The Museal Production of Hungary’s Inorganic Past and Poland’s Postponed Victory
The Case of the House of Terror and the Warsaw Rising Museum

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After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, post-communist countries such as Hungary and Poland sought to reinvent their national identity by rewriting and reimagining their recent history.¹ In particular, Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Magyar Polgári Szövetség) in Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński’s Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) in Poland have been identified as mnemonic warriors in Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik’s monumental work on national mnemonic actors.² In particular, Bernhard and Kubik wrote on the post-communist transition within the context of their respective national memory regimes. As mnemonic warriors, the two parties are observed to sharply differentiate themselves from other actors claiming that they have the “true” version of the past. Any other narrative that goes against their version is considered distorted. Moreover, these mnemonic warriors also claim that unless the entire nation has agreed on the “true” version of history, present and future problems cannot be effectively addressed. Thus, for these warrior-politicians, collective memory is largely non-negotiable, and the meaning of each event is determined by its relationship to a “golden era” of national greatness.³

With museums playing an essential role in their memory campaign, Fidesz and PiS developed their flagship museums, the House of Terror (Terror Háza) in Budapest and the Warsaw Rising Museum (Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego).

While both parties established institutions that reflect their preferred historical narratives, they were far from being able to enforce them as the sole legitimate narrative of the past. New museums were established by the successors of both Fidesz and PiS. Bernhard and Kubik framed these successors as “mnemonic pluralists”. When Fidesz and PiS returned to power, they “inherited” the established museums from their predecessors, as Croatian political scientist Ljiljana Radonić puts it. The new museums pose a challenge to these mnemonic warriors, primarily since the narratives of the newly established museums do not correspond to that of the two parties. It is also important to note that, aside from these “inherited museums”, the two flagship projects are also heavily influenced by international developments. One is that the two nations are trying to forge a new national history and identity within the context of a pan-European crisis of memory and identity. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how the nation is presented and represented in the two museums and how these presentations and representations fit into the promoted national memory and identity of the two parties.

Considering the close links the two museums have with the two political actors, they play a fundamental role in understanding the memory and identity politics of Fidesz and PiS. They promote the parties’ official interpretation of the past and its meaning in their respective national histories by producing a form of social knowledge legitimated by the institutional power of a museum. They become political instruments that reshape contemporary national identities to fit the present political needs. Moreover, it is important to investigate how these two museums play a role in promoting national identity because of the warrior nature of the two mnemonic actors. As modern museums that can provide their visitors with an opportunity to experience the past, it is also within their capability to reconfigure collective traumatic experiences. By studying these two museums, this article aims to understand Fidesz’s and PiS’s current memory politics and the articulation of national identity in Hungary and Poland.

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7 Ibid., p. 51.

In this article I examine how national identity is articulated in the House of Terror and the Warsaw Rising Museum roughly two decades after they were opened. I analyse the permanent exhibition of the House of Terror and the Warsaw Rising Museum, which I visited from October to November 2021 and January to March 2022, respectively. To provide a more comprehensive analysis, I also include the official accompanying text for each room in the museums, the museum guidebooks, and secondary sources from various scholars who have written on both museums to support my observations further. My method of analysis borrows three methodological approaches from museum studies: analyzing museums as script, text, and narrative. I created my own research protocol that uses these three tools to uncover three layers of museal articulations of identity and memory. Therefore, while these two museums have been widely studied and compared, mostly by Ljiljana Radonić, this article aims to illustrate how the nation is presented and represented and how this bolsters the museum’s articulation of national identity and memory to an international audience. Therefore, it must also be noted that the scope of this research is limited to English-language sources. It engages with the English-language texts in the museums and the museum guidebooks. Moreover, it also engages only with the international scholarly literature written on the museums.

Memory, New, or Non-Museums?

By the early 1980s, memory began to be used as a concept that shapes the collective image of the past. Drawing from other memory scholars, the Hungarian historian Péter Apor aptly describes memory as “a process where the preservation of the knowledge of the past and the construction of linkages with the past are secured by radically different means”. He enumerates these means to include social frames of communication, the formation of communities, canons of cultural genres and meanings, the framing of identities, and the implications of power and dominance. As Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins point out, memory became a representation of the past that is generally independent of historical accuracy or evidence. Consequentially, with many museums around the globe

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10 Ibid.

considering themselves as alternate “history museums” or identifying as modern memorial museums, museums have become homes to not only various representations and spectacular recreations of the past but also constructions of, education on, and access to memory.\textsuperscript{12} Monika Żychlińska and Erica Fontana emphasize in their work that museums become ritual sites where the interplay between authoritative knowledge and spectacle occurs. They claim that authoritative knowledge is grounded in disciplinary expertise, while the spectacle is generated through architectural and aesthetic presentation strategies.\textsuperscript{13} By producing an amalgamation of historical knowledge on violence and commemorations of victims of atrocities, these museums provide an experience of the past that is created through “the totalizing perception of sentiments, atmosphere and multimedia sound, spectacle, and often smell and touch”.\textsuperscript{14} In response to these developments, scholars began to scrutinize how the visitors’ identification with (imaginary) objects and their associated values stir emotions. They observed that these modern exhibitions run the risk of the visitors consuming rather “simplistic emotional versions of history”.\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, with museums being instrumentalized in creating and perpetuating collective memories, these exhibitions risk “directly abusing history for political aims”.\textsuperscript{16}

The House of Terror and the Warsaw Rising Museum create an immersive interpretive environment that helps convey an emotional and moral message.\textsuperscript{17} The House of Terror identifies itself as “one among the innovative museums of memory that allegedly perform the task of displaying social remembering”.\textsuperscript{18} It uses multimedia techniques to create visualisations of the past and it seeks to not only memorialize the victims of the two totalitarian regimes but also “serve as a space of history and learning, with its central task being to morally educate its visitors to reject totalitarian and dictatorial ideologies in the future”.\textsuperscript{19} The Warsaw Rising Museum also claims to be a modern memory museum. Having been called the finest of Polish museums, the museum provides its visitors with

