, a public condemnation a posteriori (most of them no longer being in the mood) of their highly criminal acts.

Moreover, the unquestioned credibility of the victim discourse has allowed nations, historically dominated by powerful neighbours, to extend victimhood to the nation as a whole. This is the case of Ukraine whose historical legacy abounds in episodes of political and economic dependence and foreign occupations. Although the early years of independence were focused on the common category of victim of Stalinism, by the seventieth anniversary of the Holodomor (2003), there was a shift towards a more specific category, that of victim nation (Ostriitchouk, 2009: 141-151). Beyond the reparation of an injustice suffered in the past, and a necessary work of memory, the position of nation-victim is likely to lead to a complete revision of the historical narrative, allowing those to escape any responsibility for the past: complicity with different political regimes, voluntary or forced participation in events, political movements, economic reforms and cultural life.

In Ukraine, under Yushchenko's presidency, the desire to base national identity on the model of the victim nation, promoted by nationalist activists and spokespersons (authorised or not) of the victims of communism, made it possible to build a new social link based on the enhancement of national liberation struggles (which were also struggles of resistance to the communist regime, 1920-1950), while at the same time concealing the darker, less glorious aspects of the nationalist experience: the obligation to flee the country, suspicions of complicity with the German occupation regime, direct or indirect participation in the Judeocide, or atrocities committed against the Polish civilian population. On the other hand, for the militants of the opposing camp, whether they were designated as "pro-Russian" or "pro-Soviet", the emphasis on the complicity of local collaborators, with nationalist affiliations, in Nazi crimes, allowed the experience of the Great Patriotic War to be reevaluated in the name of victory over fascism, and at the same time, the dark aspects of the communist experience to be mitigated: repressive measures, persecutions of all kinds, executions without trial, etc. In both cases, a category of crimes is condemned without considering the question of individual or group responsibility or the complexity of historical contexts, which implies in a large number of cases, shared responsibilities and mutual wrongs.

On 28 November 2006, the Ukrainian parliament passed the first memorial law ('Holodomor Law') in Ukraine, which defines the Holodomor as genocide perpetrated against the Ukrainian people. The legal characterisation of this historical event, 'removed' from its historical context (Jewsiewicki, 2008: 8), consecrates its unquestionable character. The law gave the signal for a large-scale heritage campaign in the form of numerous official and semi-official publications (by the Institute of National Memory and the Association of Holodomor Researchers), testimonies and archival documents, the inauguration of an imposing memorial in Kiev and numerous commemorative signs or monuments in the regions, and a vast programme of commemorations on different scales. From that moment on, the entire nation acquired the status of a victim-nation (victim of the Stalinist genocide), and any interpretation that deviates from this can be qualified as negationist and anti-Ukrainian chauvinist, and is liable to legal action.

Finally, while the position of victim may have many advantages, victimisation as a phenomenon is not without ethical problems, and may even have perverse effects that raise questions. Indeed, the plaintiffs

of history are guided more by 'an ethic of conviction' than by that of 'responsibility', and may want to replace justice with simple revenge, rightly notes G. Erner, specifying that 'victimism is not a humanism' (Erner, op. cit: 186-189, 192). For politicians and intellectuals alike, it induces a compassionate, moralising attitude in the name of the Good, which can prove harmful to critical work, leading them to defend some to the detriment of others. All the more so since the associations that decided to promote the cause of the victims, in the name of historical truth, tend to ask, more and more often and urgently, for the help of the research community, to establish it scientifically (in particular by means of international scientific meetings that they take on entirely), in order to put pressure, afterwards, on the politicians, so that this truth is placed under the protection of the law. How then can we remain fair in the face of pressure from different groups? How can we distance ourselves from the narrative that the victims impose, at the risk of being misunderstood?

The victim and the sacred

In order to fully understand what makes the victim so consensual and socially recognised, we must also question the essence of the commemorative rites that stage it and invest in its sacralisation. In this respect, it seems useful to us to resort to the anthropological approach, which is interested in the symbolism surrounding commemorations and the ritual gestures of collective mourning that refer to the meaning of human existence itself: since 'a deceased person is a sacred being' (Durkheim, 1976 (1915): 390).

In this sense, it is worth recalling that in primitive societies, rites were associated with cultural practices, sacred or profane. This is why some have been quick to announce their decline in the contemporary world, particularly in the West. Others, such as Martine Segalen (Segalen, 2010 (1998): 27), have recognised that contemporary rites, although increasingly dissociated from religious bodies and ties of kinship, are entering new fields (politics, sport, the workplace, etc.), and even moving into new territory. We decided to check whether Martine Segalen's remark could be applied to post-communist contexts, but what can be observed there is rather contrary to what is happening in Western democracies. Current trends favour the desacralisation of old symbols (in the sense of the loss of their former meanings), built during the Soviet era and purged of their religious meaning, on the one hand, and the introduction and sacralisation of new symbols and rituals, very similar to religious ceremonials, on the other.

How can we explain the vivacity of religious sentiment, the extension and diversification of its practices in the states of the post-communist space? Is there a link between this phenomenon and the way in which collective memory and national identity are practised by the political and intellectual elites? Each religion presupposes a specific mobilisation of collective memory", argues Danielle Hervieu-Léger (Hervieu-Léger, 1993: 178). But the opposite is also true: religion could be considered as a stable space of common reference, transcending borders and times, capable of providing at any time a support for the reconstruction of a collective memory. Thus, religious frameworks of memory seem to be among the most available and consensual for replacing old temporalities with new ones in these societies. Finally, as Eastern and Western Ukraine do not have the same perception of the past, and their collective sense is built on different sensitivities, their sharing of Christian principles leads them to adopt a similar position towards tragic moments of the past, such as the Holodomor, and even to give the impression of reconciling, in the public

arena, the proponents of the two antagonistic memories, divided by their contrasting historical experiences²⁸.

Another explanation for the importance of the sacred in contemporary rites is to be found on the anthropological level of the construction of collective meaning: rites are universal since each community needs symbols. According to Marcel Mauss, the rite is where meaning is produced (Segalen, op. cit.: 24), and meaning is constantly being produced, and humans have always needed rites for their existential needs; however, the nature of these rites has evolved over time, according to the tastes and expectations of groups and individuals. The state (as well as active communities and their leaders) has the task of instituting, keeping alive and passing on to posterity a certain representation of the past. To this end, it develops rites of collective remembrance to make a lasting impression on people's minds and thus help to strengthen national unity. Contemporary rites, which are highly formalised and codified ceremonies, play this role as consolidators of collective meaning. They do so in different ways: 1) by sanctifying collective pain and restoring the link between the dead and the living 2) by compassionate discourse and mediation 3) by the collective emotion that emerges thanks to the effectiveness of the rituals.

The sanctification of pain and the worship of the dead

According to G. Erner, 'If our society has adopted the religion of victims, it is because it lends suffering the ability to make things sacred' (Erner, op. cit.: 25). The suffering of the victim, when it is recognised as unjust, cannot be questioned, because there is a tacit consensus within the entire community of commemorators, and even beyond, on its authenticity, whereas the victorious hero may be open to suspicion, and his sacrifice, in order to be understood, requires a clearly formulated justification: in the name of what ideal did he fight? Unlike the hero who assumes his choices, the victim is passive: he has not chosen to suffer, he has suffered an injustice without having any control over the situation in which this suffering was inflicted, while he was defenceless: he was there at the wrong time, in the wrong place. It is also this status of innocent victim that obliges 'to take these words as pure and simple truth' (Pomian, op. cit.: 267) and to point the finger at his or her torturer.

The example of the Holodomor is quite telling in this respect. The first commemorative rites of this tragedy date back to the late 1930s. Emerging as a painful memory among the survivors of the 1932-1933 famine, the memory of the terrible famine appeared first as a vivid memory that could testify in favour of the ultimate degree of suffering of the Ukrainian nation, "dominated", "colonised", "dispossessed" since the beginning of time. Some survivors, who became political refugees after fleeing the territories occupied by the communist regime and emigrating to Western countries, were encouraged by their host communities within the Ukrainian diaspora to recount the horrors they had experienced in the form of written testimony (memoirs) or oral testimony (stories, interviews, meetings within various organisations sensitive to their cause). Symbolic places were set up by these same communities to mourn, meditate and pray for the salvation of innocent souls, attesting to the desire to transform this event into a ritualised object of commemoration.

It must be said that when the memorial rite emerged, the independent Ukrainian state did not exist. The only authorities that could legitimise the rite were the political and religious organisations in

²⁸ These include memory disputes between veterans of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which is dominant in the West, and those of the Great Patriotic War, which is dominant in the rest of the country, particularly in the eastern and southern regions.

exile. From the very beginning, churches participated in the worship of the Great Famine victims, celebrating mourning masses, delivering speeches in their memory, using religious symbols (crosses, icons, etc.) for the design of memorial sites. These ceremonies and ritual gestures helped to re-establish the symbolic link between the dead and the living, and even more so, between those who still lived in Soviet Ukraine and those who had decided, or been forced, to go into exile in the West. The role of the churches was intended to bring people together: as Metropolitan Mstyslav proclaimed at one of the largest commemorative ceremonies in North America in 1983, 'Churches should unite us all' (Zarycky, 1983: 1).

In the 1980s, these private memories were misused to serve a political purpose: to gain international recognition of the evils inflicted on the Ukrainian nation by the communist regime, in the name of universal values of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The survivors' testimonies were then used in public hearings aimed at condemning the communist crimes on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR. They appeared as the symbolic capital of the national tragedy, in contrast to the official narrative, still in use at that time, which emphasised the great achievements of the Soviet regime, without saying a word about the enormous price that Soviet citizens had to pay for them. Those who collected the testimonies of the exiled survivors seized on the most tragic episodes, emphasising the short- and long-term trauma that these experiences had caused to Ukrainians (abandonment of the mother tongue, 'deformations of the nation's genetic heritage'). But although transcribing the living memory was a chance to perpetuate it, it was also a chance to 'mutilate' it, to 'freeze' it (Tarot, 2008: 227), to divert it.

At the same time, the commemoration of the Great Famine became a highly codified political event in symbolic terms: through the memory of its victims, it was supposed to strengthen the bonds between the demonstrators, to consolidate their common interpretation of the past, and to reinforce the determination of the entire Ukrainian community in exile to liberate the Ukrainian nation from the communist regime and to allow it to achieve independence. Brian Mulroney, the leader of the Canadian Conservative Party, the official opposition party at the time, and guest of honour at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Great Famine, comments (Zarycky, op. cit.: 4): 'We rejoice in the rich memories and traditions of those Ukrainians who took their burning ideals of freedom and liberty, their qualities of independence and individualism from Ukraine and gave them to us in Canada... (I was) touched and overwhelmed by the sanctity of this occasion and by the strong and determined bonds which bring so many people together in common purpose of remembrance.'

Later, when the Holodomor commemoration was introduced in independent Ukraine, it already had the tradition of a strong political sense and well-established commemorative rituals based on religious rites (the commemorative candles used in Orthodox ceremonies to symbolise the restoration of the link between the dead and the living, the commemorative wreaths, the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic crosses, etc.). Ukrainians in Ukraine, then rediscovering religious practices, will have no difficulty in reviving the tradition of the cult of the dead. They took part in collective mourning liturgies, took care of grooming the burial sites of their relatives who had died during the famine, and built symbolic graves topped with an Orthodox cross in their villages. Finally, the religious dimension, mobilised during the commemorative rite, will facilitate its acceptance by the majority (although the perpetrator is not named on the monuments dedicated to the famine in the east of the country). The emphasis will be on the victim, or rather on the suffering of millions of victims who, taken together, represent a colossal loss to the Ukrainian nation and who, by their demographic weight, accuse the Stalinist regime of having sought to break the resistance of the Ukrainian nation through the threat of their physical extermination and thus to eradicate any spirit of

independence among Ukrainians. As for the churches, which were also victims of repressive measures under the communist regime, they will have no difficulty in making people admit the tragic nature of the famine and the need to pray for the souls of all the victims of the regime.

Thus, the collective pain, through the horror it inspires, acquires a sacred meaning. The tragedy was consecrated by all Ukrainian churches, and the leaders of the nationalist movement invested it with a patrimonial, patriotic value, and made it a major symbol of the nation, thus transforming an 'impure' thing (the crime of destroying the Ukrainian nation) into a 'pure' thing (the salvation of the martyr nation).

Compassionate attitude and mediation

Compassion (in the sense of 'shared suffering', emotional capacity to empathise or sympathise with others) dominates the victimhood discourse. Furthermore, the compassionate attitude implies respect for all victims, regardless of the reasons why they became victims. In many religions, compassion has always been considered a virtue, an integral part of God's love. In contemporary societies, it has also become a political virtue. We can no longer imagine a head of state who is insensitive to the misfortunes of his or her fellow citizens or to those of other peoples, and who is unaware of the codes of compassionate behaviour prescribed by today's standards. It has become commonplace for the inaugural ritual of official visits to begin with the laying of a wreath at victims' memorial. But to acknowledge the victims commemorated by the state we visit is not only to demonstrate a compassionate attitude towards them, it is to acknowledge, through them, the very existence of the nation-state for which their suffering has acquired a sacred meaning and has been transformed into the foundation of identity. Moreover, official recollection in the presence of foreign heads of state and the host country's head of state, broadcast on all screens, is also a gesture of good faith, predisposing to the smooth running of the negotiations and other official meetings that follow. It is therefore not surprising that when a high-level official visits a country, he or she is expected to adopt the same or a similar stance on remembrance and recognition of victims as that practised in that country. However, he or she can just as easily do the opposite: seize on a memorial issue to provoke the state that fails to respect the victims of the crimes for which it is deemed responsible or heir (since there is no crime against humanity that is not a state crime), and push it to acknowledge this heavy responsibility. Thus, when a visit to Moscow by the Prime Minister of Quebec, Jean Charest, was envisaged in December 2009, the question of the attitude to adopt arose (given the divergence of the official positions of Russia and Canada on the qualification of the Holodomor), while the objectives of this meeting were essentially economic. It should be noted that the Holodomor, thanks to powerful Ukrainian lobbying (notably by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress), has already been recognised in Canada as genocide, and that the province of Manitoba, where Ukrainian Canadians are heavily concentrated, has already instituted a memorial day to commemorate the genocide, while the top leadership in Moscow opposes this ethnic reading of the past, claiming that the 1932-33 famine also claimed victims in other regions and among other nationalities, particularly Russians and Kazakhs. The change of power in Ukraine in the presidential elections in 2010²⁹ led to the immediate suspension of the Holodomor issue. At the highest-level Ukrainian and Russian positions on the issue seemed to be in agreement at the time. As can be seen, the issue of the recognition of the Ukrainian genocide, referred to as Holodomor, is having an impact not only on Russian-Ukrainian

²⁹ In 2010, Yanukovich succeeded to his opponent Yushchenko, who was elected president by the Orange Revolution.

relations but also on the internal affairs of other states and their relations with Ukraine, the victim nation, on the one hand, and with Russia, the heir to the former USSR, on the other.

Compassion, through the principle of respect for all victims, neutralises divergent opinions and produces social cohesion by strengthening the social bond (Erner, *op.cit.*: 168). It easily finds its place in post-communist societies where social ties have been greatly weakened after the fall of the regime. The community that mourns expresses its deep sorrow for the victims and shares their suffering. It initiates a process of mediation, which begins with the recognition of the wrongs done to the victims and their families, accompanied by the feeling that justice has been done. During the memorial ceremony, the souls of the victims are invited to share the symbolic space of communion with the community of their descendants, participating in the commemoration. The dead are to protect the living from similar disasters ("never again") and to recall the moral duty towards the victims. The link between the dead and the living is restored almost physically, as in this recourse to the symbolic ear of wheat that creates a medium for seeing the invisible and feeling the impalpable: "It burns my fingers. I perceive, through time, the souls of our brothers and sisters stretching their arms towards it, and I feel the warmth that comes from the contact. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid of anything now. Behind you, the dead of the holodomors, stands all our people and your state. We stop time and God listens to you"³⁰. A sort of freeze-frame, the image of a collective gathering, of a restored intergenerational link and of national unity. The patriotic discourse, inserted into the religious frameworks of memory, demands belief in the necessity of this act both for the victims (the salvation of their souls) and for the overall objective of restoring national memory. It is also a way of affirming a religious understanding of national identity that has become common in post-communist societies.

For the compassionate discourse reveals how close the religious interpretation of the past is close to the nationalist interpretation. Both use the metaphor of "purification" that leads to the salvation of the souls of the victims, in the case of the former, and to "national self-healing" for the latter. In the strictest sense of the term, suffering purifies the believers' love of God. In these conditions, to preserve the memory of the victims is to give them back their moral dignity and take them out of their marginality, which gave the impression that they had "lost face" (Bogalska-Martin, 2004: 251). But the suffering can also be used to remind us of a moral debt owed by the community to those who have suffered unjustly, and its responsibility for what has happened. An example of this kind of rhetoric can be found in a speech of Yuhnovsky, director of the Institute of National Memory in 2006, during the debates on the Holodomor law in Parliament: "We must adopt the law in its entirety. Repentance will purify us from the terrible burden of the past, it will heal us, heal our sins, and finally, it will ease our conscience."³¹ Yuhnovsky's speech reminds his fellow citizens of the necessity of a collective examination of conscience regarding the complicity of some Ukrainians with the communist regime, from which the "traumatised society" must be healed. Thus, the purification acts on a double level: the restoration of the dignity of the victims and the purification of the whole nation from a criminal past.

At the same time, the mediation engaged between the dead and the living encourages new generations to think about how everything that has happened is connected to the future of the nation. The lighted candles used during commemorative ceremonies are a manifestation of the power of remembrance.

³⁰ Excerpt from lochchenko's speech on November 25, 2006.

³¹ Press release on the proceedings of the of the meeting of 28.11.2006 in the Verkhovna Rada. Website of the Verkhovna Rada: portal.rada.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article/news_let?art_id=80882&cat_id=33449, accessed 14.09.2011.

Each candle is supposed to represent a departed soul. For the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor (2008), an Olympic style candle went around the world, symbolising the duty of memory towards the victims of totalitarianism and the unity of the Ukrainian nation: "Carry this flamme to every people, every person, every heart. And in November this year, this sacred lamp will arrive in Ukraine to become the eternal symbol of our mourning for the millions of our brothers and sisters who perished during the famine. It will become the symbol of our unity and our faith in the invincibility of the Ukrainian people. So that the souls of the innocent victims may find peace and may God remember each of them in his kingdom."

