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Budapest's 'Memento Park'

Public Art, Communist Heritage and Contested Representations of the Past
in Post-Communist Europe

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Introduction and a Note on Literature

On the 27th of June 1993, only two years after Hungary celebrated the withdrawal of Soviet troops from its territory, an open-air museum displaying monumental statues from Hungary's Communist period was inaugurated. Memento Park, holding the likes of Lenin, Marx and Engels in the imposing traits of Socialist Realism, still stands today and entices Hungarians and tourists alike to take the bus journey out of Budapest's centre to visit it. As the architect of the Park, Ákos Eleőd,¹ identified: the Park is an embodiment of multiple paradoxes and unanswered questions referring to its purpose and identity.² This dissertation is an attempt to identify such paradoxes and centre the Park in the context of communist heritage, and discourses on the artistic value of public art. Ultimately, through comparisons with similar heritage sites, it will evaluate Memento Park's place in the construction of contemporary Hungary's national identity and collective memory and its relevance to museological research in the twenty-first century.

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Note on Hungarian Names: In Hungarian, names follow the 'Eastern name order': the family name is followed by the given name (first name). Outside of Hungary, Hungarian names are usually rendered by the Western convention of other European languages. Therefore in English language academic publishing the order is inverted. So Mikus Sándor as he is traditionally written in Hungarian, would be referred to as Sándor Mikus in English language literature. In an attempt to maintain coherence with the many English language texts I refer to, I have decided to abide by the Western convention. When indexing names, the Hungarian names will be re-inverted so the surname comes first, the same as the English names.

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Eleőd, A., *The Designer's Commendation, 1992-2003*, Accessed at: www.mementopark.hu/pages/conception, Accessed on: 8th October 2014

Memento Park sits delicately within the context of communist heritage, tourism and Western cultural discourses. Boris Groys argues that the cultural situation in the countries of post-communist Eastern Europe is still a ‘blind spot’ for contemporary cultural studies.³ I will analyse Memento Park in connection to dominant Western cultural markets that have required Hungary and other Eastern European countries to rediscover, redefine and manifest their cultural identity through communist heritage tourism. Its identity as a tourist destination and privatised business is controversial and exposed to criticism. Here, comparisons with similar parks in Lithuania, Bulgaria and Russia shed light on the treatment of such heritage across nations.

In this dissertation, I intend to consider the very tangible history of Communist Hungary, especially the violent Soviet response to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956,⁴ and the key role Hungary played in instigating the downfall of the Iron Curtain across Central and Eastern Europe. This will develop an understanding of what Memento Park sought to bring to a fractured Hungary in 1993. A comprehension of the correlations between power, politics, public monuments, and their destruction poses the question as to why Hungary stood, almost entirely alone, in 1989 and decided to preserve and exhibit such hallmarks of tyranny and oppression. Does Memento Park reflect a heightened national consciousness towards the preservation of public art? Indeed, were the works in Memento Park, preserved due to their artistic value and position in Hungarian art history? These questions will be answered through an analysis of Socialist Realist monumental sculpture, and a balanced consideration of both Soviet and Western, and contemporary and retrospective arguments on this period of art history.

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Groys, B., *Art Power*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008) p.149

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Note on The Hungarian Revolution: Within literature the events of October and November 1956 in Budapest are often referred to as the Hungarian ‘Uprising’ and/or the ‘Revolution’. Many authors interchange both terms, acknowledging that they are mutually exclusive; whilst others place importance in the distinctions in the terminology. Despite the fact that, in 1956, the revolutionaries were unable to successfully overthrow the regime after the Soviet troops intervened, out of solidarity for the remembrance of the events I have opted to refer to it as the ‘Revolution’. Not only is this the common term that Hungarians chose to use, but the Hungarian term for Revolution, ‘forradalom’ literally translates to ‘a boiling over of the masses’ which, as Victor Sebestyen remarks, is what happened in October 1956.