\textsuperscript{12} APOR, P.: An Epistemology of the Spectacle?, p. 333.
\textsuperscript{13} ŻYCHLIŃSKA, M. – FONTANA, E.: Museal Games and Emotional Truths, p. 254.
\textsuperscript{14} APOR, P.: An Epistemology of the Spectacle?, p. 332.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 329.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 330.
\textsuperscript{17} ŻYCHLIŃSKA, M. – FONTANA, E.: Museal Games and Emotional Truths, p. 254.
\textsuperscript{18} APOR, P.: An Epistemology of the Spectacle?, p. 330.
a unique modern vision of narrating and commemorating the past, modelling its exhibitions on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. and the House of Terror in Budapest.\textsuperscript{20} Aiming to compete for the attention of the Polish youth, the museum uses cutting-edge technology to stimulate its visitors’ historical imaginations. Moreover, the museum’s Wall of Remembrance and chapel form an integral part of the exhibition by eliciting emotions from the visitors. The exhibition aims to connect with the visitor on a personal level by prompting them to reflect on what they would do if they were in the shoes of ordinary citizens. By successfully doing so, the Wall of Remembrance and the chapel become a personal and familial pantheon or what Paweł Kowal, the museum’s co-founder, calls “the Warsaw pantheon”.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, the two museums attempt to engage their visitors through innovation and sentiments fully.

With these developments in museology, the German-American philosopher Hilde Stern Hein observes how “museums now advance themselves as public institutions with a primary responsibility to people and their values rather than to the value of objects”.\textsuperscript{22} The Canadian historian Julia Creet echoes Hein’s reflections, writing that these modern museums do not house collections but rather objects in “service of emotions as means to political ends”.\textsuperscript{23} This shift from taxonomy and preservation to phenomenology and affect has increased the focus of public historical culture on images and modern audio-visual media representations.\textsuperscript{24} The disorderly mix of the original and replica or the authentic and staged provides a new type of epistemological modality for experiencing the past. In her analysis of the House of Terror, Tamara Rátz echoes these observations. Rátz notes that the original objects in the House of Terror would hardly be sufficient for a comprehensive exhibition on totalitarian terror, including wartime


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 35.
fascism and post-war communism in Hungary.\textsuperscript{25} In an attempt to address the dearth of authentic objects on display, the curators of the House of Terror claim that the museum’s subject is a period poor in conventional historical evidence, especially for museum exhibits, but they justify its establishment because it does memory work.\textsuperscript{26} In contrast, the Warsaw Rising Museum puts a premium on historical items and showcases them as they were. Paweł Kowal writes that “historical objects are the key to understanding history and carry great value as authentic sources, such as letters, medallion inscriptions, surviving photographs, not retouched or enlarged”.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, in 2020, the museum had more than 1,000 artefacts and 1,600 photographs in its exhibition. Moreover, the museum also has more than 42,000 archived photographs, 12,242 artefacts that have undergone conservation treatment, and almost 115,000 artefacts in the museum collection, with 78,830 of them from donations.\textsuperscript{28}

This discussion leads us to question what it means to be a museum in the world today. Recently, in August 2022, a new museum definition was approved by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) after a general acknowledgement to reconstruct the definition of a museum based on the contemporary realities and challenges of the world today.\textsuperscript{29} As the cultural historian Anna Krakus highlighted, the Kyoto conference has identified that the definition of the museum must have a clear purpose and value base, in which museums meet the cultural, ethical, political, social, and sustainable challenges and responsibilities of today.\textsuperscript{30} The new definition reads:

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally


\textsuperscript{26} APOR, P.: An Epistemology of the Spectacle?, p. 331.

\textsuperscript{27} KOWAL, P.: A Brief History of the Museum, pp. 16–17.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 13.


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”

Illiberalism is one of the challenges we face today. The authoritarian backlash and the weakening of democratic checks and balances, which have defined Fidesz’s politics since 2010 and PiS’s since 2015, raise suspicion whether these two museums would fulfil the criteria of the new museum definition. In 2017 and 2018, the European Union initiated Article 7 procedures against Poland and Hungary, respectively, for a “clear risk of a serious breach” of fundamental EU values by a member state: “the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities”.

This authoritarian development is closely connected to the mnemonic regimes the two parties have been trying to enforce. Lech Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán both participated in the transformation of 1989, the period which was supposed to be a turning point for Poland and Hungary, respectively. However, Fidesz and PiS imagine the 1989 round table pacts as “rotten deals” that resulted in a “pseudo-transition” that failed to sweep away the socialists and provide “moral clarity”. With such a memory regime, these museums risk violating the values of cultural democracy and cultural participation by endangering the plurality of voices. Thus, the museums also prove to be an essential point of analysis in understanding how memory and museums are exploited for political gains.

Analyzing Museums as Scripts, Texts, and Narratives

In her work, the curator Henrietta Lidchi coins a phrase that brings together both the semantic and political readings of museum exhibitions: the poetics and politics of exhibiting. She defines the poetics of display as “the practice of produc-

33 Ibid., p. 50.
34 Ibid., p. 51.
ing meaning from the internal orderings and conjugations of the separate but related components of an exhibition”, and the politics of display as “the role of exhibitions or museums in the production of social knowledge”. In my research protocol, I aim to touch upon these two aspects by uncovering the three layers of national identity articulation in museum exhibitions. The layers I identify are:

1. the presentation of the nation to the museum visitor,
2. the representation of the nation in the exhibition, and
3. the political production of national identity.

I argue that these three layers can be uncovered by analyzing museums as scripts, texts, and narratives. I illuminate how these three approaches do so in the sections below.

**Museums as Scripts**

This approach draws from Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach’s understanding of the museum as a physical script. They liken a *museum visit* to performativity, specifically by how the museum’s organisation of space guides a visitor’s movement, attention, and sensory receptors (often the field of vision). More importantly, the nature of the building housing the museum influences how its visitors act, especially if it has a close relationship to its story. Inside the museum, forms of control mimic the performance of a ritual. These forms of control include prompts on where to go, where to direct one’s attention, and how to engage with or reflect upon the museum’s content. This approach studies the nature, the size, the appearance, and the intended order of the spaces. Analyzing the order of the spaces must not be confused with the analysis of the museum as narrative. While chronology is part of narrative, the intended order of the visit will only be analysed in so far as how the museum guides a visitor’s movement and not how it tells its story. I ascribe to Christopher Whitehead’s definition of differentiating story and narrative. He defines story as the “defined and finite sequences of related events” and narratives as the “telling” of the story. By analysing the museum as a physical script, I can identify how the museum...