On the other hand, communion with the dead can have a collective therapy effect, since it has all the characteristics of the Durkheimian piacular rite, designed to reinforce the solidarity between the members of a community through the work of mourning, notably the exaltation of the collective sorrow and atonement for sin. The rite creates a mental state where the individual feels morally committed to participate in the collective joys and sorrows: not responding to this duty is equivalent to not address the threat to the whole community, and to attract the curse and the wrath of God: "The truth about the atrocious genocide of the Ukrainian people must ring out loud and clear because the people who do not remember their past is condemned to wander in the future... This truth must unite the Ukrainian people"³². As in all mourning rites sadness, the dominant feeling, is mixed with a kind of anger. To escape the curse the dead must be mourned and entitled to ritual lamentations. In a contemporary collective rite of collective mourning, involving millions of dead, the community needs to consolidate and homogenise its collective memory by devoting itself to the cult of the sacred symbol. Thus the compassionate rite "orders disorder and gives meaning to the accidental and the incomprehensible", finally it gives to the community that commemorates the impression of "mastering evil, time and social relations". (Segalen, op. cit.: 26).

Commemorating the Holodomor on a regular basis could also prevent similar tragedies from occurring. "The strength of collective remembrance must be the best guarantee of our autonomous existence," said President Lushchenko in a radio address to the nation. No people can live without memory, without a past, without a future. Otherwise it will be easy to manipulate them, to enslave them"³³. In this sense, keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive is a sense, keeping the memory of the Holodomor alive acts as a collective protection against future misfortunes, as a way of consolidating the foundations of national identity.

The high efficiency of symbolic objects and collective emotion

If the rite proves to be so effective, it is because the objects and the symbolic gestures that it mobilises are likely to provoke an important emotional charge, generating mental states of strong collective sharing in those who participate. In Ukraine, these objects come from different traditions, some being closer to the religious imaginary (candles, crosses), others of the national or even nationalistic imaginary (ear of wheat, guelder rose). Their proximity could be explained, on the one hand, by the fact that the pro-Ukrainian churches have always supported the national liberation struggles, blessed their leaders and their

³² Statement signed by the leaders of the main Ukrainian churches, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the commemoration of the Holodomor, 23 November 2007, http://www.risu.org.ua/ukr/resourses/religdoc/ecumen_doc/statement_noagit/, last consultation 30.09.09.

³³ Radio speech of President Lushchenko of 26.11.2005. Website of the President of Ukraine: www.president.gov.ua/news/data/25_4446.html, last consultation 30.06.2007.

symbols, encouraged their attempts to achieve independence. On the other hand, nationalists have always cultivated a metaphysical, spiritual and irrational vision of the nation. And in Ukraine, the Christian faith (together with attachment to the land and family) is a pillar on which national identity is built.

The following examples can provide verification to the high effectiveness of certain symbols and their links with religious practices or practices of the cult of the nation. Let's take the guelder rose, a shrub that has always been, in Ukraine, endowed with a communal, unifying and patriotic meaning. Traditionally used during family rituals such as weddings or funerals, it has accumulated several meanings: purity, beauty, resistance, like these bunches that freeze and bend but do not break. The guelder rose is also the symbol of "occupied Ukraine" in the patriotic song, which became the anthem of the national liberation struggles of the 1920s. In 2005, President Yushchenko decided to plant a grove of 10,000 guelder rose trees in Kiev, next to the newly built memorial complex. Each one is to symbolise a Ukrainian village victim of the famine. This commemorative event gives substance to the traumatic memory in a metaphorical way. It symbolises the magnitude of the tragedy, encourages mourning for the dead, and sees the grove as a symbol of national unity. Ironically, The Grove of Guelder Roses was also the name of the play by Olexander Kornychuk (1950), an official playwright of the Stalinist regime, who was able to recuperate the national meaning of this symbol to legitimise the Soviet Ukrainian identity (an episode that has been completely forgotten). Nowadays, guelder rose berries are often used to decorate monuments dedicated to the victims of all totalitarian regimes.

Another symbol frequently used in connection with famines and Ukrainian identity is the ear of wheat, both singular and plural. It can take on different meanings depending on the context. Wheat being the classical symbol of Ukraine, a land of wheat, represented by the yellow colour of the flag, it can easily take on a unifying meaning. A large quantity of wheat (a crown of wheat ears, a wheat germ) would rather evoke prosperity (ease, good harvest) and thus the strength of the nation. Surrounded by a black ribbon, it emphasises deprivation and famine and the need for mourning, the only way to recover the sense of national pride that has faded in the past. It testifies to the debt owed to the dead, whom it reminds that they had been living (Ricoeur, 1996 (1991): 194) and that today's Ukrainians have the duty not to forget. In Paris, in 2003, during the commemoration of the Holodomor, a sheaf of wheat tied with a black ribbon was laid under the Arc de Triomphe. The participants interpreted it "as the memory of the wheat exported abroad and taken away from those who had grown it, the symbol of life overcoming death, the memory of those ears of wheat gathered from the kolkhoz fields for which "the enemies of the people" were shot" (Lazarijeva, 2003). Another example: as an awareness campaign to draw attention to the importance of recognising the Holodomor as an act of genocide, some deputies took it upon themselves to give each of their less convinced colleagues an ear of wheat tied with a black ribbon (as a reminder of a duty to remember). The ears of wheat can be found on many monuments dedicated to the victims of the famines. Their iconographic representation can be seen on posters, clips³⁴, exhibition materials³⁵, trailers. In short, the effectiveness of this symbol increases as its uses multiply and diversify.

Finally, some rituals encourage the commemorating community to "slip into the skin" of the victims, making the participants experience sensations similar to those of the victims, such as eating a soup

³⁴ The clip of Oksana Bilozir, entitled Svicha transl. the candle, is a good example to observe the symbolism: <http://video.i.ua/user/34416/3255/24123/>

³⁵ As was, in 2007, the exhibition "Executed by hunger: the unknown genocide of the Ukrainians", organised in several European capitals (Brussels, Geneva, London, Minsk, Washington) to raise public awareness of the Holodomor.

made of wild herbs accompanied by bread made of straw and bark, during the symbolic meal organised by the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church in the United States in October 2007, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor (Houdzyk, 2007). Each of the guests at this symbolic meal had to light his or her candle and take a few sips of the soup in silence, thinking of all those parents who had to feed their children during the famine with something similar. The dinner ended with a collective walk, candle in hand, to the Church of Memory, built in memory of the victims, where a mass was planned. This materialisation of the famine through commemorative staging testifies to a desire to strike the spirits and make them really experience the famine, in order to anchor its memory better. Contrary to the other rites, this one is more participative than contemplative. It encourages participants to commune with the victims, provoking the resurgence, suddenly materialised, of the inhuman conditions that the victims had to face, sharing their sufferings, in a kind of self-flagellation that removes the temporal distance between the dead and the living, and investing in the cult of traumatic memory.

Conclusion

Thus, the victim as a new social category, and victimisation as a burgeoning societal phenomenon, provide historical plaintiffs with powerful political tools to effectively wage their collective struggles for social recognition both within their own communities and with the international community. Official condemnation of perpetrators of past crimes, public apologies and collective repentance are now becoming common practice. The new place that the victim has gradually acquired, including in collective narratives, is due to the evolution of international law accompanied by a wave of public interest in the testimonies of victims, whose voices have finally been heard in the public arena. All this contributed to the emergence of traumatic memories and to the effectiveness of the victim model, forged on the example of the Holocaust at the end of the Second World War, and applied to other contexts as soon as the Cold War ended and the communist regime fell. Its main appeal is compassion, which produces societal cohesion at the national level.

Our analysis has also shown that not only is the victimisation model perfectly exported to post-totalitarian societies, but that it becomes dominant there, going so far as to claim victim status for the entire nation. Here two processes converge and reinforce each other: the recognition of the wrongs inflicted on the victims and the sacralisation of collective punishment, which together encourage communion with the dead through rituals of recollection, provoking strong emotion in the participants. Moreover, the operability of victimhood memories is not limited to the commemorative domain, but can also be attested to in the political sphere and in international relations, since a question of remembrance can become an affair of state or even an affair between states.

But one question remains. Is operability synonymous with success? Many historians and other memory specialists constantly warn against the misuse of victimised memories and the perverse effects of victimisation, because "purifying oneself of the burden of the past", in the anthropological sense of the term, does not mean fully assuming it. However, collective mourning rituals, if they do not raise the question of critical scrutiny and self-examination, respond to other universal needs, such as the construction of collective meaning and societal cohesion, and do so with remarkable effectiveness.

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Latvian National Identity in the post-heroic era³⁶

Markus Meckl

Introduction

In recent years, commemorative practices in Europe have changed and historiography uses the term "post-heroic" to describe this transformation in memory-making. Post-heroism signifies the change when public recognition is no longer attributed to heroic deeds, but to the victims of conflicts and wars, therefore representing a "shift from heroization to victimization" (Sabrow, 2011: 90).

Trying to gain public recognition through narratives of victimhood is historically a new strategy used by disadvantaged groups or in social movements. For example, when Franz Werfel wrote about the suffering of the Armenian genocide in 1915, he did so by recounting the heroic resistance of one Armenian village for 40 days (Werfel, 1933). The same happened after the Second World War in countries that had been occupied by Nazi Germany. Those countries commemorated their occupation and suffering by underlining their heroic deeds and opened museums to commemorate the resistance.

In the 21st century, the heroes have gone. Post-heroic commemorative practices become apparent when Germany erects a monument for soldiers who died on foreign missions, and when the German President Horst Köhler feels obliged to point out during his speech at the inauguration: "The Bundeswehr memorial does not promote false hero worship, it does not serve any sacrificial cult and it does not glorify war". (Blechs Schmidt, 2009).

These recent transformations in European commemorative practices are a challenge to the idea of a united European identity, since an identity based on a narrative of victimhood creates an identity for the group which has suffered (Assmann, 2006), but leads to a "concurrency of victimhood" (Chaumont, 2001), as it is exclusive and does not allow the ideal of a European identity to thrive.

The construction of Latvia's collective memory after the country regained independence in the year 1990 is a good example to describe post-heroic identity; with this example one can illustrate the consequences and challenges for a society which embraces such a self-image. Collective memory is understood here as the memory policy put forward by the state through commemoration days, monuments, museums and public rites (Assmann, 2006: 35).

Of course, one might take for granted that the grievance of a nation or group should be commemorated through the emphasis of suffering in collective memory, but this is not the case. For example, the holocaust did not draw on such emphasis (Chaumont, 1997). In 1945, when the survivors of the holocaust returned to their home countries, they quickly realized that being a victim did not give them any social status and that no public recognition was awarded to survivors. Echoing this sentiment and full of bitterness, Bernard Klieger wrote in 1948: "Six million Jews have fallen. They did nothing to deserve this. The last we, the survivors, can ask for it that our victims get recognition. All we demand is that we also given a small place in the sun" (Klieger, 1948: 191).

Klieger is an exception when he asks for recognition since other survivors accepted the judgement that surviving and suffering as such does not constitute a value to be proud of. In "Le Monde Juif" in 1947,

³⁶ An earlier version of this text without putting it into the framework of a post-heroic narrative has been published under Meckl, M. (2016). Latvia's Vanished National Heroes. *The European Legacy*, Volume 21, Number 4, pp 408-418.

Chaim Chazaz suggested banning teaching our children “Jewish history, because why on earth should we teach them about the shame of their ancestors” (Chaumont, 2001: 21). This is the context in which the Warsaw ghetto uprising – in strict contrast to the “passive” death in the gas chambers –, became the symbol of the genocide of the Jews (Meckl, 2008). As Isaac Schwarzbart explained at the World Zionist Congress in 1954: “the imagination and hearts of people cling to deeds of courage, sacrifice, heroism, shining examples of self-defense, strength and pride, rather than to mourning over general calamities, passive defeatism, and destruction” (Schwarzbart, 1954: 2). In a world where a group is only considered equal to other people if it engages in armed struggle, it was necessary for the Jews to refer to their contribution during World War II. Hannah Arendt expressed the same idea in 1944: “The Jews in Warsaw couldn’t save themselves, so they wanted at least to save the honor and glory of the Jewish people. They liquidated the pariah position of the Jewish people in Europe and established themselves as equals in the fight for liberation in Europe.” (Arendt, 1944: 147). What Schwarzbart and Arendt assert here was addressed by one commemorative practice after the war; when the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, opened in 1957, its focus was on the resistance of the Jews and not on their role as victims. The same occurred almost forty years later, in 1993, when the Holocaust museum was opened in Washington, as inauguration day was chosen to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the ghetto uprising.

In the 90s, commemorative practices started to change in Europe. In 1996, when the Holocaust memorial day was created in Germany, the date which was chosen to remember this day was no longer the anniversary of the Ghetto uprising but the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27th. This choice, which was adopted by the United Nations and the European Union as well as most countries, demonstrates the shift of paradigm from heroization to victimization. The heroism of the Jews no longer needed to be underlined and instead public recognition shifted towards their suffering, allowing Auschwitz to become its symbol.

This shift in public recognition can also be seen in the decade-old conflict about the memory of the Holocaust between Poland and Israel. Both countries had argued for decades about the appropriation of the memory of the Ghetto uprising since both claimed this event as decisive for their country’s identity (Meckl, 2000). As the uprising lost its symbolic power, both countries issued a common stamp to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the uprising, meanwhile the conflict emerged between both countries about Auschwitz as a symbol of Polish or Jewish suffering.

The shift in public recognition from heroes to victims becomes obvious if we examine the self-representation of Latvia after regaining independence in the 90s. No longer did the country underline its heroic past, but the suffering it had endured throughout twentieth-century history. After the country regained its independence in 1990, no national hero materialized. While nineteenth-century Latvia’s nation-building required a national hero, all possible national heroes that could have unified Latvia’s ethnically diverse society were rejected after 1990. Instead, the ethnic Latvian population unified and strengthened their identity by underlining their role as victims.

After decades of Soviet occupation (1940/41 and 1944-1990), the population of Latvia was split into two linguistic communities: two-thirds of the population were ethnic Latvians who spoke Latvian as their mother tongue; while one-third spoke Russian and belonged to minorities that had either already been living in Latvia during the First Republic (1918-1940), or had moved there during Soviet times. There are some other smaller minority groups, like Polish, Roma, and Livs, but they do not play a significant role in the public debate. The majority of the population were born and raised in the Soviet Republic of Latvia and had not

experienced living in an independent Latvian State. In 1990 this heterogeneous society faced the challenge of having to create a state by becoming a political entity.

As Jan Assmann points out, societies create an image of themselves over generations by “developing a culture of memory”³⁷ (Assman, 2007: 18). However, fifty years of occupation had a strong impact on the process of shaping Latvian identity. Public and private discourses were divided, and the migration of workers from other parts of the Soviet Union altered the country’s demographics. In private, a nostalgic image of prewar Latvia was often cultivated, while the Russian-speaking population remained indifferent to this image.

With the arrival of independence in 1990, Latvia needed a new public culture of memory to create and strengthen a national identity. Traditionally, this could have been achieved by following the process described by Anthony D. Smith: “Every nationalism requires a touchstone of virtue and heroism, to guide and give meaning to the tasks of regeneration. Heroes provide models of virtuous conduct, their deeds of valour inspire faith and courage in their oppressed and decadent descendants.” (Smith, 2007: 65).

However, in Latvia no such heroic image emerged³⁸; on the contrary, the role of victim throughout the centuries became the emblem of regained Latvian independence. The country did not lack “heroes”: there were in fact many possibilities for the creation of a national hero, but these did not fit the new Latvian state and were ignored. While rejecting the hero, victimhood was cultivated and contributed to writing the history of the country. Latvia’s newly cultivated self-image as a victim found its expression in books, articles, symbolic acts, and speeches constituting the “dominant narrative of the past” (Eglitis & Ardava, 2012: 1035).

Nation-Building and Heroes

In the winter of 1807-8, Johann Gottlieb Fichte gave a series of lectures at Humboldt University in Berlin under the title “Reden an die Deutsche Nation” (Address to the German nation). The lectures were concerned with the awakening of the German nation, and Fichte saw in the education of the youth the key component for the birth of the German Nation. To educate the German youth, he provided them with an ideal to strive towards by introducing Martin Luther as the ideal German hero. Through his life story and deeds, Fichte showed what Germans could achieve, and why Martin Luther was considered the perfect role model for the youth of the country (Fichte, 1997: 629). The role of the hero is also pointed out by Ernest Renan as he saw in the heroic past “the social capital upon which one bases a national idea” (Renan, 1947: 906) every nation-building practice in the 19th century went along with the creation of a national hero. In Latvia this was *Lāčplēsis* (lit. “the bear slayer”), an epic poem written by Andrejs Pumpurs in the 1880s, whose protagonist became Latvia’s heroic figure. *Lāčplēsis* represents the eternity of the nation because he can never die and continues to fight forever in the Daugava River (Smidchens, 2007). The path of Latvian nation-building took a similar route than that of other nations in the late nineteenth century and its national movement successfully led to the declaration of Latvia’s independence on 18 November 1918. Although

³⁷ “Gesellschaften imaginieren Selbstbilder und konstituieren über die Generationsfolge hinweg eine Identität, indem sie eine Kultur der Erinnerung ausbilden; und sie tun das–dieser Punkt ist für uns entscheidend–auf ganz verschiedene Weise.” My translation.

³⁸ While teaching in Latvia I would ask my students about their heroes. They all struggled to answer the question.

many historical events contributed to this success, the idea of the nation and its rhetoric were heavily influenced by German Romanticism and German Idealism (Merkel, 1998). National heroes were part of Latvia's First Republic, and in 1923 not only did Lāčplēša receive his own street name in Riga, but several other streets were named after other characters from the heroic epic. Furthermore, as in every other European country, the soldiers who had died for their motherland were honored with a national monument; the Latvian cemetery Rīgas Brāļu kapi (Brothers' Cemetery) in Riga commemorates the soldiers who died in the struggle for the country's independence. During the interwar period, Latvia did not differ from other European nations. However, a significant change occurred in the 1990s when it regained its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union: the national hero, once an essential element in nation-building, disappeared. Although Lāčplēšis continued to exist as a street name in Riga, he suddenly ceased to be the focal point of reference and was no longer invoked in public speeches and memorials to inspire the people (Smidchens, 2007). As one critic commented when the national epic was adapted for a rock opera in 1988: "Could Bearslayer be a typical victim of the cult of Stalin, forced to beg and grovel at the feet of the bureaucracy that had also stolen his sword and golden armor, his will and heroic strength?" (Mazversite, 1989: 43). The shift from hero to victim is symbolised in the transformation of the museum dedicated to the Latvian riflemen into the "Museum of Occupation" (1993). The museum commemorating the official heroes of Soviet Latvia was altered to show the world the suffering of the Latvian nation rather than its heroism. The Museum of Occupation, which is included in the state protocol, is thus a unique case. France also opened museums to commemorate the years of German occupation, and these museums were called "Museums of Resistance". The same occurred in Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands. There are still dozens of museums across Europe that commemorate the resistance to Nazi Germany. Estonia, with its past similar to Latvia, named its museum the "Museum of Occupation and Fight for Freedom."