Source: Sebestyen, V., *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006) p.xxvii

Ultimately, this dissertation will locate Memento Park's place in Hungarian society today and question contemporary Hungary's response to its communist heritage. Maier's theory of 'Hot and Cold Memory' analyses the treatment of communism, not in history, but in memory. Keeping this theory in mind, Memento Park is contrasted to its key competitor, House of Terror, a museum that controversially deals with Hungary's fascist and communist pasts. House of Terror's dubious involvement with nationalist politics orientates this dissertation in debates regarding how Hungary should remember the tarnished periods of its twentieth-century past. Such museums highlight the dangers in attempting to memorialise epochs that are still contentious and pertinent today.

This all works down to the rudiments of this dissertation: that of the potency of public monuments, and their abilities to manipulate public thought and memory. The statues and monuments that stand today in the Memento Park are living testament to these. As they now stand, disempowered and imprisoned in a park in a suburb of Budapest it is worth questioning what authority they now retain in reinforcing Hungarian identity, memory or discourse.

In conducting my research and in the eventual execution of this dissertation it has been of paramount importance that I acknowledge my position as a Western, non-Hungarian speaker. In actual fact, I reflect one of the most common groups of visitors to the Park: tourists coming from '*countries that were geographically and politically protected from the 'east winds.'*'⁵ It is also notable that the majority of literature on the Park, and even on the fall of communism in Hungary, is written from an outsider's perspective, chiefly by American or Western-European authors.⁶ Whilst a small portfolio of Hungarian writing has emerged, with works such as Póto's study of the Stalin Statue⁷ and Géza's writing on the Park itself⁸ and

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Réthy, Á., *In the Shadow of Stalin's Boots: visitors' guide to Memento Park*, (Budapest: Private Planet Books, 2010) p.59.

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Note: Even Victor Sebestyen, whose works offer one of the most overarching narratives to the decisive years of 1989 and 1956 in Hungarian history, left Hungary as a young child, and has since lived in Britain

Source: 'Victor Sebestyen About', in: *Victor Sebestyen*, 2015, Accessed at: <http://victorsebestyen.com/about/>, Accessed on: 28th November 2014

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Póto, J., *Emlékművek, politika, közgondolkodás : Budapest köztéri emlékművei, 1945-1949 : Így épült a Sztálin-szobor, 1949-1953*, (Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézet, 1989).

1956 monuments⁹; such works are inaccessible to the non-Hungarian speaker, due to a lack of translation or publication overseas. Therefore, it is important that I recognise that there remains a field of research that is unreachable for me, and hence, its presence in this dissertation will be missed. However, I maintain that prolific Western writing in this area raises interesting questions in relation to the target audience of the Park and the growth of communist-heritage tourism as a Western-led phenomenon in post-Eastern Bloc countries.

Chapter 1 – Hungary and Communism: A Contextual Understanding

Hungary in 1989

In 1989, Hungary underwent a seismic shift that monumentally changed its politics, economy, society and national identity, and all relatively peacefully. Although Hungary is the protagonist in this dis-

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Géza, B., *Statue Park: A Mi Budapestünk*, (Budapest: Municipality of Budapest, Office of the Mayor, 2002).

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Géza, B., *Emlékművek '56-nak*, (Budapest : 1956-os Intézet,1997).

sertation, it is inevitable that I compare its experience with the independence movements of the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. However, I do not want to risk viewing Eastern Europe through the Western 'veil of inherited clichés'¹⁰; moulding the identities and events of these separate countries, that might have appeared, though never were, entirely homogenous. Hungary and Poland led the way in the late 1980s with peaceful talks that eventually led to the first democratic elections in the Eastern Bloc being housed in Poland, and the Hungarians making the first cut at the Iron Curtain at the border with Austria. However, the road to democracy was a lot rockier for some of the other countries: it is not easy to forget the dramatic revolutions in former Yugoslavia and in Romania which left over a thousand dead.¹¹