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37 Ibid., p. 168.
38 Ibid., p. 185.
40 Ibid., p. 10.
introduces the visitors to the exhibition, which includes its presentation of the nation. Therefore, this approach focuses on “meeting” the nation.

It must be noted that analysing museums as scripts does not deal with real visitors but what Whitehead refers to as the imagined visitor. An imagined visitor is a curatorial construct that is necessary to the museum’s creative process but may bear little relation to many real visitors. While I do keep this limitation in mind in my analysis, I would also like to recognize that analyzing museums as scripts still forms a robust methodical frame in understanding overtly presented prompts, enabling the researcher to investigate the motives behind it.\textsuperscript{41}

\textit{Museums as Texts}

This approach claims that museum displays can be read. Elements of the display (such as objects, photographs, or lighting) are considered units in a linguistic structure. Precisely because these are taken out of mundane circulation and put on display, Polish historian and philosopher Krzysztof Pomian claims that invisible significations are projected onto them and become carriers of signs or “semiophores”.\textsuperscript{42} Therefore, a pair of soldier’s boots carries a different function from being footwear when put on display. It becomes a “semiophore” that could signify patriotism depending on how the unit is presented. This approach treats a museum exhibition as a communication system of units. Thus, each unit’s signification is read in connection with the rest of the exhibit. This makes each unit’s signification interdependent and relational. By studying the museum as a system of signification, I can identify what meanings are produced by the exhibition, including the significations that are ascribed to the nation. Therefore, this approach focuses on “signifying” the nation.

The drawbacks of this framework, which are often related to more practical and logistical issues, are also considered in my analysis. I am referring here to conservation requirements, floor-load limits, insurance costs, security, unavailability of objects, or lack of funding that may affect the logic and meaning production of the display. For example, poor lighting may be an electrical issue rather than a deliberate choice. While my analysis makes a conscious effort to avoid the danger of reading too much into displays, I assert that one cannot say that meaning is not there simply because it was not intentionally built into the display.

\textit{Museums as Narratives}

This approach analyses how the story is being told in the museum. Narratives differ from story because the former focuses on the “telling” of the story, which

\begin{footnotesize}\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 16.\end{footnotesize}

\begin{footnotesize}\textsuperscript{42} POMIAN, Krzysztof: \textit{Collectors & Curiosities}. Cambridge, Polity Press 1990, p. 6.\end{footnotesize}
involves “matters of emphasis, tone, omission, judgement, and convention”. This approach studies the manner in which the museum stages temporal issues. By temporal issues, I mean causal links, ruptures, transitions, speed, and cataclysms. It does so by looking at the following:

1. how the time and place of the story correspond to the architectural spaces and units in the museum,
2. the story elements present in the museum and the order in which they are encountered,
3. how the story flows (whether one storyline progresses in a linear fashion or various storylines do so simultaneously), and
4. the agents of change.

By analyzing the museum as a narrative, I can identify how the museum makes sense of its story in the context of national memory and identity. Therefore, this approach focuses on “belonging” to the nation.

It must be noted that, just like the first approach, this approach also deals with the imaginary visitor. It assumes that the visitors will pay a great deal of attention to the entire exhibition. However, as we all know, a visitor’s experience will be different, especially if they only gravitate towards parts of the exhibit that interest them the most. Nonetheless, it is still worth examining these to show the political motivations behind the museum.

House of Terror

I argue that the visitors to the House of Terror meet a victimized nation. The museum presents a nation terrorized by two brutal regimes, from the building’s façade to its entrance hall and throughout its exhibition. The depiction of victimhood capitalizes on the principle that victims cannot be victimizers. Thus, it represents the nation as innocent during the period of the Arrow Cross Party (*Nyi-laskeresztes Párt*, NYKP) from October 1944 to March 1945 and communist dictatorships. By representing the nation as innocent, it can externalize the culpability of the crimes committed. More importantly, it can classify these periods as foreign or inorganic to national identity and memory.

Meeting a Victimized Hungarian Nation

The presentation of a victimized nation already begins even before the visitor enters the museum. The word “terror” in capital letters looms above the building, with the communist star and the symbol of the NYKP, which are two double-headed arrows forming a cross. From its appearance alone, the museum stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the neo-renaissance architecture along Andrássy
Avenue. The avenue, recognized as a World Heritage site in 2002, is one of Budapest’s main shopping streets and home to fine cafes, restaurants, theatres, embassies, and luxury boutiques. Upon approaching the museum entrance, the visitor sees a memorial plaque erected beside it. Its text outlines the political terror that the nation endured under the NYKP and communist dictatorships from the late 1930s up to the communist rule. This already sets the visitor’s expectations of what the museum is all about.

As Hungarian historian István Rév writes, the story of the museum building is one “of undifferentiated terror from the moment of the German occupation [March 19, 1944] until the summer of 1991, when 57 years later, the Soviet army left the territory of Hungary”.

From 1937 until the end of the Second World War, it served as the NYKP’s meeting place. However, in 1944, the party used it as a prison and torture centre. During Hungary’s communist period, the building served as the headquarters of the State Protection Authority (Államvédelmi Osztály/Hatóság, ÁVO/ÁVH), which gained a reputation for brutality during the series of purges that began in 1948. Until the 1956 uprising, the building served as their interrogation centre.

In 2000, the government-sponsored Public Foundation for Research on Central and East European History and Society (A Közép- és Kelet-európai Történelem és Társadalom Kutatásáért Közalapítvány) bought the building along Andrássy Avenue to house a museum of Hungary’s post-war history. Thus, the distinctive building that houses the museum is the same site where people were detained, interrogated, tortured, or killed by both regimes. The building’s history elicits a certain level of respect from the museum visitors, as if paying homage to the victims.