The awkward Heroes

By the 1990s, it was understandable that the Latvian riflemen, acclaimed heroes of the First World War, no longer fitted the needs of the time, and so the existing museum was converted into the "Museum of the Occupation of Latvia" in 1993. When Latvia was still part of the Russian empire, the riflemen had become heroes during WWI and its leading figures were campaigning for more independence. Following the successive defeats of the Russian army on the Western front and the growing threat of the German army on its borders, the high command in the Russian Army accepted a proposal to create a Latvian unit, "the Latvian riflemen" (Rifle Battalion), which soon became the symbol of Latvia's ambition to gain independence. In his book on the riflemen, Uldis Germanis explains that their popularity met the need of the patriotic propaganda to inspire people with heroic examples (Germanis, 1974: 88). However, many of the Latvian riflemen believed that Lenin was the best option for Latvia and joined him during the October Revolution. Lenin's revolution, in fact, would have ended in Moscow on 6 July 1918 had it not been for the Latvian riflemen. Their commanding officer Jukums Vācietis later became the first commander-in-chief of the Red Army (Germanis, 1974). Consequently, the Soviets built an impressive monument for the riflemen in Riga city centre in 1970, commemorating the men who were Lenin's most loyal revolutionaries. By the 1990s, however, they were no longer considered national heroes, and their museum underwent a radical transformation.

Other options for constructing national heroes that were not tainted by the communist past remained available. The most obvious choice seemed to be the people on the barricades in the 1990s, standing up against the Soviet regime and fighting for their liberation from Soviet occupation. The image of people on barricades has been used many times in the modern western world. Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), with Marianne standing bare breasted on the barricades with the flag of the revolution, has become the French national icon. When six Latvians were killed on 20 January 1991 in Riga by Soviet special forces (OMON) (Bleiere, 2006: 443), the event could have been inscribed into the Western tradition of a heroic act. It was without doubt an act of courage to build barricades in the center of Riga and to defy the Soviet empire, especially after twelve people had just been shot in Vilnius. While it is understandable that the new republic refused to incorporate the Latvian riflemen into its national narrative, it is not so clear why the new state rejected the people giving their lives in the fight for freedom from Soviet rule as heroes *par excellence*. In the *History of Latvia: The 20th Century*, published with the help of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we can read that "about 500,000 people took to the streets to protest. [...] OMON forces attacked the defenders of the barricades multiple times, and during one of these attacks a person was killed. The most significant attack by OMON forces was on the Latvian Ministry of the Interior on January 20, when five people were killed" (Bleiere, 2006: 444). The names of those killed are not mentioned by the authors.

The perspective historians take here is interesting since the event is described from the point of view of the attackers. The OMON forces were fighting, while the people on the barricades were simply killed. It could have also been written from the perspective of the people on the barricades, who might then not only have been killed but would have died for 'something'. There is a difference between "being killed" and "dying for something." One is killed in a traffic accident, but the classic hero dies for a cause. In *A Concise History of the Baltic States* by Latvian-American author Andrejs Plakans, these people are said to have been killed in a "shooting incident". One has to imagine a French history book explaining Delacroix's painting with this phrase, a "shooting incident," with the dead simply lying on the ground as Marianne walks over them. Or imagine a history book on the Warsaw ghetto uprising describing those who lost their lives as dying in a "shooting incident" rather than as the result of their heroic act. Similarly, Achilles did not die in a "fighting incident". He made the decision to go to Troy and did not die there accidentally. Another detail in Plakans's description worth mentioning relates to the "four civilians" who died, while other writers counted six (Plakans, 2011: 398). Plakans is correct insofar as the other two victims were policemen, defending the people against the Soviet Special Forces; imagine a report on 9/11 in which all the firefighters who died on duty at the World Trade Center have been removed from the list of victims.

Latvian historians and writers do not see what happened in Riga on 20 January 1991 as a heroic event. In *Imagining the Nation: Modernity and Revolution in Latvia*, Daina S. Eglitis does not name the victims either, but mentions the ethnicity of the demonstrators, "thousands of unarmed Latvians". On the other hand, Eglitis dedicates half a page of her discussion of Latvian identity to the fact that the Latvian-American Association, at a conference in Jūrmala in Soviet Latvia, provided the American participants "with lapel pins to hand out to people both in and outside the conference; the pins depicted the American flag and the pre-1940, maroon and white Latvian flag joined at the poles. During television coverage of the conference, the pins worn by some delegates were shown up close numerous times for up to ten seconds" (Eglitis, 2002: 59). She also names the American speaker at the conference, Jack Matlock, several times. Such detail over some events and silence over the names of those who were killed can only be deliberate.

On the “Latvian history” website, which is run by a Latvian PhD student in English, some of the names of the six victims are at last mentioned:

“At 21:06 OMON approached the ministry of Interior and opened fire. They hoped for stiff resistance. However, the ministry building was taken with ease. One ministry officer was shot dead. The only serious response was from militiamen who opened fire. This resulted in wild shooting in the parks that caused the deaths of two cameramen, Gunārs Zvaigzne and Andris Slapiņš. Both cameramen filmed their own deaths as bullets hit them. Two militia officers died and schoolmate E. Riekstinš was shot dead. OMON suffered no damage. However, there is a video that shows how an OMON car takes away a dead body at high speed. There is a theory of a so called “third force” that also took part in shootings. They were men wearing camouflage and masks and took part in the shootings” (Ligaru, 2011, accessed 28/7/2022).

This description of the event is as unheroic as possible. The author assumed the attackers were hoping for “stiff resistance” and were disappointed that the “building was taken with ease”. No one heroically resisted the Soviet Special Forces. The act of resistance by the two policemen, which could have easily been described in a heroic narrative, is transformed into a “wild shooting” so that their action appears to have caused the death of five people. We are informed of the names of the three civilians killed, but not the names of the two policemen who died for Latvia.

These two unnamed policemen, killed on duty and left out of Plakans’s list of casualties, were police officers Vladimir Gomanovič and Sergei Konoņenko. Their names indicate that they belong to the Russian-speaking community in Latvia. As Eglitis explains, this does not fit into the narrative since it was “Latvians” who took part in the demonstration; the presence of any ethnic Russians dying for the new state would have contradicted this version of events.

This systematic exclusion of the heroes from the official narrative can also be demonstrated through an important figure of the independence movement: Mavriks Vulfssons. A letter published on 3 February 1990 in the *New York Times* described him as follows: “The Latvian Popular Front, backed by more than 90 percent of Latvians, receives significant support also from Russians (about 50 percent from voting patterns) and other nationalities, especially Jews. One of the chief spokesmen for the Popular Front, Mavriks Vulfsons, is a Jewish journalist, who was elected to the Supreme Soviet in Moscow. In a recent poll, to determine the most trusted public official in Latvia, Mr. Vulfsons was second, behind the president of the Latvian Writers’ Union, but ahead of the chairman of the Latvian Popular Front” (Latvia and the Jews, 1990). Vulfsons’s popularity in Latvia was the result of his intervention at the Latvian Writers’ Union Congress in June 1988, when, facing the TV cameras, he read out the secret content of the Hitler-Stalin pact. As Artis Pabriks and Aldis Purs write, this announcement “could be considered the first official challenge of the legitimacy of Soviet power in Latvia. [...] The announcement triggered tremendous political upheaval that was dubbed the ‘Awakening’ by journalists” (Pabriks & Purs, 2001: 53). Vulfsons himself described the reaction: “During a break in the proceedings, Pugo [Boris Pugo, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Latvian SSR] hurried up to me. Flushed with anger, he hissed: “Do you know what you’ve just done? You killed Soviet Latvia” (Vulfsons, 1998: 81).

Here too we have the elements of a heroic act: a person who dares to stand up alone and defy Soviet power. Although the official, state-sponsored history of Latvia mentions Vulfsons, it does so in a very peculiar way: “Mavriks Vulfsons, a well-known political commentator and active participant in the event of 1940, [said] that a socialist revolution had not taken place in Latvia in 1940” (Bleiere, 1996: 432-433). No further

explanation is given as to his being an “active participant in the event of 1940”, and there is no mention of his reading out the Stalin-Hitler Pact, nor the impact of his speech.

This tendency to ignore a potential national hero is reinforced by historians and by Palkans in his *Concise History of the Baltic States*, who does not find Mavriks Vulfsons worthy of mention –nor does Guntars Ābols in his *Contribution of History to Latvian Identity*. For Ābols, “fear has simply vanished. The process seems to bolster the opinion that fear had been the cement holding the USSR together. If so, the demise of the USSR dates back to the exhortation of John Paul II: Do not fear!” (Ābols, 2003: 255).

There seems to be a divine force at work in Latvia’s history while a Jewish writer does not need to be praised for his courage, and if he is not ignored then he is resented. Džemma Skulme, one of the members of the Popular Front, twenty-five years after the event, still downplayed his contribution: “Mavrik Vulfsons didn’t reveal anything new to us. [...] In my opinion he planned his speech depending on situations which would develop during the plenum” (Slūžas vaļā, 2013). The Museum of the Popular Front dedicated to the times of the barricades and the Popular Front (Latvijas Tautas fronte), which was co-founded by Vulfsons in October 1988, shows footage of the Latvian Writers’ Union Congress in June 1988 but Vulfsons’s historic speech is not shown. In fact, he is not mentioned even once in the whole exhibition. A sentence inscribed on the wall above the museum’s information desk may explain his curious absence: “It was our battle and our victory. We do not owe any thanks to anyone else for it”³⁹.

It would seem that the only unifying national figure who remained is Kārlis Ulmanis, who in 1934 assumed power and established an authoritarian rule in Latvia until the Soviet occupation in 1940. A new monument was erected in his honor after 2000 and a large street was named after him. There is, however, one thing that disqualified him from becoming Latvia’s national hero. This was not so much his being a dictator, but his giving Latvia up to the Soviets without any resistance, for it was Ulmanis himself who signed the pact incorporating Latvia into the Soviet Union. While it may have been reasonable, perhaps, not to resist the Soviets like the Finns did in 1940, his choice of submitting to the Soviets could not fit easily into Latvia’s heroic narrative.

As demonstrated by these examples, the nineteenth century was still in need of heroes for nation-building purposes. As Pumpurs (here quoted in Smidchens, 2007: 488) saw it, “The heroes of legends become the heroes of the nation, they struggle and die for the freedom and independence of the Latvian nation”. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, it seemed that ethnic Latvian heroes had fought for the wrong cause, like the riflemen, and that when they fought for the right cause they were not seen as ethnic Latvians.

The question of Latvia’s reluctance to construct a heroic image of itself remains. Eglitis identified in post-Soviet Latvian society a tendency towards normality, which in her opinion was perceived as not being related to any Soviet culture. This suggests that Latvia’s rejection of heroism could be understood as a critique of Soviet culture with its glorification of heroes. The rejection of Soviet heroes, war, revolution or work, could have led to the rejection of heroes as such, and as the saying goes “the baby was thrown out with the bath water”.

Another possible explanation is that postmodern society no longer needs nineteenth-century national heroes (Sedlenieks, 2013), which is why their absence is not necessarily a sign of a lack of unity; on the

³⁹ Seen by the author on a visit to the museum in December 2013. The period of “awakening” and the barricades has a strong presence in Latvia’s collective memory; however, as this inscription shows, the contribution of people of non-Latvian origins is simply erased from this memory and nationalised.

contrary, as Brecht's Galileo said: "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero" (Brecht, 1962: 114). Yet these two arguments would have been more convincing had Latvian history not tended to be written only as the story of victims and victimhood. Or, as Eglitis and Ardava put it: "The history and memory of victimhood [...] united, while, perhaps paradoxically, the history and memory of victory [...] divided" (Eglitis & Ardava, 2012: 1045).

A Unifying Victimhood

Once it had regained its independence, Latvia chose to build its national unity based on the victim rather than the hero. In an effort to unite ethnic Latvians, the victim was now cultivated as the protagonist of the country's narrative. Yet the new focus on Latvia's victimhood could neither be explained, as Eglitis argued, as a search for normality, nor, to borrow the words of Brecht's Galileo, did it mean that the Latvians were now happy with their lot.

The focus on the image and role of the victim can be seen during Latvia's memorial days, and in its history books and public speeches. In 1991, for example, the government declared that one week in June would serve as "Memorial week for the Victims of Stalinism". In 1993, the "Museum of the Occupation of Latvia" was opened in Riga to commemorate the victims and to remind the world of the nation's suffering under Soviet occupation. Similarly, the mourning and grief over their losses during Stalin's terror unified the members of the movement for independence; for example, on 14th of June 1988, 100,000 people participated in a memorial march for those who had been deported under Stalin. The Latvian calendar includes three days of commemoration for victims: 25th of March marks The Communist Genocide Commemoration day; 14th of June is The Communist Genocide Commemoration Day; and 2nd of December is the Totalitarian Communist Genocide Victims Memorial Day.

The common motive uniting the theme of victimhood is the emphasis on the protagonists being innocent victims of historical conflicts. Therefore, the contribution of Latvia to the building of the Soviet Union and to the killing of Jews during the German occupation tends to be silenced or explained away⁴⁰. One telling example of this self-image-as-the-victim is found in Andrew Ezergailis's *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941-1944*. In the chapter on police battalions, he comments that "the question here is whether or not any battalions, in addition to regular military assignments, also performed tasks that violated international law [...]—that is committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. [...] A case can be made that they [the Latvians] themselves were victims of a sort" (Ezergailis, 1996: 321). One of the events he discusses to clarify whether they were "victims of a sort" was the police battalion employed in "guarding the Warsaw ghetto in the mid-1942" (Ezergailis, 1996: 327). According to Ezergailis, the Latvian 22nd Daugavas Schutzmannschaft Battalion, 556 strong, and the Latvian 272nd Daugavas Schutzmannschaft Battalion, a 403 strong unit, were employed as guards at the Warsaw ghetto from 1st of August 1942 until mid-September 1942. Ezergailis describes the problems Latvians had with the SS in Warsaw: "The petty offenses and the constant drunkenness must have been part of the reason the Latvians had only a short stay. Another strong possibility is offered in a documentary novel that Jānis Zariņš, a veteran himself, wrote about Latvian

⁴⁰ After teaching for many years in Latvia, I recall that none of my Latvian students seemed to have been aware that the first leader of the Red Army was an ethnic Latvian; on the other hand, whenever we discussed the Holocaust, they often mentioned the high number of Jewish communists, but never mentioned the ethnic Latvians within the Secret Police.

soldiers in World War II" (Ezergailis, 1996: 329). Quoting from the novel, he writes: "Of course we are getting the money from the Jews, but not by stealing, not by robbing them, but by helping them. In this period of time, we have already helped more than forty Jewish families to escape to Palestine" (Ezergailis, 1996: 329). And then concludes: "This does, of course, come from a novel, published in America to boot. Yet there may be a grain of truth. [...] If only a half of Zariņš' tale is true, and we have no evidence of any such help, that alone could explain the quick departure of the Latvians from Warsaw" (Ezergailis, 1996: 329).

In all likelihood, Ezergailis did not know the true reason for the Latvian soldier's departure, or else he could not have used this episode to illustrate their victimhood. The fact is that the Latvian soldiers left Warsaw because their work was done: from the end of July until the middle of September, when the last selection took place, 5,000 to 10,000 Jews were rounded up daily, dragged out of their houses, and beaten into the trains that took them to Treblinka, where, upon arrival, they were exterminated in the gas chambers. By the middle of September, the extermination of the Jews of Warsaw was over: 300,000 of them had been murdered in Treblinka so no extra guards were needed to oversee those few who remained in the ghetto. In other words, the Latvian guards had accomplished their mission. Incidentally, in his later work Ezergailis tries to demonstrate the extent to which Latvia was the victim of Soviet disinformation by examining Latvians' contribution to the Holocaust (Ezergailis, 2005).

A Society without Heroes

There is no doubt that Latvia and its people suffered greatly during the years of Soviet and Nazi occupation. After independence, and for the first time in fifty years, Latvia could at last remember and grieve publicly over the victims of the Soviet occupation. The tens of thousands of Latvians sent to Siberia meant that nearly every family in Latvia had one member deported, and many of those deported never came back. In the nineteenth century the fate of being a victim and the "lack of national self-esteem [...] was to be cured by heroic historical narrative" (Smidchens, 2007: 488). At the end of the twentieth century, Latvia went in the opposite direction and embraced victimhood rather than heroism. This choice had consequences.

One social impact is on the relationship of the state with its ethnic minorities. By definition, these communities are excluded from the Latvian national narrative: if they are Russian-speaking they are seen as part of the legacy of the oppressor; if they belong to any other minority that has suffered under twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, they are seen as competitors for recognition through victimhood. To a certain extent, the feeling of community can be strengthened through a narrative of victimhood, but it is more difficult to build an open and diverse society on such a discourse. As Pieter Lagrou puts it: "A commemorative discourse of victimhood is very much the opposite of a constructive and dynamic engagement with the present, but rather a paralysing regression of democratic debate (Lagrou, 2010: 283). Aleida Assmann came to a similar conclusion in her book *Shadows of Trauma*. She describes a group trying to seek recognition through its suffering in the past but who blocks its own development and becomes immune towards the suffering of other groups (Assmann, 2006: 81). The same sentiments were expressed by the Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry. Being a victim, he writes, nourished a resentment that "nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. [...] and blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future" (Améry, 1980: 68).

As we have seen, the creation of commemorative practices revolving around our own victimhood will always mean that one has to underline his own innocence, or as Assmann puts it, it “consists in its absolute passivity, connoted with innocence and purity” (Assmann 2006: 80). Self-representation as a victim does take away agency and by creating the image of a victim keeps its recipients in a state of helplessness.

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A New Institution for Serbian Memory: the Genocide Victims' Museum

Vukašin Zorić

"Sometimes it is easier to dream the old dreams – even when they are nightmares – than to wake up to unfamiliar realities."

Mark Mazower (1999, p. 395–396)

The nation-states, as dominant mnemonic agents in Europe since the French Revolution, supported narratives that depicted virtuous national heroes and personifications of the nation. Nations were attributed eternal characteristics, uniqueness, and superiority, which overshadowed shared international and European historical experiences and heritage (Berger et al., 2002, p. 9). Heroic national narratives remained dominant after the First World War when the past was functionalized for national integration and political gain even more intensively than in the "long" 19th century (Berger, 2007, p. 30). Following the Second World War, narratives in countries that had been at war with Germany found heroes in the resistance movements, in case their country was occupied (e.g., France and Denmark), or in the nationwide wartime effort (Great Britain) (ibid, p. 48). Simultaneously, the pan-European trauma of the Second World War allowed steps to be taken to formulate a European identity based on shared European memory. Post-war integration of the Western European countries de-emphasized the national framework of the past and allowed a transnational anti-fascist narrative to thrive (ibid, p. 56).

However, the end of the Cold war saw the re-actualization of national narratives, especially in post-socialist societies (ibid, p. 52–53). Different from previous methods of narrating the nation through celebrations of heroism, victimization suited post-Cold war national memories better because "[t]o have been a victim gives you a right to complain, to protest, to make demands.", as noted by French-Bulgarian theorist Tsvetan Todorov (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 86). Thus, victims took the role of heroes as forebearers of the national narrative. The so-called "shift from heroization to victimization" (Sabrow, 2011, p. 90), in its particularity, was more applicable to national memories than to the pan-European one. Thus, various national narratives of victimhood blossomed (Müller, 2004; Meckl, 2016). Victimhood narratives became sources of legitimation (Lagrou, 2011, p. 283), which continues to hinder international dialogue, European integration, and scholarly debate through the sanctification of the victims. Oversaturation of the public discourse with various victimhood narratives created an atmosphere of competition (Chaumont, 2010), where every group struggles for recognition and reparation.

Post-socialist and post-Yugoslav Republic of Serbia offers an illustrative example of the "post-heroic" shift because the processes of transition to capitalism and Yugoslav wars happened simultaneously, thus making the renegotiation of the national narrative an urgent necessity. Additionally, Yugoslavia was a socialist country outside of the Soviet bloc, which was never occupied by the Soviet Union, and where the Soviet Union had no immediate political influence since 1948. Furthermore, the communist regime was not merely installed as a result of the Red Army's advance in 1944/5, but it was a result of a revolutionary resistance movement that spearheaded the anti-occupation uprising since 1941. That meant that Serbian memory lacked the perfect enemy, a foreign oppressor personified by the Soviet Union in the contemporary Eastern European narratives (Ostrittchouk, 2022). The absence of a foreign enemy led Serb mnemonic agents to construct a narrative of Yugoslavia as a mistake whose design was to the detriment of the Serbian

people (Jović, 2016; Nikolić, 2017). Arguments for this thesis were sought in inter-ethnic conflicts that happened in Yugoslavia during the Second World War.

Discussions about the Second World War in the Republic of Serbia are conducted not only at the level of historiography and memory but also at the level of internal and external politics. Serbian historian Dubravka Stojanović points out that the "monopoly over memory" (2011: 247) of the Second World War is critical to Serbian politics. What she noticed eleven years ago – that the Second World War is still the topic of speeches by politicians at all levels in the Serbian government and that it is used for national mobilization – perdures until today. State institutions, especially museums dedicated to contemporary Serbian history, partake in the so-called "battle for the truth about the Second World War" (ibid).

Before we analyze the current role of the Genocide Victims' Museum in Serbia, we ought to take a brief look at the history of the memorialization of the Second World War in Serbia before the Museum was founded in 1992. Then, we will present the politics of memory of the Museum when it was founded and in the last decade, when it became more prominent under the leadership of director Veljko Đurić Mišina and bishop Jovan Ćulibrk, who aimed to fill the gap left by previous scholars on the topic of Serbian memory in post-socialism. In the end, this paper will try to answer two main questions: What are the consequences of the simultaneity of the break-up of socialist Yugoslavia and the beginning of the "post-heroic age" (Sabrow, 2011, p. 92) for memory in contemporary Serbia? How do two main mnemonic actors, the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), cooperate and collide on a shared stage about memory?

Prelude: Heroization (1945–1990)

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) led the partisan movement in occupied Yugoslavia (1941–1945). With the help of the Soviet Red Army, the partisans liberated the territory of Yugoslavia from Nazi control and their allies (a conflict the CPY named "The People's Liberation War"), and the communists took over the monopoly of political power, including the field of politics of memory. Prominent party member Milovan Đilas declared the crucial goal of state propaganda at the Vth Congress of CPY (1948):

"Education of our people in the spirit of boundless love and loyalty to their homeland, on the sources of our glorious revolutionary traditions from the past and in the spirit of the People's Liberation Struggle, always keeping in mind the upbuilding of socialism" (Koljanin, 2013, p. 274).

With the supervision of the party leadership, an official version of the past was created based on the state's founding myth - a heroic and "morally pure" partisan struggle for freedom and revolution (Karge, 2014, p. 11). The partisans, which came from various ethnic groups of Yugoslavia, became a paradigm of "brotherhood and unity" and the ideological pillar of the new socialist federation. The politics of memory that focused on this embellished image of the partisan struggle left no room for a nuanced judicial and historiographical interpretation of the ethnically and ideologically motivated atrocities that took place during the war. As a result, the memories of the war that did not coincide with the state-mandated narrative were silenced for forty years (ibid, pp. 12–13). The victorious had a monopoly on interpreting war events, which they intended to pass on to future generations.

Former partisans used the Alliance of People's Liberation War Veteran Organizations (or SUBNOR, following the organization's acronym in Serbo-Croatian) to meet and formulate interests. SUBNOR was founded in 1947, and it proclaimed preserving and disseminating this desirable memory as one of its primary goals:

"The Alliance will actively work to preserve and refresh the memories of the heroic struggle of our peoples, of the heroes of the People's Liberation War, so that our future generations can be inspired and learn from them. [...] Following the example of the heroes of the People's Liberation War, we need to nurture our youth, who will be imbued with true patriotism and love for their homeland and capable, in case of need, of defending the achievements of the People's Liberation War" (Jović, 1989, p. 119).



The memory of the partisan struggle was intended to be omnipresent. Members of SUBNOR visited schools to tell war stories, and SUBNOR sponsored student literary and art contests with topics on the People's Liberation War. Furthermore, it organized jubilee celebrations and trips and hikes to significant wartime locations (Zorić, 2015, p. 456-460). Additionally, SUBNOR was an active participant in international veteran affairs, being the founding member of the World Veteran Federation (Jović, 1989, p. 104), a worldwide, inter-bloc organization focused on maintaining world peace.

SUBNOR focused on supporting projects celebrating the partisans' victories and sacrifices but did not ignore the remembrance of ethnic violence and genocide, at least from the early sixties. Norwegian historian Pål Kolstø notes that immediately after the Second World War, most European societies "wanted to get on with life and preferred not to remember the hard times they had been through" (Kolstø, 2011, p. 239). The Croatian department of SUBNOR led the initiative of memorializing the site of the Ustaša camp Jasenovac. That initiative resulted in a sculpture by a prominent Yugoslav sculptor, Bogdan Bogdanović, and an exhibition dedicated to the victims of the Ustaša in a museum (ibid). The original permanent exhibition depicting the atrocities by showing instruments and weapons of torture and murder was scattered and destroyed during the War in Croatia, and a new exhibit was unveiled in 2006 (ibid).

Despite its activities, it is hard to argue that SUBNOR succeeded in passing the revolutionary torch. Even though it had state funding and a massive membership (almost 1,5 million members), SUBNOR had little success communicating its message to the post-war generation (Karge, 2014). Their Local units even defied the policy of the main board by building

Jasenovac memorial opening ceremony, 1966
(Spomenik Database)

commemorative plaques for local victims instead of monuments to the victorious partisans (Đureinović, 2020; Zorić, 2015). However, the heroization of partisans remained the main state-sponsored narrative until the late eighties, when SUBNOR was marginalized as an organization. The old memory-bearers were the veterans of the communist revolution and were unfit to tell the new, national, non-communist story (Đureinović, 2020).

At that time, the regime of Slobodan Milošević needed to reinvent national memory in the context of the fall of communism in Europe and the break-up of Yugoslavia. Milošević, even though he rose to power as a

member of the League of Communists, adopted Serbian nationalist rhetoric in late eighties to consolidate power within the Yugoslav federation. The main mnemonic agents of socialist Yugoslavia, the veterans of the revolution were replaced by nationalist intellectuals and the Serbian Orthodox Church, who promoted a new interpretation of the Second World War in Yugoslavia. The "Brotherhood and unity" motto was dismissed, and the genocide against the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia became the focus of the national narrative (Dragović-Soso, 2002). The influential Serbian historian Radovan Samardžić even declared genocide a quintessential part of Serbian history (ibid, p. 114). The stage was set for an institution, rather than an organization, to push this new narrative forward, and a museum overtook the role of fighters.

The Formative Years (1990-2002)

The motion to create the Museum originated outside the Serbian government and outside of historiographic and museologist circles since the idea arose within an amateur community (Đurić Mišina, 2020). In February 1990, the influential weekly newspaper *Politika svet* organized a roundtable about the importance of establishing a Museum of Genocide Victims in the Second World War (Đurić Mišina, 2015). Later, the idea was pushed by an institution whose members were very active in the national mobilization of the Serbs since the late eighties (Milosavljević, 1995), the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. The general-secretary of the Academy wrote directly to the President of the Republic of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević on December 3, 1990, to inform him of the initiative led by Milan Bulajić, a jurist and retired diplomat (Đurić Mišina, 2015). Bulajić was known for his interest in Holocaust and genocide studies. His initiative was presented to Milošević before the beginning of the violent phase of the break-up of Yugoslavia, meaning that the conditions already seemed favorable in Serbia to introduce a new viewpoint on the history of the Second World War.

However, the motion came to fruition after the wars in Croatia and Bosnia broke out. The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia passed a law on the establishment of the Museum of Genocide Victims ("Zakon o osnivanju Muzeja žrtava genocida") and founded the museum on July 16, 1992 (*Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije*, 1992, p. 1644).⁴¹ The law defined the object and the purpose of the institution in its first Article:

"For the permanent memory of victims of genocide over Serbs, collection, processing, and use of information on them, and fulfillment of obligations under the International Convention on Genocide Prevention and Punishment [...] The Museum can also work on collecting, processing, and using the information on the genocide against the Jews, Roma, and victims who belong to other nationality or ethnic minorities (ibid)".

The same law declared April 22 to be an annual Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Genocide since, on that date in 1945, prisoners in Jasenovac liberated themselves from the Ustaša. Interestingly, there is no mention of a permanent exhibition in the law (ibid). To this day, the Genocide Victims' Museum remains an institution without an exhibition area, and it is more comparable to a documentation center or a research institute rather than a space that aims to represent genocide like elsewhere in Europe (Moradi, 2017; Six-Hohenbalken, 2017; Biwa, 2017). The absence of a permanent exhibition shifts the focus of the analysis

⁴¹ The Republic of Serbia was a part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was created in april 1992.

from the (nonexistent) visual representation of the genocide in the museum to the textual or discursive representation of the genocide in the museum's publications.

The law was the starting point of a long process of emergence for the Genocide Victims' Museum. The museum was unregistered until January 27, 1995. It required working space which it received in phases (1993–1999). All the offices the museum received were in the same building in central Belgrade, meaning that the museum had no working space in Kragujevac, its official seat (Đurić Mišina, 2015, p. 28). The state, even though it founded the museum, seems to have been passive and uninterested in the functioning of the museum at this time. On the other hand, the enthusiasts that led the museum were reluctant to transfer their activities from Belgrade, the center of political power, to Kragujevac, a town of regional importance and a place of a 1941 massacre the Germans perpetrated on civilians. The absence of the museum from Kragujevac indicates the priorities of its creators. The symbol of German atrocities was put aside, leaving the spotlight solely on the victims of Ustaša.

The first temporary exhibition presented by the Genocide Victims' Museum was created in cooperation with the Museum of Vojvodina, and a striking symbolism was attached to this first event. The exhibition was dedicated to Jasenovac and opened on April 22, 1993, in the Krsmanović's House in central Belgrade. Before analyzing the political dimension of the exhibition's content, it is worth noting that the unification of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes into a common state was proclaimed in Krsmanović's House on December 1, 1918. Therefore, holding the exhibition about Jasenovac Camp in this building was meant to highlight the grim consequences of Yugoslav unification (genocide of the Serbs) and to strengthen the belief that Yugoslavia as a project was a mistake to the detriment of the Serbian people. The director of the Genocide Victims' Museum, the aforementioned Milan Bulajić, wrote in the catalog of the exhibition:

"In discussions about the political resolution of the Yugoslav crisis and the demarcation maps of Croatia, Republika Srpska, and Republika Srpska Krajina, the question of the status of Jasenovac – the Ustaša death camp – must be raised. It must not be allowed that Jasenovac – the Ustaša death camp – is broken up by turning administrative borders into state borders" (*Jasenovac*, 1994, p. 4).

From this quote, one can deduce the point of view of the director of the state institution on the situation on the battlefield at that time and his proposal for a solution to the Yugoslav crisis. Since the Jasenovac camp system extended to the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulajić argued for the dissolution of a border between the Republika Srpska (territory controlled by Bosnian Serbs) and the Republika Srpska Krajina (territory controlled by Croatian Serbs). It is also clear that Bulajić does not recognize the sovereignty of the Republic of Croatia over the territory it treated as occupied. Further in the text, he even states that the exhibition is an appeal for the Jasenovac Memorial Area to be recognized as a United Nations World Cultural Heritage site.

The first exhibition, created partly by the Genocide Victims' Museum, had a multi-layered ideological message. The choice of the location of the exhibition points to the break with Yugoslavia, and the choice of approach to the theme speaks of the need to justify the control of Serbian forces in the area around Jasenovac. The content of the exhibition itself represented the victims and the various ways they were being killed to shock and mobilize the viewers' disgust and empathy. The victims were not "victims of fascist terror," as they had been during the rule of the communists, but mainly ethnically-classified Serbs, Roma, and Jews.

We can agree with the conclusion of Czech historian Karin Hofmeisterová, who wrote that during Bulajić's directorship (1993–2002 - Đurić Mišina, 2015), the Museum "continued to claim Serbian victimhood, even

at the cost of historical inaccuracies and insisted on the similarity of Serbian and Jewish experiences in that period" (Hofmeisterová, 2019, p. 514). Bulajić exhibited problematic and unacademic behavior in his endeavor to prove that more than a million victims, mostly Serbs, died in Jasenovac. Notably, his claims were dismissed at a conference held by the Jasenovac Research Institute in the United States in 1997 (Kolstø, 2011, p. 233). Later, he had to apologize at a conference in Jerusalem in 2002 because he cited anti-Jewish sources in his book on Jasenovac (ibid, p. 231). That same year, Bulajić was dismissed due to political changes after the end of Milošević's regime.

The Renaissance (2013-2022)

During the post-Milošević regime, which started on October 5, 2000, no alteration was made to the discourse from the nineties. On the contrary, the delegitimization of Yugoslavia and the revision of the history of the Second World War were the focus of the state institutions in charge of memory (Đureinović, 2020). However, during the so-called *October 5* and after the dismissal of Bulajić, there was a noticeable shift in the Museum's stance on the number of victims in Jasenovac. In cooperation with Croatian historians, some researchers conducted thorough investigations and estimated the approximate demographically plausible number of victims, about a hundred thousand (Kolstø, 2011). Despite progress in research, from 2003 to 2013, the museum was a less visible mnemonic agent than a body formed by the church: the Jasenovac Committee of the Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), headed by Jovan Ćulibrk. The goals of Ćulibrk and the SOC were already a topic of scholarly interest (Byford, 2007; David, 2013; Hofmeisterová, 2019). Sociologist Lea David pointed out that the SOC gained public trust by the time Milošević fell, but "instead of becoming a leading institution that could approach questions of responsibility, the Serbian Orthodox Church became a leading right-wing nationalist force" (David, 2013, p. 71). The Jasenovac Committee, led by Ćulibrk, received support from the Serbian government and became a mnemonic agent that was internationally recognized, partially owing to Ćulibrk's connections at Yad Vashem (Hofmeisterová, 2019). However, the memory politics of the SOC had shortcomings in terms of internationally recognized goals of the Holocaust and genocide awareness. David warns that the pact between the church and the state perpetuated the claim of the timeless Serbian righteousness and victimhood, which was to be used to turn the public eye away from the Serbian responsibility for crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars (David, 2013). Coincidentally, the Genocide Victims' Museum underwent personnel changes in 2013. Historian Veljko Đurić Mišina became an acting director in June 2013, and bishop Jovan Ćulibrk became a member of the management board of the museum (Đurić Mišina, 2015). The bishop's idea of genocide, embodied in the concept of the New Martyrs of Jasenovac, began its institutional coexistence with a research-based production of museums' associates, including those with a clear pro-Serbian agenda.

Yearbook of Genocide Research

An element of the museum's work intensification was the publication of research results through periodicals. In 2014, the museum established the *Yearbook of the Genocide Victims' Museum (Godišnjak Muzeja žrtava genocida)*. It changed its name to the *Yearbook of Genocide Research (Godišnjak za istraživanje genocida)* the following year. The acting director emphasized in the program in the 2014 issue

that in the absence of a museum exhibit, the museum should have a lively publishing activity and a yearbook. Furthermore, he announced that the texts in the *Yearbook* could also refer to the First World War (Đurić Mišina, 2014).⁴²

In the previous period, the museum included the Yugoslav wars and the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in its scope of research, with an exclusive focus on Serbian victims. The *Yearbook* followed this policy. By including the First World War as a theme, the museum joined the mnemonic agents who claim that the twentieth century is the century of futile Serbian sacrifice, the "lost century" for the Serbs (Nikolić, 2017; Jović, 2016).