The same thread continues as the visitor enters the building. The visitor is welcomed by dark gothic-like melodies and a carefully lit, narrow, gloomy stairway leading to two tombstone-like memorial plaques. The plaques commemorate the victims of the communist and Arrow Cross regimes: one is black with the symbol of the NYKP, while the other is red with the star. The overall mood of the entrance hall urges the visitor to be quiet and respectful. This mood is maintained when the visitor enters the exhibition. The visitor immediately sees a former Soviet tank T-64. Behind it, a collage of the victims’ faces cascades from the roof of the building down to the ground floor.

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46 Ibid.
The museum’s curators intended to create an ethnographic-style exhibition to depict the past in its totality. This is similar to how conventional anthropological museums strove to capture a culture in various aspects. The principal designer of the exhibition, Attila Ferenczfy-Kovács, is a former stage designer turned historian. Thus, it is no surprise that the museum’s main object was to achieve visual intensity by turning each room into a graphic surprise to maintain the visitor’s interest. Arguing that traditional historical museums are ineffective in conveying their message, the curators designed the House of Terror as a criticism of conventional historical exhibitions. In their view, a standard exhibition is text-heavy with little to no spectacle, resulting in dull exhibits. To them, this kind of exhibition cannot maintain the interest of the younger audience. Moreover, after studying the museum exhibition, it seems as though the minute details of the past become less important. The museum designers claimed that only a few objects from the period were available, forcing them to experiment with “new ways of getting access to the past”. Ferenczfy-Kovács said that it was difficult to visualize certain historical events accurately, adding that an accurate account would be incomprehensible and reduce the richness of their interpretation. Thus, it was more faithful and effective for the museum designers to mediate such a period through “the complex experience of a multimedia installation”.

The exhibition is designed strictly chronologically. From its entrance, the visitors are ushered to the second floor, where the exhibition formally starts. In each exhibition room, there is only one entrance and one exit. The exit of one room serves as the entrance to the next. From the museum’s façade and entrance hall, the visitor assumes that the dictatorship of the Arrow Cross Party and communism will be equally presented. However, as the visitor goes through the exhibition, it becomes clear how the museum focuses more on the crimes committed during the communist era “while only paying mere lip service to the mass murder of the Jews of Hungary”. Only two-and-a-half rooms are devoted to the terror of fascism and Nazism: the rooms on the double occupation of the fascist and communist (counted as half a room), the Arrow Cross corridor and the Arrow Cross hall. The rest deals with the crimes of the communist dictatorship.

We can see the working of the museum’s script through its overwhelming concentration on the violence and brutality of the communist dictatorship and how

49 Ibid., 331.
50 Ibid., 330.
51 Ibid.
Visitors immediately encounter a former Soviet T-64 tank upon entering the entrance hall of the House of Terror. The atmosphere urges the visitor to be quiet and respectful. Behind the tank, a collage of the victims’ faces cascades from the roof of the building down to the ground floor.

The author’s own archive / © Rose Smith
it completely ignores the history of the authoritarian Horthy regime.\textsuperscript{53} Where the exhibition just once refers to the Budapest ghetto, it claims that it was “lucky” to be liquidated only in 1945. As Ljiljana Radonić points out, it is “a strange choice of words, to say the least”.\textsuperscript{54} As she observes, this kind of representationdownplays the relevance of the political culture initiated by the pre-Nazi Hungarian governments during the Miklós Horthy period, failing to adequately explain the historical context of the shockingly bloody rule of the NYKP.\textsuperscript{55} Instead, the museum disregards anti-Semitic and authoritarian aspects by depicting Hungary’s Horthy era as a functioning multiparty system.\textsuperscript{56} As scholars have pointed out, the museum guidebook published in 2007 writes: “Up to the time of the Nazi occupation of 1944, Hungary’s affairs were conducted by an elected, legitimate parliament and government, with representatives of active opposition parties sitting in the chambers.”\textsuperscript{57} This effectively omits the fact that Hungarian Jews were murdered before the German occupation and blurs the fact that most Hungarian Jews were deported immediately after the Nazi occupation, while Horthy was still in power. Individuals responsible for the atrocities of the Second World War are featured only in their subsequent capacity as “victims of communist dictatorship”.\textsuperscript{58} As Péter Apor observes, “the impression is truly puzzling: as if the House of Terror evoked the horrors of Communism only to render fascism irrelevant”.\textsuperscript{59}

In response to the criticisms received by the museum for effectively marginalizing the Holocaust, Mária Schmidt, the Director-General of the House of Terror and frontwoman of Fidesz’s memory politics, responded that the Holocaust belonged in a separate Holocaust Museum.\textsuperscript{60} Indeed, the Holocaust Memorial Centre (\textit{Holokauszt Emlékközpont}) was established in Hungary in 1999 and opened in 2004. However, scholars have pointed out that it has achieved little resonance in Hungarian society. Compared to the more popular House of Terror, the Holocaust Memorial Centre is often nearly empty and visited mostly by foreign tourists.\textsuperscript{61} The prominent presence of the memory of communism compared to the

\textsuperscript{53} APOR, P.: An Epistemology of the Spectacle?, p. 334.


\textsuperscript{55} Ib. id.

\textsuperscript{56} Ib. id.


\textsuperscript{58} RADONIĆ, L.: “Our” vs. “Inherited” Museums, p. 53.

\textsuperscript{59} APOR, P.: An Epistemology of the Spectacle?, p. 335.

\textsuperscript{60} RADONIĆ, L.: “Our” vs. “Inherited” Museums, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{61} UHL, H. – FORRESTER, S.: Conflicting Cultures of Memory in Europe, p. 60.
Holocaust serves as a classic example of post-communist Europe’s difficulty in incorporating the destruction of the Jews into its recent memory.\textsuperscript{62}

The primary impetus behind the creation of the House of Terror may provide a reason for this imbalance. As early as 1997, then Fidesz party vice president József Szájer, floated the idea of turning the building along Andrássy Avenue into a museum of communism.\textsuperscript{63} According to the museum’s director Mária Schmidt, the motivation behind creating the museum was the question of what to do with the many perpetrators of crimes committed under the communist regime. As American sociologist Amy Sodaro points out, Hungary’s uneasy relationship with transitional justice resulted in an uneasy amnesty, which was deeply unsatisfying to many people, especially Schmidt and her colleagues in Fidesz.\textsuperscript{64} Thus, plans for the museum to expose the truth about the communist past were drawn up in the effort to move forward and come to terms with their history, if not juridically, then morally. Thus, when Fidesz gained power in 1998, the project began to take shape.\textsuperscript{65} By extension, since the building was also used by the preceding fascist regime and considering the striking similarity of repression under the two regimes, the museum was also created to remember Hungary’s more distant past of suffering under Nazi occupation.\textsuperscript{66}

In terms of the exhibit in each room, the museum presents the Hungarian victims individually. The personal stories of Hungarians are threaded throughout the exhibition in video interviews, documentaries, or with their possessions on display. The first room on communist terror, Gulag, is also one of the museum’s biggest (if not the biggest) exhibition rooms. It presents the individual stories of the victims. The visitor’s attention is drawn to the monitors on the walls. The monitors show Hungarians recounting their memories of the forced-labour and slave camps. Speaking in Hungarian with English subtitles, they tell their stories of being separated from their loved ones and tortured by their occupiers. After one story, a video of the view from a moving train with its corresponding sound plays and then transitions to the next story. The sound grabs the attention of the visitor. Objects, which it can be inferred were owned by the detainees, are presented in display cases in the room. The display cases are in the shape of cones. The tip of the cone points to a location on a map of camps on the floor. This is the visitor’s first encounter with the individual victims.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} SODARO, A.: The House of Terror, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., pp. 66–67.
The visitor gets a clear picture of how the period has impacted the lives of many Hungarians. One encounter with the victims is during a slow, depressing and excruciating elevator ride to the cellar. During the elevator ride, a video of an elderly man describing the routine of hanging prisoners is shown. The man in the video had been a cleaning attendant at executions. The elevator doors open to the museum’s cellars, where torture chambers of the ÁVO/ÁVH have been reconstructed. This may confuse the visitor into thinking that the executions the man mentions happened here. Several other rooms present the stories of individual Hungarians in the same manner. The Religion Room (112) projects documentaries about the persecuted and imprisoned members of the clergy. An entire room (113) is dedicated to József Mindszenty, a cardinal who uncompromisingly opposed fascism and communism. In the 1956 Room, the leather coat of Gergely Pongrátz, one of the victims of the Mosonmagyaróvár fusillade, hangs from the ceiling. Names of the martyrs can be heard from the loudspeaker in the Reprisals Hall. In the Emigration Room, individual postcards written by those who left Hungary after the Revolution of 1956 can be read by the visitors. Names of those executed between 1945 and 1967 are on the walls of the Hall of Tears (-07, basement). These individual stories paint a picture of a victimized nation through personal stories, possessions, and memories.

Approaching this exhibit as a text enables us to observe that the visitor mostly meets the perpetrators in rather abstract, intangible forms, which loom throughout the exhibition. The first room is the double occupation room, which reminds the visitor of the two symbols on the façade of the building as well as the two plaques in the entrance hall. The room is split in two by a dividing wall. From the wall, monitors are fixed on opposite sides. The exhibition guides the visitor’s attention towards monitors that play videos of atrocities on loop without any explanatory text (except for the museum text printed on paper). The Change Room (206) displays a symbolic change of clothes with two mannequins without a head wearing a Soviet uniform and an Arrow Cross Party uniform. The Soviet Advisors Room is filled with Soviet paraphernalia to evoke the Soviet presence in Hungary. This paraphernalia includes a painting of Stalin and a big red armchair, which instantly catches the visitor’s attention. The Resettlement and Deportation Room (101) displays the ZIM automobile, which is “a frightening relic of the times”, evoking “the infamous ‘black car’ used by the communist political police to pick up its victims, usually in the middle of the night”. The Torture Chamber Room (102), which displays torture instruments on the wall, is the only room preserved in its original form. When the visitors can meet the perpetrators

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individually, a particular distance remains between them. While a figure of Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the fascist party, is on display in the Hall of the Arrow Cross (204), his body is represented by his uniform and his head is projected in a way that blends it with the illuminated background presenting what seems like his ghostly form. In the ÁVO Entrance Hall (106), a red star stands in the middle of the room between the board of photos of the members of the Communist Political Police’s chiefs-of-staff and the visitor as he or she enters. The study of ÁVH’s chief, Péter Gábor, is recreated (Room 107) but with his eery, invisible presence. Only at the end, in the Perpetrators’ Wall, does the visitor come face-to-face with the victimizers. Therefore, throughout the exhibition, the visitor generally feels the perpetrators’ ghostly presence, be it Nazis or communists.

Emphasizing an Inorganic Past within Hungary’s National Memory

By capitalizing on spectacle, especially a shocking and depressing atmosphere of violence, this presentation of a victimized nation is, I argue, a way for it to claim its innocence. The units in the exhibition externalize all culpability. They suggest that the German occupation enabled the Hungarian Nazis to take over. Moreover, the Change Room (206), which is featured very prominently at the beginning of the exhibition, wrongly claims that the so-called Hungarian Nazis of the Arrow Cross Party simply changed uniforms after 1945 and became the communist State Security. The exhibition suggests to its visitors that former Hungarian Nazis were all turned into communists. They operated large-scale terror and surveillance under orders of omnipotent Soviet advisers. In claiming this, the museum minimizes the number of the so-called evil Hungarians and makes them the exception to the rule. The individual stories are included in the exhibition “insofar as their narrative of heroic struggle contributes to the Hungarian cause.” The individuals were solely victims subjected to manipulation, propaganda, and show trials. The basement, which is the most emotionally charged section of the exhibition, suggests that Hungarians were executed, tortured, and jailed despite a moment of heroic resistance in 1956. Moreover, all anti-communist fighters are depicted as heroes and even martyrs who sacrificed their lives or freedom to fight the oppressor.