Another change in scope, which followed in 2019, confirmed the museum's intention to consider the twentieth century as a century of Serbian victimhood. In the second issue of the *Yearbook* for that year, the editor announced that the *Yearbook* would deal with the victims of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), as well as the victims of the partisans (1944–1945) (Đurić Mišina, 2019). Such choices indicate the focus of the museum and its *Yearbook* – the crime's quality and the quantity are of secondary importance if it is about victims to whom the researchers have assigned a Serbian national identity.

It is worth noting that despite placing the Serbian victims at the center of attention, the museum still experienced criticism from the political right. In an emotional text, Đurić Mišina referred to the unnamed critics who condemned the museum for allegedly reducing the number of Serbian victims. He defended the museum's work by stating that "such odium is probably a consequence of the fact that the few employees in this institution look at historical events from a professional and scientific point of view, rejecting mythomania, folklore, and similar "theses." All our research activities are transparent and verifiable, and experts should judge the quality" (Đurić Mišina, 2020, p. 316).

Right-wing criticism of the museum shows the central importance of Jasenovac's abnormal number of victims, ranging from 700 000 to 1,1 million, in contemporary Serbian nationalistic memory.

In 2021, Đurić Mišina's directorship ended, and so did his editorship. Under his leadership, the *Yearbook* became a publication that encouraged knowledge of the genocide against the Serbs, the Holocaust, and the Samudaripen. Historiography presented by the Genocide Victims' Museum did not challenge the state-sponsored narrative.

Topic/Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019/1	2019/2	2020/1	2020/2	2021/1	Total
First World War	1	1	2	/	2	1	/	1	/	1	9
Second World War	9	6	7	6	4	8	2	5	1	4	52
Yugoslav Wars and NATO intervention	2	/	1	3	/	/	/	/	/	2	8
Archival sources	/	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	/	1	10
Other	3	2	6	6	2	4	10	6	4	3	46

⁴² It should be noted that the *Yearbook* is considered to be in continuity with the five previous irregular anthologies published by the museum, so the numbering of the issues starts from number 6.

Table 1: Articles in the *Yearbook* by topic (*Godišnjak Muzeja žrtava genocida*, 2014; *Godišnjak za istraživanje genocida*, 2015–2021).

New Martyrdom: High Clergy and the Museum

"Therefore, no matter how often the world crucified the Serbs, they will resurrect because such is the path of the Serbian cross-bearers, and such is the logic of their cross."

David Petrović, bishop of Kruševac (Petrović, 2019, p. 64)

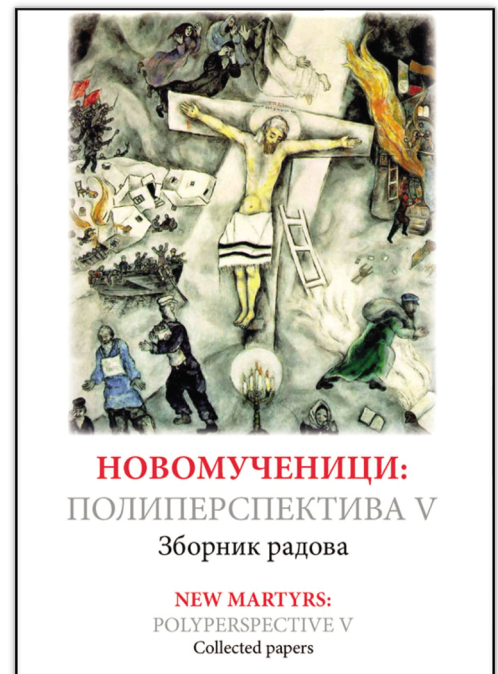
In 2019 and 2021, the Genocide Victims' Museum published the proceedings from two conferences organized in collaboration with the Jasenovac committee. Some participants (Serbian Orthodox bishops) used historiography to support the idea of the Serbian New Martyrs (novomučenici). The editor of both publications was bishop Jovan Ćulibrk, who stated that "rigorously re-examined historical facts are the basis for any (self)understanding of the mass suffering of the "short" yet painful 20th century" (Ćulibrk, 2021, p. 12). However, the content of some papers shows that the (self)understanding consists mainly of (self)victimization used to perpetuate the notion that Serbs are a people chosen by God. That further implies the interdependency of the Serbian nation and the Serbian Orthodox Church and their shared faith as martyrs that await the Messiah's Second coming (Ćulibrk, 2019).

Texts in the 2019 issue are particularly symptomatic. A retired bishop wrote:

"[O]ur biggest Graveyard, the New Serbian Kosovo, our biblical Mesopotamian Babylon – infernal Ustaše labyrinth of "death factory." Jasenovac is the cross-bearing symbol of the True Cross Itself, which extends to all foursome directions of our Motherland Earth, especially in Jasenovac Golgotha on the River Una's confluence to the Sava, the place that teaches remembrance and not malevolence, love for Martyrdom and not revenge. It brings to the memory the testament of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović to build the temple of forgiving in Jasenovac in remembrance of all innocently killed and as a sign of forgiveness to those who committed the crimes" (Jevtić, 2019: 15; typographical errors corrected by V.Z.).

One could unwrap a lot from this passage. First, there is a visible analogy between the suffering of the Serbian and Jewish people. Secondly, the assumption of the Orthodox essence in the Serbian victims of Jasenovac is repeated. Finally, the selective use of the legacy of the problematic bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1880–1956), whose undisguised anti-Semitism was ignored in Church circles (despite the re-actualization of the topic by researchers, see Byford, 2005; David, 2013; Hofmeisterová, 2019), is present as well. The readiness to utilize the Holocaust as a context of genocide against

The front cover of *New Martyrs: Poliperspektiva V* (2021)



the Serbs is once again paired with the unreadiness to face Velimirović's role in interwar and wartime Yugoslavia.⁴³

Moderate voices from the Church see the parallels between the suffering of Jews and Serbs as a chance for international recognition while appropriating every Serbian sacrifice to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Immoderate voices discredit the nationhood of neighboring nations and the right to the territory of neighboring states, using the genocide of Serbs in the Second World War as an excuse for new, divinely sanctioned killing (Petrović, 2019).

Conclusion

Polish historian Krzysztof Pomian writes that "[p]olitics is not about the past but about the future. However, one cannot shape the future without taking the past into account, because the past is present" (Pomian, 2009, p. 81). The political dimension of museums and their communication with the past to shape the future has been a topic of scholarly research for some time. Studies have shown that the very first public museums, founded after the French Revolution, had the intention to share "what had previously been private" and to expose "what had been concealed" (Bennet, 1995, p. 89). The Genocide Victims' Museum claims to be an institution to expose the atrocities committed during the Second World War (which evolved to the whole twentieth century) and honor the victims (Đurić Mišina, 2020). This goal is aligned with Chaumont's notion that "behind the pseudo-issue of knowledge was concealed a real issue of recognition" (Chaumont, 2019, p. 50).

The Genocide Victims' Museum example can help to answer the questions posed at the beginning of the article about memory-making in contemporary Serbia. The simultaneity of the disintegration of Yugoslavia at a time when the whole of Europe was dominated by a shift in focus from heroes to victims led to a change in the representation of the victims of the Second World War. The Republic of Serbia shifted its focus from supranational "victims of fascist terror" to Serb victims. As a mnemonic agent, the museum did not write out the minorities, including the Jews, from the national history of the Serbs. However, it focuses on minorities only when they were victims of the same perpetrator as the Serbs. The fact that the museum's publications focused on Serbian victims during the whole of the twentieth century testifies to the museum's bias and emphasis on the concept of victimhood.

To answer the question of the relationship between the state and the church as mnemonic actors, we emphasize that the Serbian Orthodox Church imbued Serbian victimhood with sanctity, appropriating them by doing so. As a secular institution of a secular state, the museum did not offer an alternative to the Church's reading of Serbian twentieth-century history.

The narrative of Serbian victimhood, by insisting on the singularity of the Serbian historical experience, serves as an ideological foundation of perpetuation of Serbian isolation from the European Union. It creates an atmosphere of competition with narratives of victimhood in neighboring, ex-Yugoslav, states and diminishes the results of the reconciliation process in the region. Furthermore, it disqualifies political alternatives to the current regime because the previous ruling options are condemned as neglecting towards the Serbian victims of the 20th century. Previous narrative of partisan heroism was abandoned

⁴³ Bishop Jevtić continued to perpetuate positive stereotypes of the Jews as Serbian brothers in suffering while denouncing the Paris commune, French socialism (sic!), the Turks, and the converts to Islam (poturice) (Jevtić, 2019).

because of its ideological incompatibility with the ruling anti-communist ideology, even though some of its elements could be useful in constructing an inclusive, transnational memory. Firstly, members of all nations of former Yugoslavia cooperated in the partisan movement. Secondly, the partisan movement can be understood as one of many European anti-fascist resistance movements, giving Serbia a place in the European memory.

During the redaction of this article, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić inaugurated the restoration of the central tower of the Staro Sajmište Concentration Camp in Belgrade. Vučić declared that he took pride in the fact that he was a part of the generation that liberated (sic!) the Camp (RTS, 2022). Once again, the remembrance of the Holocaust and genocide against the Serbs became a polygon of settling the score with the heritage of socialist Yugoslavia. Those who were victorious and liberated the country in the Second World War were dismissed – and the (self-proclaimed) liberators of memory and representatives of victims were given the spotlight. In contemporary Serbia, victims are not only in focus as a sacralized, and thus untouchable, collective entity, but the previously celebrated heroes are robbed of their primary quality, the achievement of liberation. The "shift from heroization to victimization" in Serbia was not only a triumph of the victimhood narrative and all its negative effects on European integrative processes but also an iconoclasm that intended to punish previously celebrated heroes with oblivion.

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Perceptions on the Greek War of Independence (1821 – 1828): Divergences between academic and public history

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Introduction

The history of Greece is marked by three pivotal events that have fuelled extensive debates. These milestones include the War of Independence from 1821 to 1828, the Asia Minor Catastrophe and WWII, and the subsequent civil war in the 1940s. Among these, the War of Independence holds particular significance as it led to the establishment of the modern Greek State. While the focus of this paper centres on the first milestone, it is crucial to acknowledge the interconnection and impact of all three events on the collective and individual memory of the Greek people. The second milestone, characterized by the Greek army's landing in Smyrna in 1919 with the consent of the Entente allies, notably the British and the French, aimed to safeguard the Greek-Orthodox population estimated at approximately two million individuals. However, the Greek army suffered defeat in September 1922, and the subsequent Lausanne Treaty imposed the compulsory exchange of Christians from Asia Minor with Muslims residing in Greece. This turn of events significantly shaped the historical trajectory of the region. The third milestone encompasses a series of events, including the Greek resistance to Mussolini, the four-year occupation by the Nazis, the subsequent resistance against them, and the three-year Civil War that concluded in 1949 with the defeat of the Left Democratic Army and the victory of the "national" army, supported by British and American forces. These three milestones have become deeply engraved in the collective and individual memory of the Greek people. Their impact permeates various aspects of public life; however, it is evident that different groups have interpreted and recorded these events in distinct ways. This paper specifically concentrates on the War of Independence, which is central to the formation of the modern Greek State. It occurred during a period when the Enlightenment movement waned, and Romanticism gained prominence. These historical circumstances, along with the prevailing ideological views, significantly influenced the contemporary and historical perceptions of this event.

The Greek War of Independence has often been depicted as the epitome of heroic spirit, glorifying the Greek rebels, while demonizing their Muslim Ottoman opponents with dehumanizing portrayals. This dichotomy in perceptions has prevailed both in the public discourse, where the war remains heroic, and in academic texts, where an increasing anti-heroic perspective has emerged. These contrasting interpretations coexist in Greek society, intersecting and influencing one another to a certain extent, while occasionally clashing.

The Greek War of Independence occupies a unique position in Greek collective memory and academic history. This paper will demonstrate that divergent perceptions of the war exist, with the public discourse emphasizing heroism and academia adopting a more critical stance. These contrasting perspectives, influenced by the fading Enlightenment and the rise of Romanticism, shape the understanding and interpretation of the Greek War of Independence. By acknowledging and analyzing these differing perceptions, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of this pivotal event in Greek history.

One event, two perceptions

The Greek War of Independence erupted at a significant juncture in 1821, coinciding with the waning influence of the Enlightenment and the rising prominence of Romanticism. These two intellectual movements had far-reaching and intricate effects, not only in the realm of art but also in intellectual life and politics. They played a crucial role in garnering support for the Greek War of Independence. The Enlightenment, with its ideals of freedom and critical thinking, deeply influenced numerous Greek scholars, particularly those in the Greek Diaspora, as well as bourgeois individuals, primarily merchants, who were active in major European cities. On the other hand, Romanticism elevated Ancient Greece to a position of eminence by exalting heroism, and it contributed to the growth of philhellenism—a movement that supported Greek independence—through various means such as physical involvement on the battlefield, moral or financial support, and advocacy campaigns.

The absence of newspapers and printed media also played a significant role in disseminating narratives about the heroic spirit. This, coupled with the lack of information regarding the ongoing events, led to the monopolization of information by the warriors, while simultaneously depriving scholars and intellectual "journalists" of an opportunity to establish themselves as influential figures alongside the former.

Indeed, when the War of Independence broke out in 1821, there were no written documents available in the areas where the revolt occurred. This naturally raised questions among scholars abroad, given that the second half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century witnessed a proliferation of printed works in Europe. The Greek-speaking communities in the Diaspora were directly affected by these developments, experiencing a remarkable increase in the production of books and documents.

However, the same could not be said for the areas where the revolution was taking place. As Finley wrote in his 1861 work, "History of the Greek Revolution," individuals accustomed to traveling from London to Constantinople within a week would struggle to comprehend the challenges associated with news transmission in the East during the first three decades of the 19th century. The concept of the press was virtually unknown in the East, and private correspondence rarely served as a reliable source of information. Between 1822 and 1824, no newspapers were published. I. Kokkonis, a friend of I. Kapodistrias who oversaw primary schools during the early years of the newly established state, wrote to Al. Mavrokordatos in October 1823 expressing the need for a newspaper, which was essential for enlightening the people and defending national rights in the international arena (Koumariou, 1971).

However, everything changed in 1824, thanks primarily to the contributions of Philhellenes, particularly the Irish officer Stanhope. Three newspapers were published that year: "The Greek Chronicles in Missolonghi" on New Year's Day, "The Friend of the Law in Hydra" in March (which served as an administrative body for a year), and "The Athens Newspaper" in August in Athens. The first and third publications ceased in 1826 due to the occupation of Missolonghi and the siege of the Acropolis of Athens. The circulation of "The Friend of the Law" halted in May 1827. Finally, after enduring numerous setbacks, the "General Newspaper of Greece" was established in October 1825 as an official administrative entity, now known as the Government Gazette.

Public perceptions of the Greek War of Independence

There have been relatively few studies on the current perception of the Greek War of Independence in 1821. Until recently, there was a dominant image in the public consciousness that focused on renowned male

heroes who were considered pioneers and protagonists of the war. This perception mirrored Greek history, which was characterized by the formation of the national state, numerous local and European wars, and domestic political instability. The years 1921 and 1971, which marked the 100th and 150th anniversaries respectively, were marked by other events such as the Greco-Turkish war in 1921 and a military dictatorship in 1971. These events influenced the perception of the war, with a necessary emphasis on heroism after the Greek army's defeat in 1922 and the arrival of over 1,200,000 refugees in Greece.

In recent years, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary, the first public opinion studies on the 1821 event were published, providing insight into how Greeks perceive it today. Two nationwide studies conducted in 2007 and 2019 examined the formation of views on the event. Both studies utilized multistage random sampling, with the second study including a sample of 1200 people.

The studies revealed several common findings, three of which are particularly important. Firstly, the studies highlighted the significant role of education, especially primary and secondary schooling, in shaping the perception of the Greek War of Independence. Despite the influence of media and social media, views on the event were primarily formed within the school environment. In the second study, respondents attributed their knowledge of the war to what they learned in school, supplemented by reading books, watching TV documentaries, and keeping informed through the press and the internet. University studies and attending lectures played a lesser role in their knowledge.

The perception of the Greek War of Independence is largely characterized as heroic, with the heroes being predominantly warriors and military personnel. In recent years, however, this perception has started to change, with notable figures such as military officers, women, and clergymen gaining recognition. These individuals are recognized for their contributions to the war effort, both in preparation and active participation. It is worth noting that the perception of heroes is influenced by the values and perceptions of the present time. For example, the reevaluation of women's roles has contributed to the recognition of female heroes, although they are often attributed with traditionally male characteristics.

The studies also revealed a general lack of confidence in knowledge about the Greek War of Independence. While respondents considered themselves well-informed about the event, they believed that others had little knowledge about it. This lack of confidence can be attributed to various factors, including inadequate education, distrust in the educational system, and the influence of differing historical perspectives. The perception of uncertainty is further influenced by changes in schoolbooks and academic history.

In conclusion, the studies shed light on the perception of the Greek War of Independence in contemporary Greece. Education, especially primary and secondary schooling, plays a crucial role in shaping these perceptions, although there remains a sense of uncertainty and a need for further investigation into the factors that contribute to this perception.

Public History and schoolbooks

Public history refers to how citizens perceive their own history. In Greece, public history is largely shaped by formal education provided in schools. The National Curricula and textbooks play a significant role in this regard. As Jacques Le Goff points out, "Books are the best observatories to study the historical mentality of an era" (1998:211). This is because books allow us to reflect on and interpret the past. Marc Ferro argues, "Whoever controls the past can define the present" (2001:7).

During the formation of the Greek State from 1821 to 1947, schools played a crucial role in establishing common references for students. This was achieved through the introduction of mandatory textbooks in the late 19th century. The control over education became even more pronounced after 1937 when I. Metaxas' dictatorship enacted the Compulsory Law of 952/1937, establishing the Organization for the Publication of Schoolbooks. This organization exerted total control over the selection and content of textbooks. This situation persisted until the early 1980s, with some short breaks.

From the studies on public opinion mentioned earlier, it appears that history textbooks have been effective in disseminating the dominant perceptions of the 1821 Greek Revolution. However, this effectiveness cannot be solely attributed to the content, teaching, and school environment. Other fundamental factors should be considered. Modern history, including the 1821 period, is taught in Greek schools for three years: in the sixth grade of primary school, the third grade of junior high school, and the third grade of high school. In other words, students are approximately 12, 15, and 18 years old, respectively. However, until World War II, only a minority of people attended school, with 70% to 80% of children going to primary school, despite it being mandatory since 1834. Only a few continued to junior high school, and even fewer reached high school. It was only in the 1960s that the entire population started attending primary school, followed by the mandatory junior high school in 1964. Since the 1980s, high school has had a large number of students. Therefore, the school system has become a matter of concern for all young people in this age group relatively recently, primarily after World War II.