The representation of an innocent nation that endured the brutality of the communist political terror is rooted in Fidesz’s ambitious memory politics. They “decided to build ‘national pride’ on a voluntaristic and mythical series of grandeur et gloire connected to the history of the Hungarian state and (Christian)

69 Ibid., p. 53.
church(es).” As Péter Apor explains, to construct the Christian state as Hungary’s ahistorical and eternal abstraction, the Fidesz-led government used the millennium as an opportunity to show a historical continuity of the Hungarian state. It commemorated 1,000 years after Stephen I (István), the ruler responsible for Christianizing the Magyars, who was crowned the first King of Hungary. This celebration grounded the Hungarian collective memory in Christian-clerical historicization and national particularism. Moreover, they also transferred the Holy Crown from the National Museum to the building of the Parliament. This marked the symbolic foundation of the medieval kingdom as the beginning of modern Hungary, which allowed the sacred crown of Saint Stephen to be the ultimate representative of the Hungarian political body in the late Middle Ages and early modern times. In 2000, it was regarded as the symbol of Hungarian statehood by the Fidesz-led government. This weaved together a continuous narrative of a Christian nation highlighting the essence of the Hungarian state, which is not subject to temporal change and “embodies” the deepest desire of the nation.

The House of Terror plays a special role in the politics of history in contemporary Hungary, which centres on trying to isolate the communist dictatorship as an external non-national past of political terror. The museum’s attempt to detach it as an event of non-national history safeguards a range of resilient qualities and features that characterize the nation and remain unchanged despite and during communism. After all, the biggest enemy of communism was religion. Thus, the House of Terror was founded to disseminate the message of anti-communism, to convince Hungarians that the political left was dangerously associated with the potential of a brutal dictatorship, and to regenerate national identity and pride as an antidote within society.

Thus, memory politics in contemporary Hungary, particularly in the House of Terror, centres on the interpretation of the communist dictatorship, which is represented exclusively as an external force maintained solely by violence, coercion, and force. This portrayal of the communist dictatorship buttresses the representation of the nation as an eternal entity through its resilient qualities that remained unchanged during and despite communism. Following the museum’s portrayal of the past, the appalling periods of the nation’s past are regarded as regrettable accidents brought about by external forces. Meanwhile, the once victimized nation is now a success story.

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71 Ibid., pp. 334–336.
72 Ibid., p. 334.
The Warsaw Rising Museum

The visitor to the Warsaw Rising Museum meets, I argue, a nation that is worth fighting for. The museum presents the individual stories of the insurgents and uses techniques that immerse the visitor in the atmosphere of that time. Such a technique influences how the visitor engages with the exhibition. The depiction of a nation worth fighting for represents a strong and brave nation that endured the brutalities of the war and the occupation that followed. This representation continues to include the visitor and communicates with them as though they are part of its history. By representing the nation as strong-spirited, it can reinscribe a story of loss as that of a victory postponed within Poland’s national memory.

Meeting the Nation Worth Fighting For

Originally intended to be housed in the former building of the Polish Bank on Bielańska Street, the last insurgent stronghold defending the Old Town, the Warsaw Rising Museum found its home in a Municipal Tram Power Plant built between 1904 and 1905. An architectural competition was launched for its renovation, with more than fifty projects submitted. Krakow architect Wojciech Obtulowicz submitted the winning design. His design was based on a few paradoxes, including combining modern exhibition halls with an industrial architectural setting and the transformation of a building from the time of the rule of the Russian tsar into a museum symbolizing patriotism, love of freedom and the struggle for independence. Moreover, the museum’s design turned an unsophisticated factory building into one with a reverential function. The museum’s chapel, the Wall of Remembrance and Freedom Park urge visitors to pay their respects to those who fought for Warsaw’s freedom.

The museum was built with the intention of moving away from traditional methods of museology. The archives at the Warsaw Rising Museum, as quoted in Żychlińska and Fontana’s research, show that “a visit to the museum is supposed to be an emotional lesson of patriotism directed at young people” and should “above all, and from the very beginning, avoid museal boredom”.

Upon entering the exhibition, the visitor encounters the past by walking amidst the recreated ruins of Warsaw, touching walls, and gathering calendar cards with daily news about the battles. A heartbeat and a reproduction of the uprising’s soundscape can be heard throughout the exhibit. The atmosphere in the exhibition recreates the past. In an interview in Gazeta Stołeczna, the museum director, Jan Oldakowski, said that the museum aimed to present the story of the Warsaw Rising in a similar manner to the script of an American movie. This presentation

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would include having an introduction, plot development, culmination point, and ending, emphasizing that the texts are only supplementary, with the visual presentation of the museum being the primary medium to convey the museum’s message. However, the museum’s design does not strictly impose a chronological visit as the House of Terror does. While it does have a map that suggests a chronological path, the spaces are designed so visitors can easily move around each exhibit, which may result in the visitor deliberately or unintentionally skipping certain exhibits. Therefore, the visitor would most likely encounter the feel of the past rather than the sequence of events.

The visitor becomes part of the museum, which means part of the insurgency. Young visitors from seven to eleven years old are invited to the Little Insurgent’s Room, which serves as a playground and an educational spot. With replicas of historical toys from the late 1930s to little barricades and insurgents’ helmets and camouflage jackets, they can participate in the exhibition in their own way. Moreover, the young visitors can also hear the music of Tomasz Stańko and insurgent songs in Joszko Broda’s contemporary arrangement to complete their immersion. Older visitors can also have their own immersive experience in the museum. They can have a glimpse of what it was like to go through the sewer routes, which maintained the links between individual combat sites. Another exhibit that adds to the visitor’s experience is an exact replica of the Liberator B-24J heavy bomber, hanging from the museum ceiling. On the walls of the ground floor, there are stereoscopes, which were popular before the war, inviting the visitor to view certain episodes of the rising through them. These interactions with the exhibit give the visitors a different experience from simply looking at these photographs or videos behind a glass case.