Despite its recent massification, the school system has had a major influence on the perception of history for two main reasons. Since at least 1890, schools and history textbooks have echoed the official state perceptions of the past, which were shaped through systematic policies of gathering memory through images and rituals, the dominance of academic historiography, and the 1871 rituals commemorating the 50-year anniversary of the 1821 event.

An interpretation of the events of 1821 gradually formed since 1833, with March 25th being established as a national holiday in 1837, and the symbols such as the flag and heroes' symbols being determined. This project was formalized through the dominance of an ethno-romantic perception of history, as formulated by Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, a Professor of History at the University of Athens. According to this perception, the Greek nation is unified, contemporary Greeks are descendants of the ancient Greeks, and Greek history is considered inseparable, divided into three parts: Ancient, Middle or Byzantine, and Contemporary Greece. This perception has been apparent in school textbooks since 1884. Finally, in 1871, a series of rituals during the 50-year anniversary of the 1821 event established certain constants that have been preserved to this day. School essentially validated the existing view and contributed to its effectiveness by repeating and reinforcing the prevailing views outside of school, aligning to a large extent with the prevailing academic historiography.

The situation became more complex after World War II. The Civil War (1946-1949) and the increasing massification of schools changed the status quo. The winners of the Civil War promoted a more patriotic and heroic interpretation of history. The Dictatorship of the Colonels (1967-1974) followed a similar approach, even more forcefully. It is worth noting that with the adoption of Legislative Decree 749/1970 "About school books," only one predetermined book was distributed in primary schools, exclusively within the state's responsibility. Prior to this, private publishing houses were allowed to market their books for three years after obtaining approval from the School Books Directorate of the Ministry of Education. The opinion on the books had to be published on the inside or back cover. Due to the destruction of relevant ministry archives,

it is evident that an unspecified number of history books circulated and were taught in Greek schools until 1970. However, the differences identified in these books were minimal and insignificant, as authors were obligated to adhere faithfully to the National Curricula and guidelines, and make corrections as indicated by the advisory body.

In contrast, the situation became more complicated with the return of the Republic and the liberalization of the regime after 1974. Despite occasional challenges, authors of schoolbooks enjoyed greater degrees of freedom. Additionally, most history book authors are scholars. While problems arose and continue to arise, books that exceeded certain boundaries faced reactions and were excluded from schools.

The aforementioned situation is reflected in the content of history books from 1950 to 2022, as outlined below. There are nine history books for the sixth grade of primary school, five books for junior high school, and eight books from the sixth grade of junior high school to the third grade of high school. The authors of the first group primarily consist of primary and secondary school teachers, except for the last book, which is led by university professors. As for the five history books for the third grade of junior high school, the first book is written by teachers, the second by a historian, and the next three have a scholar or a group of scholars as the lead authors. Finally, of the nine books for the sixth grade of primary school to high school, five are written by teacher-historians, one by a historian, and the authors of the last two books are university professors.

It is challenging to interpret general trends regarding the content of the books and their perspective on the 1821 event. It depends on both the authors and the curricula. There is a tendency to entrust book writing to scholars, which has undoubtedly influenced the content of the books. It is now difficult to exclude scientific opinions or opinions that are challenging to support. However, the national curricula are equally important as they establish guidelines and, to some extent, influence the content of the books. From this perspective, it is evident that the book content aligns with the ideological orientations of the Minister of Education, if not the government itself.

To illustrate the ideological dimension, let us consider the aims of the History subject based on the last two national curricula: the one implemented by the previous radical SYRIZA government and the current New Democracy conservative government. According to the first curriculum, "The aims of the subject of History are in line with the ideals of a society, the future it envisions, and the desirable type of person and citizen shaped through education. The development of a genetic historical sense, of a historical thought, of democratic sense and humanistic values as well as the formation of a pluralistic and tolerant national identity are key purposes of the subject of History in contemporary democratic and multicultural societies" (Government Gazette 2020/B/3-6-2019, p.22917). The second curriculum for primary schools states, "History teaching aims to promote the development of critical thinking, self-knowledge, communication and research skills, as well as the activation of students' emotions and imagination. Students should not only acquire the awareness that the modern world is a continuation of the past, but also the perception that the modern historical horizon is directly linked to their own lives. Additionally, the study of the historical course of the Greek World, with an emphasis on primary school, helps students evaluate the historical past of Hellenism and determine their place in the modern European and global environment." In summary, the second curriculum is more normative and ethnocentric in nature.

Despite these differences, we have identified certain consistent trends that support the finding that History curricula and books have gradually become less focused on heroism and more inclined towards anti-heroic

narratives over time. One significant observation is that a smaller portion of schoolbooks is dedicated to the events of 1821. This discrepancy is more pronounced in secondary education books compared to primary school books. This is reasonable due to the broader time periods covered in secondary education books and the addition of new chapters over the years. Furthermore, primary school books traditionally have a stronger focus on Greek history, while secondary education books tend to emphasize the international context, particularly the European milieu. This shift is acceptable given the increased emphasis in recent years on topics like women's emancipation, culture, technology, European integration, and European citizenship. To illustrate this, let's take the example of sixth-grade History books. Almost all the History books dedicated to this grade allocate half of their pages to the events surrounding 1821. For instance, in the early 1950s, I. Kampanas authored a book (exact publication date unknown) that dedicated 68 pages to the period of 1821, featuring 10 images, 8 of which were portraits of heroes. In the current book, "History of the modern and contemporary world," assigned to its collective authors by the Minister of New Democracy, Euripides Stylianides in 2007 without a public tender, the section titled "The Great Revolution" constitutes the third out of five sections and covers 75 out of 224 pages, approximately one-third of the book. This section is further divided into 18 subsections that delve into topics such as the Filiki Eteria, the rebellion in the Danubian Principalities, the Revolution in various Greek regions, and the involvement of the Aegean islands, Epirus, Thessaly, and Macedonia. Some sub-chapters focus on key events, notable individuals, and other aspects like Philhellenism, the political organization of the Liberation Struggle, and the role of the Great Powers of the time. The book is richly illustrated with color images, including portraits, lithographs, oil paintings, and archival material from significant museums and libraries. Each sub-chapter includes a glossary to aid students in understanding key terms, and primary source texts are included to provide a firsthand perspective. Finally, the subsections conclude with questions designed to assess students' comprehension and reinforce their understanding of the content.

In the context of secondary education, the differences in History books are more evident, primarily due to the revised curricula that place greater emphasis on active learning and adopt a less Greek-centered approach, focusing more on the international milieu. To exemplify this, let's consider two books from the third grade of junior high school: one written by teachers Matarasis and Papastamatiou in 1966, which was used until 1975, and another written by Professor Louvi and Historian Xifara, which has been taught since 2007.

The first book (Koliopoulos et al, 2014) devotes a chapter with seven subsections to the 1821 War, featuring 19 images, 15 of which are portraits, three maps, and one painting. Similarly, the second book includes a chapter with seven subsections (5-11) and incorporates 23 images, including 10 portraits, two maps, and 11 paintings. However, the second book has fewer depictions of heroes, and those present are usually presented without detailed comments or specific references. Additionally, there is a notable contrast in the textual content. While the first book focuses on the events of the war, the second book takes a different approach. Particularly significant is the inclusion of one of the most important and tragic events of the 1821 Revolution: the siege and exodus of Missolonghi. This event marked the fall of a crucial city and resulted in the death of thousands, including many Europeans and Americans who had come to defend it. In the 1966 schoolbook, the narrative covers four pages (Matarasis, Papastamatiou, 1966: 143-147), whereas the 2012 book allocates only six lines (Louvi, Xifaras, 2012: 312) to this event.

The decrease in emphasis on heroism in the second book is offset by a focus on new aspects such as the preparation of the Revolution and the role of the Filiki Eteria, the secret society that played a key part in its

organization, following Masonic principles prevalent at the time. In the 1966 book, the term "Filiki Eteria" appears twice, once in parentheses (Matarasis, Papastamatiou, 1966: 102 & 114), and there are only two references to the members of Filiki Eteria (Matarasis, Papastamatiou, 1966: 103-4). In contrast, the 2012 book dedicates a separate subsection, the seventh one (Louvi, Xifaras, 2012: 28-29), to the foundation and role of the Filiki Eteria. Lastly, while the first book primarily centers on Greek history, with a special emphasis on Greek heroism in military victories and defeats against the formidable Ottomans, the second book explores new dimensions, such as the international milieu and the actions taken by Europeans.

Public, School and Academic History

We have observed that the general public's perception of the history of the year 1821 and the history taught in schools are largely similar. This similarity can be attributed to the influence of school history, which strongly reinforces the official historical narrative through textbooks and public ceremonies. However, this identification is not absolute. As we have seen, school history has undergone changes in recent years, offering a different perspective from the past. At first glance, this new perspective does not seem to be reflected in the general public's perception of the history of 1821.

Two questions arise from this observation: why is school history changing, and why is this change not influencing public history? The first question raises the issue of the relationship between school history and academic history. To answer this question, we need to gain insight into academic history and how it analyzes the 1821 Revolution. It is evident that the analysis is not uniform, as different interpretations have existed since the immediate aftermath of the revolution. Intellectuals who witnessed the event promoted alternative versions that were less focused on national identity and more influenced by Enlightenment ideals and Jacobinism. Nikolaos Spiliadis, a notable representative of this perspective, had a significant impact on historians, intellectuals, and politicians (Rotzokos, Tzakis, 2014: 150-162).

Despite the existence of different interpretations, the so-called ethno-romantic perception of history dominated, particularly through the works of Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, a professor at the University of Athens. This perception emphasizes the continuity of the Greek nation throughout history (ancient, Byzantine, and modern Greece) and emphasizes the nation's will for freedom during the 1821 Revolution. This version was introduced into schools in 1884 and has been reproduced with variations since then (Koulouri).

Thanks to school history, Paparrigopoulos' viewpoint still prevails among the perceptions of the 1821 Revolution, although not without some exceptions. Recent opinion studies have shown that a majority of respondents, influenced by this perception, also acknowledge the social dimension of the Revolution. They recognize that it was not solely organized by the Greek nation but involved a socially diverse population with different characteristics and interests (poll). In other words, academic history does have some influence, to some extent, on both school and public history. However, the extent and timing of this influence remain uncertain.

In recent years, academic history has gradually moved away from the dominant ethno-romantic perception of history. Discussions and studies about education since the 1980s, including the "Krifo Scolio" (the Secret School) and the education of enslaved individuals in so-called "Krifa Scolia" (Secret Schools) during Ottoman rule, have contributed to new approaches to understanding the 1821 Revolution (Angelou, 1997). Numerous new studies on the revolution have emerged, especially in the past decade, due to the upcoming

200-year anniversary celebration. These studies have prompted new concerns and perspectives, addressing issues such as gender, international aspects, and the role of ideas.

What are the key elements that differentiate this new perception? A comprehensive understanding is provided in "The Greek Revolution: A Critical Dictionary," edited by P. M. Kitromilides and C. Tsoukalas in 2021 (Harvard University Press). The third chapter, titled "Events and Places," covers 183 out of 770 pages, primarily focusing on events. Additionally, there is a 21-page sub-chapter dedicated to "Military Leaders," while the remaining pages cover other aspects. In summary, greater importance is given to the international context, ideas, organization, administration, as well as domestic differences and conflicts. The revolution is presented more as a European event, associated with broader European movements, particularly influenced by Enlightenment ideals. It is not portrayed as a spontaneous desire for freedom by the Greeks but as the result of ideological and organizational preparations, organized by the Filiki Eteria (Society of Friends), a Society based on the Freemasonry model of the time. The success of the revolution is attributed not only to heroic individuals but also to various groups such as wealthy merchants, scholars, politicians, and administrators. Therefore, contemporary studies emphasize the importance of state organization, including the role of the army, the relationship between heroes and the administration, and the influence of ideas (Rotzokos, 1997; Tzakis, 2021; Bozikis, 2020).

These new perspectives contribute to a diminishing emphasis on heroism. While some events, such as women's participation, are still interpreted within this framework, the heroic aspect has become less prominent. Administrators and highly educated individuals are now recognized alongside the heroes. However, it remains uncertain whether this version accurately reflects the experiences of Greeks in 1821 or if it is our interpretation of the past. Studies suggest that during the Revolution, various processes took place that led to this shift. Initially, the warrior-heroes were the central figures, but over time, the revolutionaries required economic resources, organization, information dissemination (including newspapers), and education. Consequently, new groups emerged, sometimes as rivals and sometimes as companions to the heroes (Kiprianos, 2021, 2022).

Will these views of academic history be adopted by the general public? To what extent will they become part of public history? This depends on various factors, such as the networks available to authors, the attitudes of those in positions of authority, and how public opinion engages with the issue. Both school and school history play crucial roles in shaping public opinion. However, they can also impede the dissemination of alternative perspectives. In recent years, Greek history textbooks have experienced a double phenomenon. On one hand, certain issues that cannot tolerate historical criticism are omitted, while on the other hand, books that go beyond certain limits deemed unacceptable by parts of the population face backlash and are withdrawn from schools (Athanasiadis, 2015).

Therefore, academic history is often delivered in a filtered manner through schools and reaches the public. However, the extent to which these changes occur and challenge the dominant recurring ideas is slow and uncertain. These changes are often complementary or coexisting with the prevailing perspectives, resulting in vague shifts in perceptions.

Conclusions

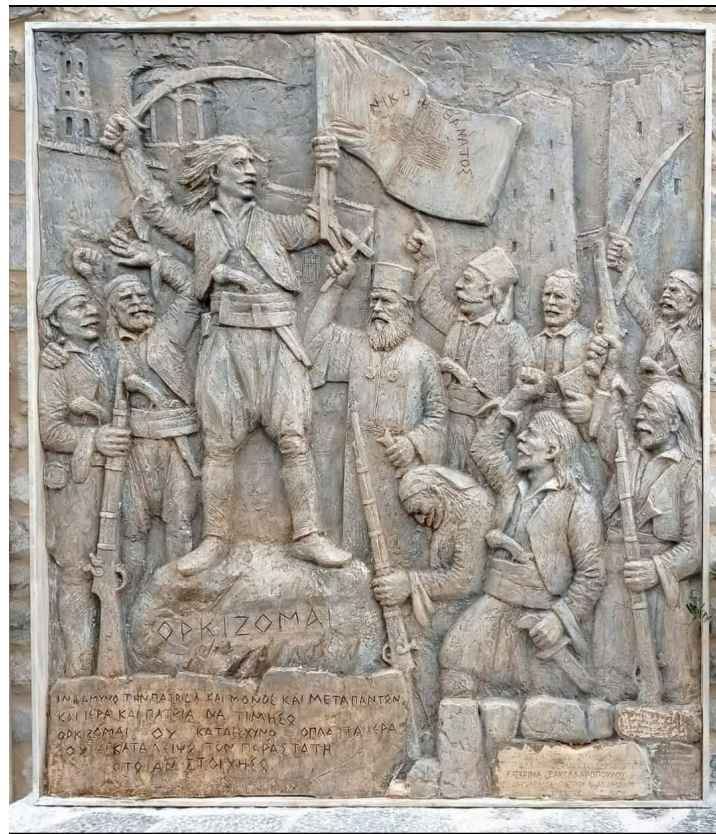
The objective of our study was to examine the changing perceptions of the 1821 War of Independence over time. This war is widely regarded as the most significant event in Modern Greek History, as it led to the

establishment of a sovereign state-nation. It is particularly heroic because the Greeks achieved independence from the Ottoman Empire through seven years of intense battles, resulting in numerous casualties and significant sacrifices. The heroic nature of this achievement is further emphasized when considering the international context of the time, characterized by autocracy and the influence of Romanticism.

The country's history played a vital role in nurturing the heroic spirit. Various war events and political evolutions contributed to its preservation. Notably, the 100th anniversary coincided with the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922) and the Greek army's defeat in Asia Minor in 1922. Similarly, during the 150th anniversary, Greece was under the Dictatorship of the Colonels (1967-1974). In such circumstances, events and rituals like student and military parades were organized, further reinforcing the heroic spirit. Consequently, primary and secondary education history textbooks were developed and taught based on this spirit.

These circumstances are reflected in the public perception of the 1821 War. Drawing from two recent studies, we examined how Greeks perceive this event. The prevailing perception is predominantly heroic, although it has been weakened due to changes in school textbooks and the new directions taken by academic historians. The focus has shifted from heroism to exploring new aspects such as gender, ideas, administration, institutions, and organization. However, these new concerns have not been adequately incorporated into school textbooks or the public's perception of the 1821 war. This discrepancy can be attributed mostly to ideological reasons, as school textbooks tend to either omit or downplay these newer concerns. Consequently, different perspectives and interpretations of the past are not being actively debated.

Will this change in the future? To what extent and in what ways will the old perceptions coexist with the new ones? These questions remain open, and further investigation is required to address them.



Monument at Arepoli, South Peloponnese. The oath at the beginning of the Revolution.



The siege of the Acropolis. Painting by Panagiotis Zografou.



A monument in Pyrgos Dirou, South Peloponnese commemorating a fight against Egyptians in which local women defended themselves and their place.

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On Victims, Heroes, and Gulag Survivors: A Central European Life Story

Constantin Iordachi

To the memory of István Bicskei (1921–2013)

In 2011, I received the stimulating invitation to deliver a *laudatio* at the 90th birthday anniversary of István Bicskei, a Hungarian WWII veteran, prisoner of war, and Gulag survivor, in a village in Vojvodina, Serbia, right across the border with Hungary. The task was challenging on multiple grounds. First, I needed to deliver the speech in Hungarian (which is not my native language), in front of a variegated, Serbian-Hungarian, rural community. Secondly, and most importantly, the veteran's rich life, spanning several historical periods, was an exceptional yet in many ways a typical Central European experience.

István was born on 28 November 1921 in Magyarkanizsa, Vojvodina, in a Hungarian Roman Catholic peasant family, as the seventh child of József Bicskei and Piroska Kovács. The couple had ten children, but only seven lived to adulthood. The geopolitics of this former imperial border region situated for centuries on the *triplex confinium* among three multinational empires (Habsburg, Ottoman and Tsarist, and their successor states), was to shape his destiny: unlike his parents—who lived their early lives as Hungarian citizens within Austria-Hungary—the boy was ascribed at birth the citizenship of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and had to learn to operate in a bilingual, Hungarian-Serbian, schooling system and socio-political environment.⁴⁴

István had a typical rural childhood, attending the local village school and playing in the barn, in the fields, and on the bank of the Tisza River. He graduated the four-class elementary school in the village and then worked in agriculture to help his family. Life was basic and full of hardship in the rural economy of subsistence. István lost his father at the age of six; the children learned the news while planting paprika. His mother raised the children alone for a few years, and then, in 1935, she too, died of tuberculosis. István was the first to learn the news and brought it to his brother and sisters who worked in the cornfield. István was thus orphaned at the age of 14; the elder sister, who was already married, sold the family house and adopted the younger brothers and sisters. István worked as a blacksmith apprentice until 1939. He bitterly remembered those difficult years. Yet, hardship united the siblings, who stucked together for the rest of their lives.

⁴⁴ On the *Triplex Confinium*, see W. Bracewell, "The historiography of the *triplex confinium*: conflict and community on a triple frontier, 16th-18th centuries," in Steven G. Ellis and R. Esser (eds.), *Frontiers and the writing of history, 1500-1850* (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2006), 211-227; and Drago Roksanđić (ed.), *Microhistory of the Triplex Confinium: International Project Conference Papers, Budapest (March 21-22, 1997)* (Budapest: Institute on Southeastern Europe CEU, 1997).



Picture 1: The extended Bicskei family in Adorján, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, 20 July 1922 (see the infant István is in his mother's arms in the first row, left hand side).

In 1941, Vojvodina's Bačka and Baranya regions were annexed by Hungary and István became a Hungarian citizen; he was soon recruited in the Royal Hungarian Army (*Magyar Királyi Honvédség*) and served throughout the war as a river-guard soldier in Hungary's flotilla on the nearby Tisza River (see Picture 2 below). Life in the army during wartime was very taxing, yet István did not participate in direct combat.



Picture 2: István as soldier in the Hungarian flotilla, Magyarkanizsa, 10 July 1942 (left side).

On 26 July 1944, upon the impending occupation of Eastern Hungary by the Soviet troops, István was released from the army in Magyarkanizsa, which was soon to be found, yet again, within the borders of (the second) Yugoslavia (see Picture 3 below).

M. KIR. III. HONVÉD POLYAMLÁR PÓTYÁSELŐDALI PARANCSNOKSÁG

KIMAUJÓ parancsnokság stb. fejbélyegzője.) A 344530 sorszám.

279 (a leszerelési jegy nyilvántartásának folyószáma.)

Leszerelési jegy
Bicskei István kom. részére,
aki a neményleges viszonyba helyeztetett (visszahelyeztetett).

Lakóhelye:
Acsorján község,
város,
vármegye,
ország.

Kelt: Magyaránizsa, 44. júl. hó 26. n.

parancsnok (tiszék) Árnai István

Személyleírás:

Kora: 23 éves	Szája: csúszlag
Testalkata: köcses	Orra: nyeres
Arca: kemény	Beszéle: magyar nyelv.
Haja: barna	Különös ismerető jelek:
Szemel: barna	

Nevezett minden illetményrel bezárólag van ellátva.
Kelt: Magyaránizsa, 1944. júl. 26.

1) Orvoslág megvizsgáltam és egészségesnek (terülő mentemnek) találtam.
2) Orvoslág megvizsgáltam és a bevonuláskor megállapított alkalmatlanság-értelmeget vizsgálva nem találtam.
3) Orvoslág megvizsgáltam. A felülvizsgálaton megállapított alkalmatlanság-értelmeget (A utaz kivétel pont töröndő).

orvos Árnai István
tiszti parancsnok

Picture 3: Istvan's discharge from the Hungarian army, 26 July 1944

Most probably, he returned home; however, on 28 November 1944 (on his birthday, as seen in the verso on document in Picture 6, below), he was detained by the Soviet Army, as a Prisoner of War (POW); the official documents issued by the Soviet and Hungarian authorities indicate two different locations for his arrest: Püspöknádasd (nowadays Mecseknádasd), and the nearby Szekszárd, both situated in Hungary, around 150 kilometers from Vojvodina's border (see document in Russian, in Pictures 4-5). The circumstances of his life during this time are not very clear, and oral history sessions did not shed full light on it. We can presume that, most probably, he was arrested by the Soviet troops in Vojvodina and sent to the collecting camps in Püspöknádasd and then Szekszárd to join the sizeable local contingent of prisoners arrested in those cities and rounded up for deportation.

István was then deported to Stalingrad (nowadays Volgograd, in southern Russia, on the bank of the Volga River). He was first kept in a transit camp in Timișoara, Romania, and then taken to Soviet Union by ship across the Black Sea, departing from the Constanța harbor. His stay in the Timișoara camp was a particularly traumatic experience; István found it very difficult to speak about it, but once revealed that the rate of mortality was very high and, since it was difficult to bury the dead in the frozen earth during the winter months, the ground was shaky everywhere they stepped on.

István's displacement was part of the waves of deportations that begun soon after the (gradual) wartime occupation of Hungary between 1944–1945, involving civilians, prisoners of war, and political dissidents.⁴⁵ The first wave began in mid-1944 until the end of that year and involved mostly prisoners of war who fought against Soviet Union, such as, and including, István (even if he was not a combatant soldier). A second wave took place in early 1945 and focused on the deportation of ethnic Germans and

⁴⁵ Tamás Stark, "Malenki Robot'- Hungarian Forced Labourers in the Soviet Union (1944-1955)," in Győző Cholnoky, ed., *Minorities Research: A Collection of Studies by Hungarian Authors* (Budapest: Lucidus Kiadó, 1999), 155-167.

POWs, but involved Hungarian civilians as well. These deportees were first gathered in transit camps in Romania and Western Ukraine, just like István was, before being taken to camps across the Soviet Union. Official estimates claim that circa 600,000 Hungarians were deported to forced labor camps in the Soviet Union between 1944 and 1953.

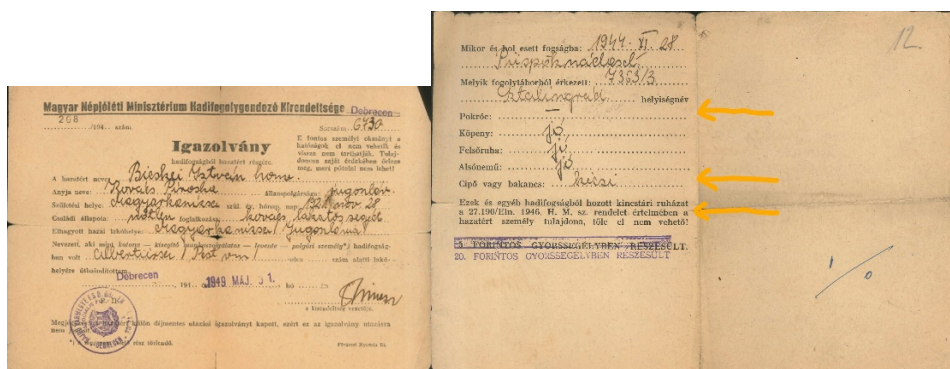
István served forced labor (*málenkij robot* in Hungarian, after the Russian *malenkaya rabota*, or “small work”) in Stalingrad for four years, until the very end of 1948, in the GUPVI (*Glavnoje Upravlenyije po gyelam Vojennoplennih i Internyirovannih*) camp no. 362 (registration number 01359448) together with people of various other nationalities, as part of the so-called ‘GULAG for foreigners.’ Lager conditions were dreadful, but he and two of his comrades survived the labor camp; they subsequently kept in touch for the rest of their lives.



Pictures 4-5: Bicskei István's liberation papers from the L-362 labor camp in Stalingrad issued by the Soviet authorities. Source:

<https://adatbazisokonline.mnl.gov.hu/adatbazis/szovjet-taborok-magyar-foglyai/>

In the meantime, as soon as 1946, Hungarian authorities started negotiations to bring home the deportees. Repatriations started in 1948-49, but it was mostly after Stalin's death, and until 1955, that most deportees were released from the camps and allowed to return to Hungary. The returned prisoners totaled an estimated 330,000–380,000 persons; the fate of the remaining 200,000 is not known; it is generally accepted that they perished in the camps.



Picture 6: Document attesting István's release from forced labor on 31 May 1949 (front and verso). The identification document allows István to travel free of charge within Hungary, from Debrecen to Albertirsa, to meet his sister (who lived in the neighboring village, called Ceglédbercel-Cserő). István used to refer to the day he reached his sister's house as his second birthday.

According to official registration documents, on 29 December 1948 István was moved from camp no. 362 in Stalingrad (which was subsequently transformed into a penal camp), to the prisoner of war repatriation camp no. 35 in Ukraine, subordinated to the Soviet Ministry of the Interior. István attempted to return to Yugoslavia but found out that his Yugoslav citizenship was revoked for enrolling in an enemy army. Consequently, he was temporarily placed in a refugee camp in Sighetu Marmăției, Romania, and then to Debrecen, Eastern Hungary, until his legal status was clarified. After over three years of military service and four years of serving in the Gulag, István thus become a *heimatlos*, a person without a country. He was considered an enemy in Yugoslavia, his native country, as it were, and a *pariah* in Soviet Union and the socialist camp, as a former *Zek* who served time in the Gulag. Fortunately, one of István's sisters—who had married a Hungarian officer from the retreating Hungarian army and settled in Ceglédbercel-Cserő, about 50 km from Budapest—managed to find his whereabouts, with the help of the Red Cross service.

On 31 May 1949, István was finally released from captivity and allowed to join his sister (see Picture 6 above). After an exhausting trip by train and foot from Debrecen in Eastern Hungary, István arrived at his sister's house in Ceglédbercel-Cserő, wearing a soldier's jacket and a worn-out pair of boots, and weighing slightly over 40 kilograms. He remembered eating an entire loaf of bread at once. It was then when he learned that, in fact, the misfortune of serving time in Gulag was most probably also an unexpected chance to escape sure death: in late 1944, after he was taken away by the Soviet Army, his village, as well as the entire Vojvodina, was occupied by Tito's partisans; the new communist authorities placed the province under a regime of military occupation and executed most adult males, including his close relatives, as a retaliation for the massacre committed by the Hungarian military in the region in 1942-43.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Tibor Cseres, *Titoist Atrocities in Vojvodina 1944-45 Serbian Vendetta in Bacska* (Buffalo, NY: Hunyadi Publishing, 1993); Aleksandar Kasaš, *Mađari u Vojvodini 1941-1946* (Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet u Novom Sadu, Odsek za istoriju, 1996); Lajos Forró, Tibor Molnár, *Tragikus emberi sorsok 1944-ből a partizániratok tükrében* (Zenta: Zentai Történelmi Levéltár, 2013); for a comprehensive presentation of the conflicting ideological or national perspectives, see Michael Portmann, "Communist Retaliation and Persecution on Yugoslav Territory during and after WWII (1943-1950)," Munich, GRIN Verlag, 2004, <https://www.grin.com/document/49718>. For contemporary Hungarian perspectives, see Ferenc Sullivan, "Commemoration Held On 70th Anniversary of Vojvodina Hungarian Massacre in Szeged," 2015.01.26, *Hungary Today*, <https://hungarytoday.hu/commemoration-held-70th-anniversary-vojvodina-hungarian-massacre-szeged-92948/>



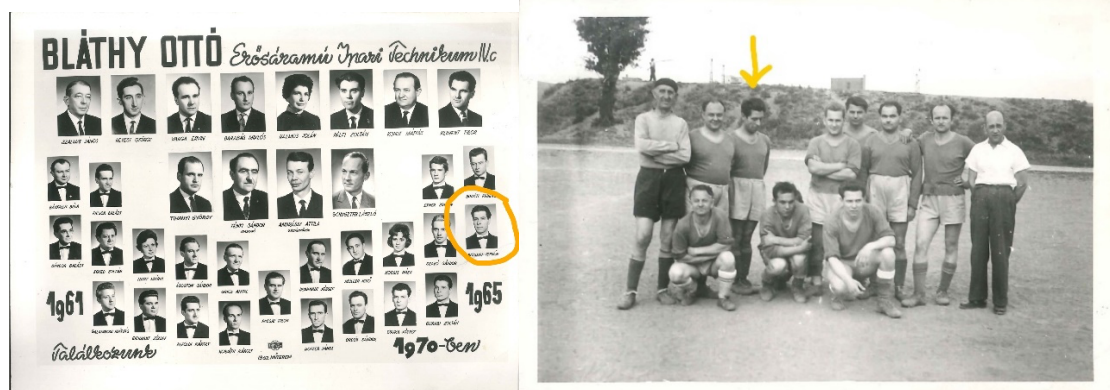
Picture 7-8: István before and after his conscription and Gulag experience. Note the difference between the kind of adolescent innocence displayed in the first picture (Zenta, 1st of September 1941) and the grave pose and depressed allure in the second picture (1949/1950).

At almost 30 years old—eight years after his conscription into the army, five years after his discharge, and after losing his family and country in a series of traumatic experiences that ranged from war to Gulag—István could, at last, commence his adult life, as a blacksmith in a socialist heavy industry factory in Hungary (Ganz, later Ganz-MÁVAG locomotive, wagon and engine factory, Budapest 8th district). Life was bleak but stable and more rewarding; throughout the 1950s, however, his integration into the new fatherland was hampered by the stigma of being a former *Zek*, an anti-social element who served time in prison, as the rumor went. In addition, in after 1953, he was openly bullied by his colleagues for his 'Yugoslav origins;' notwithstanding the fact that István was an ethnic Hungarian who fought in the Hungarian army and was stripped of his Yugoslav citizenship, he found himself at one receiving end of the growing anti-Tito fury in Hungary (and the larger Socialist camp), being openly blamed for Tito's secession from the Soviet camp and treated with suspicion because he was born in Yugoslavia and spoke a bit of Serbo-Croatian. He was routinely discriminated against, being almost invariably assigned hard physical tasks.



Picture 9: New times, new identity, and a clean start: István in the winter of 1952.

One day, István had the chance to visit the factory's administrative offices and was deeply impressed by the fact that there were types of work that could be executed with 'clean hands.' He understood that, in the new socialist world, schooling was an avenue of social mobility. He therefore decided to complete his education and try to advance in his position. He claimed to have attended six grades (rather than four) back in Yugoslavia, so that he had to only attend two more years of adult schooling in Hungary in order to complete his primary education. He then enrolled in the Bláthy Ottó Power-current Industry Vocational Technical Training School to become power current electro-technician. He remembered vividly the experience of buying his first white shirt, which he kept until the end of his life, just as he kept his first long, buttoned-lining leather coat he bought back in the 1950s. In 1958 he married a lady he used to meet every day on the train, while commuting to work from Albertirsa to Budapest, and with whom he made great dance partners. Late adulthood and marriage came with late parenting. The couple had two sons who died immediately after birth (the second death was due to medical malpractice), and a surviving daughter.



Picture 10-11: Integrating in a new society through sports and schooling: graduating the *Ottó Bláthy Erőssáramúipari Technikum*/Industrial Vocational Technical Training School (1965) and playing football in the factory team, 1974.

Under János Kádár's regime of "goulash communism" (*gulyáskommunizmus*), István experienced, for the first time in his life, stability and relative affluence. He advanced in his working place and made extra

money in the secondary economy that flourished in late socialism, fixing neighbors' household electric appliances in addition to his salary. He acquired a valuable, comfortable flat in a green, interwar residential district of Budapest. He was not able to buy a car or travel abroad (although in 1963 he visited Vienna with his wife on an organized guided tour), but he spent short family vacations at Balaton Lake and managed to buy a small house with a plot on a hill on the outskirts of Budapest at the end of the 1970s, where he grew his own vegetables. He retired from ÉPFU but continued to work aside his pension and to work his garden, thus taking part in the general embourgeoisement specific to late Kádárism.

In post-communist times, István was legally rehabilitated and awarded a supplementary pension by the Hungarian state as a WWII veteran and Gulag survivor.¹ At last, the stigma of being an antisocial element was lifted, the tragedies that marked István's life were openly addressed in the public space, and his suffering were acknowledged if not vindicated. In addition, the normalization of diplomatic relations with Tito's Yugoslavia that had occurred after Stalin's death relieved István of the absurd stigma of being a "Titoist" and, most importantly, enabled him to resume ties with his native village (nowadays in Serbia). István travel there many times a year, sometimes even monthly, to meet his friends and relatives and be part of local events and rites of passage. It was not by chance that his *laudatio* was to take place in his village: he was continually striving to reintegrate into his native community, from which he was taken away by external forces, and to recreate the lost paradise of his childhood and the sanctity and safety of his extended family.



Picture 12: Childhood memories: István in front of his birthplace house, Magyarkanizsa, Vojvodina, 2006.

Gulag Survivors and Memory Regimes in Eastern Europe

How can one narrate István's life? Was he a victim, a hero, or, unlikely, a perpetrator? As a historian of Central Europe, socialized for a long time in the political culture of postcommunist Romania and Hungary, my first impulse was to construct a new framework of interpretation—one that was local but also transnational—presenting the veteran's life experience not only as an example of victimhood but mostly of

strength, resilience, and even heroism in surviving hardship and the ‘terror of history.’⁴⁷ My approach built on the key cultural notion of the *survivor* as an increasingly desirable role in our contemporary culture.⁴⁸ Naturally, I filtered his story through my personal experience of living in Ceaușescu’s Romania as well as my scholarly view of socialism, my oral history research with peasants and former political prisoners, my participation to Romania’s Truth Commission on the Crimes of Communism, and my contribution to its Final Report condemning the communist regime “as criminal and illegitimate.”⁴⁹ It seemed to me that István was a survivor by excellence: his main moral achievement was not just that he endured the privations of the war and of the Gulag but that he managed to prevail upon them, overcoming the status of a victim, building a family and obtaining retroactive justice and rehabilitation.