Moreover, during my visit, the museum hosted an installation entitled “Reflection: I am like you, surely”, which immerses the visitors in the past. Located in the Liberator Hall, the installation displays interactive mirrors, which scan the visitor’s facial features to find his or her double among the archives of insurgent photographs. The mirror projects the question: “Do you have the courage to stand face to face with your reflection from the time of the Rising?” The mirror then projects the name of the insurgent (if known) and what his or her role was during the rising. In my case, I was an unnamed insurgent in the scout field post unit in the south district of the city centre. In the museum guide, Paweł Kowal writes that the museum was designed for people today to connect with ordinary people during the Warsaw Rising and realize that they were individuals, just like the rest of us, who were, as he poetically described, “thrown into

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74 Ibid., p. 246.

75 Visitors were warned in advance that their biometric data would be scanned.
A photo of the installation, "Reflection: I am like you, surely" is located in the Liberator Hall of the Warsaw Rising Museum. The installation displays interactive mirrors, which scan the visitor’s facial features to find their double among the archives of insurgent photographs and to engage them in a dialogue, asking them how they would have acted during the time of the Rising.

The author’s own archive / © Rose Smith
the portals of history and left to their own fate with public affairs invading their personal lives”. The motive behind the museum is for people to stop and reflect: “What would I do if the Rising started now?” These techniques therefore prompt the visitor to reflect on the past through the eyes of the insurgents.

Moreover, as in the House of Terror, the visitor is confronted by the individual stories of the Polish insurgents. The creators of the museum focus on ordinary insurgents rather than political or military leaders. Upon entering the exhibition, an array of telephone booths welcomes the visitors. They are invited to have a “conversation” with individual insurgents. Next to the telephone, the visitor can find a set of buttons corresponding to a particular question. The questions include: “What were your tasks on the first day of the uprising?” and “How did the uprising end for you?” Moreover, the museum is dotted with the many individual possessions of the insurgents. One showcase contains a collection of 382 insurgent identification cards and three insurgent passes containing factual personal data, with some issued to code or fake names. Thus, the museum presents the insurgents’ individual stories, hopes, and anxieties against the backdrop of Poland’s Second World War history. The distance between the past and the present is eliminated by presenting a relatable and emotional history.

Our Strong Polish Nation

The Warsaw Rising Museum adapts a totalizing abstract design for its exhibition. It depicts the Poles, the uprising, and the museum as one organic unit focusing on a heroic and martyrological Polish past that fades out any negative and controversial aspects. As Żychlińska and Fontana point out, this idea can be found in one of the museum’s founding documents, which states that “it is important to present the interweaving of the fate of individual insurgents with the fate of the nation and the state – the moment of making an individual decision to participate in the rising which implied taking the risk of dying”. Thus, by emphasizing individuals whose fates were bound up with the nation, all wartime civilians are portrayed as having quasi-naturally supported the uprising.

As Polish historian Marta Kurkowska-Budzan notes in her work published in 2006, the museum’s mission statement is to show the importance of the rising as an example of the strength of the Polish spirit. The Polish spirit referred

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76 KOWAL, P.: A Brief History of the Museum p. 11.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
to here is the same spirit that eventually helped overthrow communism and secure Poland’s status as a free country. In particular, the museum handpicked stories that generated empathy with the individual insurgents. One display is an emotionally charged prayer written by an eight-year-old girl for her father, who had fought in the uprising. The prayer, which was written on a piece of paper, is assigned the following description: “Shot in combat, the bullet stopped at the paper with the prayer written on it by his child.”

As observed by Ljiljana Radonić, only Poles are individualized in such a way. Members of other groups are not depicted in such a way that would evoke similar empathy. Moreover, the museum also portrays Poles and Polish Jews in a particular manner, which does not let the Holocaust narrative overshadow that of the Polish suffering. This can be seen in how genocide, the “systematic extermination of Poles”, and “selection” are used to try to equalize Polish suffering with the Shoah.

The museum depicts Poland’s survival under two totalitarian regimes. While, unlike the House of Terror, the Warsaw Rising Museum does make space for the crimes committed against Poles during the Nazi occupation, the museum also emphasizes Soviet betrayal to a large degree. As Radonić points out, the 2007 museum guidebook mentions Hitler in seven paragraphs and Stalin in twenty-five and defines the uprising as “the last attempt to save Poland from Soviet enslavement.” She also observed how the guidebook devotes a lot of space to equalizing the two totalitarian regimes: “The Germans wanted to destroy Polish national identity and Warsaw lay at its heart. [...] The other invader – the Soviet Union – had the same aim: to exterminate the Polish elite.” In response to visitors’ critical feedback, a room, entitled “The Germans in Warsaw” was added to the cellar in 2007. The language of the museum is also telling of how the museum tends strongly to emphasize the crimes committed by Soviet perpetrators and traitors. It uses more emotionally charged language when talking about them than about their Nazi counterparts. However, it cannot be denied that while the Nazi crimes feature prominently, when it comes to perpetrators, the Soviets are more conspicuous.

Engaged in the heroic anti-Nazi conspiracy, the museum presents a memory of Poles that were victimized by Germans and Soviet Russians and betrayed.

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85 Ibid., p. 56.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
by Western Allies. With an overall conclusion that they were victimized by history, the dichotomy between them and us is intensely perceived and resented, leaving little room for reflecting on issues about Polish-Jewish, Polish-German, or Polish-Ukrainian relations.\textsuperscript{88} Thus, the construction of memory is centred on those of ethnic Roman Catholic Poles.\textsuperscript{89} Hence, we also find a church in the museum. With themes such as Polish heroism and patriotism and opposition to communism used to build up mythical icons of the Polish past, the museum portrays the identity that the PiS wants Poland to have, which is “a patriotic, Catholic nation, far from the liberal democracy of the previous years”.\textsuperscript{90} Its depiction links Polish identity and Roman Catholicism, harking back to the nineteenth-century tradition of Polish romanticism, in which ideas and values were expressed in the slogan “God, Honour, Homeland”. This portrayal plays a crucial social role in shaping and maintaining the PiS’ uncritical, mythologized, and nationalistic history of the Poles.