My attempt to construct a comprehensive framework through which to narrate the experience and suffering of the Gulag survivor was complicated, however, by the transnational character of István’s story, related to the history of communist repression and rehabilitation in Soviet Union/Russia but also in Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia/Serbia. In all post-communist countries, the fall of communism led to massive changes in the field of memory politics, from the Marxism-Leninist politics of history to anti-communism as an official state policy. Yet, the memory of communism in post-communist countries has been far from fixed or immutable. As I have shown elsewhere, the patterns of remembering communism have varied greatly, as function of a plethora of factors of differentiation, such as: the nature of interwar political regimes, the existence (or lack of) local Marxist traditions, the position of the Communist Party in national politics and its relationship to Moscow, the manner of the communist takeover, the depths of the process of de-Stalinization, and the strength of dissent and resistance to communism, the extent of material satisfaction under communism, especially in the 1980s, the violent or negotiated nature of the collapse of communism in 1989–1991, the position of former communist parties in the post-1989 political system, and the degree of material hardship of the population in the transition period.⁵⁰ In addition, the demise of the ideological monopoly of the Communist parties in memory politics opened the floor to a multitude of statist, political and civic actors who vied for political influence and control. The interplay among these factors and actors led to a bewildering variety of forms of remembering communism in Eastern Europe,

⁴⁷ One way to present this live is through fiction, mostly literature and film. For a striking similarity with István’s story, see Henri Verneuil’s film *The 25th Hour* (1967) starring Anthony Quinn and Virna Lisi, based on Virgil Gheorgiu’s novel, *Ora 25* (1949), translated as *The twenty-fifth hour* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1950), about the misadventures of a supremely naïve—indeed simpleton—peasant from Transylvania who is first deported to a concentration camp for Jews by the hostile local gendarme, escapes the camp but is imprisoned in Horthy’s Hungary and Nazi Germany, is then forcefully recruited into the Waffen-SS as a ‘pure Aryan,’ and is then punished by the Soviets and prosecuted by the Americans as a former Nazi, before returning home to his village to find out his wife has another child from a Russian soldier. The peasant is unable to understand the higher forces that dramatically shaped his destiny but seems to accept everything with resignation and a kind of optimistic fatalism specific to the folk culture.

⁴⁸ See Shani Orgad, “*The survivor in contemporary culture and public discourse: a genealogy*,” *Communication Review*, 12 ((2009) 2: 132-161. For the societal fascination with the “survivor” as a societal prototype, see the fulminant international success of the *Survivor reality competition* television show, based on the Swedish series *Expedition Robinson*, created in 1997 by [Charlie Parsons](#). Although utterly different, sensational(ised) stories of war or Gulag survivors were often part and parcel of this—increasingly commercialized—fascination.

⁴⁹ See Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, and Cristian Vasile (eds.), *Raport final* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007). On Romania’s Presidential Commission for Studying the Crimes of Communism, see below.

⁵⁰ Constantin Iordachi, “‘Remembering’ versus ‘Condemning’ Communism: Politics of History and ‘Wars on Memory’ in East European Museums,” in Constantin Iordachi, Apor Péter, eds, *Occupation and Communism in Eastern European Museums: Revisualizing the Recent Past* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 15-49.

ranging from current official glorification in the Russian Federation, official civic-liberal condemnation in the Baltic States and Romania, to civic-liberal “governance memory” in Germany, civic-liberal and then conservative-nationalist condemnation in Poland and Hungary, and open yet polarized and rather inconclusive debates in other countries (such as the Republic of Moldova). Due to their paramount importance in articulating political master narratives and in shaping public perceptions, truth commissions, research institutes, museums of communism and public monuments have served as battlegrounds for historical politics in the competition for capturing the symbolic capital associated with condemning communism.

In Soviet Union, after Stalin’s death in 1953 and Khrushchev’s secret speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 25 February 1956—denouncing Stalin’s cult of personality, abuses of power, and campaigns of mass terror—the government took the first measures toward the legal and social rehabilitation of the groups and individuals who had been repressed and prosecuted without a legal basis. That involved liberations from Gulag, acquittals, and posthumous rehabilitation of those who died in labor camps. The government also rehabilitated several ethnic or religious minority populations which had been relocated under Stalin and allowed them to return to their former territories. Another wave of rehabilitations started with the implementation of Mikhail S. Gorbachev’s policy of *perestroika*. In 1987, Gorbachev established a special commission of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to complete the process of rehabilitating the victims of Stalinist repression.⁵¹ As a result, individuals who were repressed extrajudicially were formally rehabilitated by ordinary courts or by military justice on a rolling basis. This trend continued after the dissolution of Soviet Union in 1991 in most post-Soviet states, including the Russian Federation, being pushed forward by survivors or their descendants, as well as by civic activists. On October 18, 1991, in the last months of the Soviet regime, President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin passed Law 1761-1, “On Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression.” Amended 16 times, the law has remained in force until today and served as a basis for the continued post-Stalinist rehabilitation of victims.⁵² Yet, the process of rehabilitation was protracted, incomplete, and uneven at best, being marked by numerous setbacks, lack of transparency and ‘incomplete truths.’⁵³

Under Vladimir Putin’s rule, a process of glorification of the Soviet past occurred, accompanied by a tacit rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin as a great statesman. At the same time, the civic associations and NGOs which were actively involved in uncovering the Stalinist mass terror were pressured and intimidated: see the paramount case of the Memorial Human Rights Centre, declared a “foreign agent” in 2013 and finally banned in December 2021. As a result, the narratives of Stalinist repressions and calls for rehabilitation and transitional justice were not only marginalized but almost fully suppressed, as the state reinstated its monopoly over history writing and memory representation. The last annual “Returning the Names” ceremony of the Memorial, commemorating those who died in Stalin’s purges, took place on 29 October 2021, outside the former KGB headquarters in central Moscow.⁵⁴

⁵¹ See Cathy A. Frierson, “Russia’s law ‘On Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression:’ 1991 – 2011. An Enduring Artifact of Transitional Justice,” NCEEER Working Paper, 8, https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/2014_827-13h_Frierson_1.pdf

⁵² Frierson, “Russia’s law ‘On Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression:’ 1991 – 2011,” 3.

⁵³ See K. Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996); N. Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA/London: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

⁵⁴ “Moscow Commemoration of Stalin’s Victims Returns after Pandemic,” *The Moscow Times* (Oct. 29, 2021), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/29/exiled-lawyer-for-navalny-safronov-says-placed-on-russias-wanted-list-a75436>

In contrast to the Russian Federation, the condemnation of the crimes of Communism was a major axis of the official memory politics in all former Soviet satellite countries. Invariably, these policies involved countering the communist narratives of history by frontally tackling taboo topics such as the Soviet occupation, postwar abuses, and deportations to Gulag. Anticommunist politics of history focused mostly on 1) the rehabilitation of the *victims* of communism (mostly the Gulag deportees, the victims of the collectivization campaign, and political dissidents); 2) implementing forms of *transitional justice*, by bringing former *perpetrators* to justice (communist leadership, the so-called *nomenklatura*, and their collaborators); and 3) documenting and honoring *heroic resistance* against communism. The process of rehabilitating the victims of communism was also part and parcel of the process of rewriting history from a national perspective. Narratives on individual and group victimization were combined with the idea of *national* victimization. Throughout Eastern Europe, communism was denounced as a regime of Soviet occupation: the focus was almost exclusively placed on the Soviet responsibility, while the internal agency for the communist take-over and for building repressive regimes received less attention.

As part of this overall trend, postcommunist Romania and Hungary started a laborious and multifaceted process of rehabilitating the victims of communism, accompanied by measures for undoing past abuses, restitution of expropriated ownership, and retroactive transitional justice. As everywhere else, the public discourses on the communist regime were centered on the themes of victims and perpetrators. To raise public awareness of the harsh repression under the communist rule a plethora of monuments, memorial plaques and crucifixes were erected throughout the country. Influential documentary series such as *Memorialul Durerii* (The Memorial of Suffering), produced by Lucia Hossu-Longin and broadcast by the Romanian Television since 1991, provided emotional witness accounts of Gulag survivors and anti-communist freedom fighters about the labor camp system and the system of surveillance and persecution set up by the Communist Secrete Police. Most importantly, in 1993, the Civic Academy Foundation established *the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance*, in a former communist prison where Romania's interwar political and cultural elites were imprisoned in Sighetu Marmăției and exterminated. The museum received over one million visitors in its two decades of existence.⁵⁵ This policy culminated in April 2006 when President Traian Băsescu instituted the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (*Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România*); its *Final Report* was presented to the Romanian Parliament in December 2008, and provided the basis for the condemnation of communism as a "criminal and illegitimate regime."⁵⁶ The rehabilitation of the victims of communism went hand in hand with forms of retroactive justice; numerous perpetrators were brought to justice for human rights abuses, especially after the official adoption of the report of the truth Commission by the Parliament. This process thus led to a complete reversal in Romania's official pantheon of heroes, from communism to post-communism: former high Communist dignitaries who used to be celebrated under the coprevious regime as heroic illegal fighters for the 'socialist cause' were set to public trials as perpetrators, while the victims of communist repression, such as Iuliu Maniu, the founder of the interwar National Peasant Party, who died in 1953 in the Sighetu Marmăției Prison, his personal secretary, Corneliu Coposu, who served seventeen years of heavy

⁵⁵ See the Memorial's website at <https://www.memorialsighet.ro/memorial-en/>

⁵⁶ See Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrințu, and Cristian Vasile (eds.), *Raport final* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007). For the legal condemnation of communism in postcommunist Eastern Europe, see Laure Neumayer, *The Criminalisation of Communism in the European Political Space after the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2018).

detention, or the anticommunist fighter Elisabeta Rizea, were rehabilitated and celebrated as democratic role models for the new generation.

In Hungary, the authorities started an equally laborious process of rehabilitating the victims of communism, including material reparation. On June 13, 2000 (see law 58/2000), the Hungarian Parliament proclaimed February 25th as the *Memorial Day for the Victims of Communist Dictatorships* (also “Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism”) (*Kommunizmus Áldozatainak Emléknapja*) as “an annual day of remembrance in secondary educational institutions,” to honor the 100 million victims of the communist terror worldwide.⁵⁷ The experience of Hungarian detainees in the Soviet Union was musealized in a dense network of local and national museums, among which the most important are the House of Terror open in 2006; the new permanent exhibition site of the Hungarian National Museum called “The Circles of Hell ... Malenki Robot - Forced Labor in the Soviet Union”, which commemorates the large-scale deportation of Hungarian men and women after the Second World War; the *Málenkij Robot* Memorial Site and Museum at the Ferencvárosi Railway Station; the Hortobágy Deportations Memorial (*A Hortobágyi Deportálások Emlékhelye*); the memorial site presenting the history of resettlement camps in Hortobágy;⁵⁸ the *Central Internment Camp - Memorial Hall and Library* in Kistarcsa; and the *Recsk National Memorial Park*, among others. In 2012, Hungarian authorities proclaimed November 25th as an official Memorial Day dedicated to Hungarians deported to the Soviet Union, to commemorate the return of approximately 1,500 Hungarian political prisoners from Soviet camps on that day in 1953. Especially since 2010, this intense campaign has been highly politicized, however, serving as part of the illiberal official political discourse meant to rehabilitate conservative or far-right interwar or wartime politicians and to consolidate feelings of victimhood nationalism among the population.

Unlike postcommunist Romania and Hungary, in Yugoslavia/Serbia, the process of condemning the crimes of communism was slower and more protracted. A state commission for finding the graves of those killed under the Communist rule found that more than 50,000 people fell victim to the Communist repression in Serbia.⁵⁹ Although these victims were formally rehabilitated and a lustration law was finally passed in 2003, attitudes toward Communism, in general, and Tito’s regime, in particular, were mixed and often ambivalent.⁶⁰ In addition, the legacy and historical memory of Tito’s Yugoslavia were deeply tangled with the complex memory of violent inter-ethnic and ideological confrontations during World War II; historical resentments were reactivated, amplified, and further aggravated during the post-1995 wars of partition. These attitudes hampered the societal process of confronting the past in an open, balanced, transparent and critical manner, instead leading to competing victimhood narratives.⁶¹ Consequently, unlike in other Eastern European countries, the experience of the ‘Gulag’ remained a rather marginalized topic. Especially in village communities, such as István’s, the former ‘Zeks’ who survived Gulag still bore a

⁵⁷ For the text of the law, see 58/2000. (VI. 16.) OGY határozat, at <https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/2000-58-30-41>.

⁵⁸ See its website at <https://nkk.hu/fejlesztések/a-hortobagyi-deportalások-emlekhelye/>

⁵⁹ Marija Ristic, “Exposing the Secret Crimes of Communism in Serbia,” *Balkan Transitional Justice*, Belgrade, (September 9, 2013), <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/09/09/serbia-still-unaware-of-communist-era-crimes/>

⁶⁰ It is telling in this respect that, in 2014, the opening of the exhibition titled ‘In the Name of the People’ at the Institute for Contemporary History in Belgrade, documenting the crimes committed by the Yugoslav regime from 1944 until 1953, was disturbed by Communist activists. See Marija Ristic, “Belgrade Exhibition Exposes Yugoslav Communist Crimes,” *Balkan Transitional Justice* (April 21, 2014) <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/04/21/belgrade-hosts-communist-crime-exhibition/>

⁶¹ On the dynamics of victimhood competition, see Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La Concurrence des Victimes: Génocide Identité Reconnaissance*. Paris: Découverte, 2000), and also his essay in this cluster.

social stigma and oftentimes preferred to suppress or disguise their experience. For István, these different cultures of remembrance were very tangible, because they created markedly different contexts for his life narrative: what was seen as victimhood, resilience, and heroism in Romania and Hungary was still a sensitive, marginalized topic in his Vojvodina family circle and his local community. István acquired during the time many identities, past and present and was forced to switch among them as he crossed the border. In addition, the story of the Hungarian war veteran was closely linked to the tribulations of the Hungarian minority in Serbia and touched upon elements of Hungarian-Serbian inter-ethnic relations that are still delicate in postcommunist Serbia. It is no wonder therefore, in view of these underlying tensions and glaring gaps between official, collective, and individual memories, that István never felt safe enough to speak openly in Serbia about his life experience. Although his extended family and the villagers did know about István's life tribulations, they were not fully aware, if at all, of the existence, history and significance of the Gulag and preferred to perpetuate the false but more "convenient" or "familiar" rumor that he served time 'in prison.' Moreover, the villagers did not use the word Gulag to describe István's experience but those of *börtön* (prison) or—more but not fully appropriately—*fogság* (captivity). The latter term was used in mid-nineteenth century to refer to the experience of the 1848 revolutionary fighters; in the local community, (*hadi*)*fogság* (military captivity) was mainly used to refer to the experience of the Great War, when many men from the Bicskei family fought in the Austrian-Hungarian army and died in combat or were taken prisoners by the Italians.

It was only after the fall of communism, in his Budapest home, that István was more open to speak about his Gulag experience, but even there with great difficulties, due to the stigma that was, for decades, attached to this experience. He felt the need for an open recollection. Yet, societal recognition did not necessarily mean healing. Deep traumas blocked or even obliterated his memories. Sometimes, he started to narrate short episodes in fragmentary sentences: how he stole fish on the boat that carried them to Stalingrad or horse radish while marching in the fields and how critical that proved to his survival; yet his confessions always stopped abruptly without an apparent reason. He once confessed he had nightmares every night for over twenty years, a clear indication that he—surely, just like many of his fellow inmates—suffered from severe post-traumatic stress disorder. This condition was never fully acknowledged or treated by society but was carefully hidden from family or friends for decades, due to the need of social conformity.

After careful thinking, I decided to assume the role of an agent of change and speak openly at the *laudatio* event—yet in a cautious and culturally-sensitive manner—about István's exceptional life journey, but also about the heroism and resilience of the veteran, presenting him as a role model for the local community. My speech was met at first with tears and deep silence, but it soon gave birth to multiple vivid discussions about the various local, inter-generational, political and also inter-ethnic aspects of the story. The encounter between transnational scholarly narratives, oral history research, and the local community culture opened a space for a much-needed re-negotiation of the village's recent past and its traumatic memories. I remember the Hungarian villagers but also waiters in the location interrogating me on how and why I knew that much about post-war executions, for example, and on the nature of my sources. Surely, my story resonated with their repressed family memories. I handed the written speech to István who, after a few days, reached out to me to discuss it. He provided me with further details on his life experience in the most open oral history session to date. He passed away in 2013, aged 92.

Conclusions

István Bicskei's life story highlights the great variations in the politics of memory of World War II and of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, and the differing accents but also tensions and contradictions among various national perspectives (Soviet/Russian, Romanian, Hungarian, and Serbian, in this case) on common regional events. This story illustrates, in a tangible way, the fact that the socially constructed notions of victimhood and heroism are always changing and in motion, as a complex outcome of the interaction of multiple forms of human, institutional and political agencies in an ever-changing historical context and in complex and multi-layered cultural milieus. It shows that these key notions are closely tied to individual, collective, and national identities and understandings of personhood but also with reigning ideologies and political regimes. István was stigmatized as a villain under one regime, and then rehabilitated as a victim under another, and celebrated as a survivor and a role-model. There were synchronic differences in his condition, as well, function of the different societal contexts he found himself in. István originated from a multi-ethnic and multi-religious frontier region and was forced to cross borders his entire life and to continuously adjust to markedly different local conditions and memory regimes. For much of István's lifetime, the multiple facets of his border identity were played against each-other by monolithic, ideologically driven authoritarian regimes, at great personal costs: his Hungarian identity and service into the Hungarian army made him *persona non-grata* in Soviet Union and socialist Yugoslavia, while his Vojvodina roots brought him accusations of Titoism in Hungary. In the increasingly pluralistic and democratic postcommunist society, István could finally reconcile his past and present identities and experiences. Yet, while he was rehabilitated in his adoptive country, important life memories continued to be marginalized and repressed in his native community, which was part of a distinct memory regime.⁶²

The story also documents the glaring gap between official, scholarly, and local narratives about the past, especially in marginalized rural communities, pointing out to the conspicuous lack of cultural mediators or intermediators between these distinct political, media, and social spheres, and between official and grassroots memory narratives. It was of course a curious but in a certain way also a symptomatic occurrence that, in our age of increased mobility, this particular local dialogue was initiated by a Romanian historian in a Hungarian village of Serbia's Vojvodina.

⁶² According to the account of István's second wife, who was also a native of Vojvodina, in the last two years of István's life crossing the border to Serbia became a difficult experience: in at least one instance he became utterly confused and needed time to come to his senses and realize where he is. István's first wife passed away in 1986.