Retelling a Story of Loss into a Story of a Victory Postponed with Poland’s National Memory

As the museum interweaves the fate of citizens, insurgents, and the nation, some critics have observed that the exhibition risks giving its visitors the impression that heroic Poland and Warsaw won the battle.\textsuperscript{91} This impression is due to how the museum perceives the uprising. Paweł Ukielski describes the ultimate outcome of the uprising as a “victory postponed”.\textsuperscript{92} While claiming that the memory of having resisted totalitarianism sustained and strengthened people during communism, the real victory comes about with the end of communism, which PiS claims is yet to be achieved.\textsuperscript{93} In an expert opinion commissioned by the museum, historian Andrzej Krzysztof Kunert poses a set of rhetorical questions: “Should in the history of nations and states only the victories and successes matter? Should the place of a particular historical event in the national memory be determined only by its immediate results? And the most important issue – what perspective is sufficient to address those questions?”\textsuperscript{94} As Żychlińska and Fontana write, these questions “rhetorically reframe the discourse about the Rising, shifting it from pragmatic discussions of its causes, the likelihood of its success,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{88} KURKOWSKA-BUDZAN, M.: The Warsaw Rising Museum, p. 140.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{90} KRAKUS, A.: What Does It Mean to Be Polish, p. 620.
\item \textsuperscript{91} RADONIĆ, L.: “Our” vs. “Inherited” Museums, p. 56.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Ibid., p. 57.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{94} ŻYCHLIŃSKA, M. – FONTANA, E.: Museal Games and Emotional Truths, p. 247.
\end{itemize}
and its political, social, and historical consequences to an axiological level that addresses the values and ideals the Rising represents”. Thus, the Rising is represented as an exceptional event not only within the history of Poland but also within human history generally. This is not because of its scale, success, or lack thereof, but because of its symbolic value. It is taken to represent a decision to fight for freedom in insurmountable circumstances. This definition of the Rising can be found in the museum through subliminal messaging. Therefore, as Żychlińska and Fontana observe in the museum’s founding documents, the Rising is described as “a moral phenomenon on a great scale”, while Warsaw is referred to as “the Capital of Freedom”. Inevitably, the museum’s originators reference the tradition of fighting for the liberation of the Polish nation expressed in the statement “For Your Freedom and Ours”.

Paweł Ukielski, the museum’s deputy director, claims that the Warsaw Rising Museum was founded because contemporary Poles realized that only a memory community could bring real change. One of the museum’s frequent guests is the former Minister of Education and chairman of the nationalist League of Polish Families Party (Liga Polskich Rodzin, LPR) Roman Giertych, and it has been observed that conservative politicians and intellectuals are strongly engaged in efforts to set up the Warsaw Rising Museum as a core of contemporary Polish identity. As American historian John Radzilowski highlights, the museum’s design was “meant to serve simultaneously as a place of education and of remembrance, reflection, and commemoration”. Marta Kurkowska-Budzan writes that the museum serves as an essential background in public education on lessons of patriotism by offering school trips and history lessons to school children. Moreover, she also notes how the museum is constantly present in the news, commentaries and family entertainment programmes and it is praised for its mission and outstanding exhibition, which may not differ much from the methods employed by the memory politics of the communist regime.

95 Ibid., p. 247  
96 Ibid., p. 248  
97 Ibid.  
Concluding Remarks

Orbán’s Fidesz and Kaczyński’s PiS have established two museums of recent history as epistemological tools in advancing their own memory politics onto the national collective. The House of Terror and the Warsaw Rising Museum use spectacle to provide an alternate epistemology through “mental projections, cultural canons, and iconology”. As Péter Apor points out, memory is not only a distinct sociocultural practice concerning the past but also “a remarkably distinct methodology to get access to the past”. By visiting the House of Terror and the Warsaw Rising Museum, one can gain access to the past.

However, the question is: To what kind of past are you gaining access? On the one hand, by presenting an abstract image of communism as an external political horror, the House of Terror can claim that the Hungarian people as a whole were innocent and were under communism against their will. By isolating the communist dictatorship, the House of Terror supports the ambitions of the Fidesz party in building national pride on a voluntaristic and mythical history of the Christian Hungarian state. On the other hand, by weaving in the fate of the insurgents with that of the nation and the state, the Warsaw Rising Museum provides an image of Poland that has and will always patriotically fight for freedom. By generating empathy with the freedom fighting Polish Catholic insurgents, the Warsaw Rising Museum supports the ambitions of PiS to cultivate national belonging in a patriotic, Catholic nation. Thus, these museums perform the core memory work for the two mnemonic warriors.

By analyzing the museum as script, text, and narrative, I was able to trace how the museum presents and signifies the nation and how these articulate the national identity these museums espouse. In the case of the House of Terror, I argue that the museum depicts a victimized and innocent nation so that it can isolate the past from its ahistorical and eternal national memory and identity. In the case of the Warsaw Rising Museum, I argue that the museum portrays a nation that is worth fighting for and strong so that it can retell a story of loss to one of postponed victory. Therefore, by borrowing methodological approaches from museum studies, I uncover three layers of national identity articulation: the presentation of the nation, the representation of the nation, and the political production of national identity.


Ibid., 333.
Abstract

More than thirty years after the fall of communism, both Hungary and Poland are still trying to reinvent their national identity by understanding their pasts. As flagship museums of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary Civic Alliance (Fidesz) in Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland, the House of Terror in Budapest and the Warsaw Rising Museum have been used as epistemological tools in advancing the governing party’s respective memory politics. Within their portrayal of the nation’s contemporary past, these museums also endorse a particular national identity that serves the political desires of both Fidesz and PiS. This article traces how the museums present and signify the nation and how they articulate the national identity espoused by the museum. The author borrows methodological approaches from museum studies and formulates her own research protocol, which identifies three layers of national identity articulation: the presentation of the nation, the representation of the nation, and the political production of national identity.

Keywords:
Hungary; Poland; communism; museums; memory politics; museum studies; national identity; Terror Háza – House of Terror; Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego – Warsaw Rising Museum; Fidesz; Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – Law and Justice Party

DOI: 10.51134/sod.2022.042