This is all worth bearing in mind, when you compare Hungary's almost unique act of preservation in its Memento Park, to the deliberate and violent acts of iconoclasm against Communist statues and monuments in the rest of Eastern Europe.¹² As Sebastyen acknowledges: '*In Hungary the Iron Curtain had been corroding for a long time and was now beginning to fall apart.*'¹³ The physical and metaphorical disintegration of the Iron Curtain in Hungary was a result of the years of 'Goulash Communism', a novel form of market socialism that emerged in Hungary in the 1960s, under the leadership of János Kádár. Therefore Hungary's conversion from Kádárism to a moderate form of market economy in the late 1980s was relatively uneventful. When, in December 1991, the General Assembly of Budapest decided to create a museum to hold the most significant communist monuments¹⁴ it was seen, throughout the country and Eastern Europe, as indicative of the good position Hungarian authorities were in.¹⁵

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Forrester, S., Zaborowska, M. J., Gapova, E., *Over the Wall/After the Fall - Post Communist Cultures through an East-West Gaze*, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004) p.x.

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Salecl, R., 'The State as a Work of Art: The Trauma of Ceausescu's Disneyland', in: Leach, N., ed. *Architecture and Revolution: Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, (London: Routledge, 1999) p.101.

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Note: Iconoclastic acts towards representations of the communist regime in Eastern Europe varied from the famous: the fall of the Berlin Wall; the state-led: the renaming of streets and towns; to the subverted: the hands of the Dzerzhinsky statue in Warsaw were painted red and in Prague the first Soviet tank that entered the town in May 1945 was painted pink.

Source: Gamboni, D., *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, (London: Reaktion, 1997), p.67.

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Sebastyen, V., *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009) p.258.

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Indeed, by the dawn of the 1990s many of the ageing Soviet statues had morphed into Hungary's landscape and just as the Iron Curtain was rusting, their initial propagandist meaning had begun to fade away. For example, the statue of Captain Ostapenko¹⁶ that used to stand at the South West Entrance to Budapest and is now one of the last figures in the Memento Park. The statue was originally established by the Soviets in an effort to memorialise a contentious figure whose fictionalised story had been used by the Soviets as an act of anti-German propaganda in the years immediately following the Second World War. The conquering Red Army were well aware that: *'however much they [the Hungarians] despised the Germans, they had every reason to want to spare their countrymen the agonies of Soviet "liberation".'*¹⁷ So following the occupation a series of propagandist monuments to soldiers were erected, and Ostapenko's statue stood as a landmark in the outskirts of Budapest during the entire Communist regime (Fig.1). Travellers arriving or leaving Budapest would be saluted by the figure waving his flag, and eventually, the name Ostapenko became more and more synonymous with its immediate environment, and came to mark the place itself. Thus, the original political meaning of the statue appeared to dissolve over the years, and by the 1990s a debate occurred over the statue and what it represented to a newly post-communist Hungary. Ultimately, it was decided that the sculpture still recalled, for many Hungarians, the beginnings of Soviet oppression and so, in 1992 the statue was peacefully removed and re-homed in the Memento Park.¹⁸

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James, B. A., *Imagining Postcommunism: visual narratives of Hungary's 1956 Revolution*, (College Station, Tex: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), p.30.

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ibid.

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Note: Ostapenko was a Red Army officer, who during the siege of Budapest in December 1944 was sent, along with Captain Miklos Steinmetz to cross no-man's land to negotiate with the German Generals. According to the Soviet side of the story (the only one that was available to the Hungarian people until the 1990s), Ostapenko and Steinmetz were intentionally killed by the Germans.

Source: Szkuklik, D., In conversation with the author, 9th November 2014

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Garrison Walters, E., *The Other Europe: Eastern Europe to 1985*, (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1988) p.287.

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Fig. 1: Statue of Captain Ostapenko (1951) at the junction of Balatoni and Budaörsi roads, at the southwestern gate of Budapest, 1958.



Fig. 2: Statue of Ostapenko in Memento Park, November 2014.

The Legacy of 1956

Despite such cordial stories of the transition from Communism to democracy in 1989, Hungary had attempted another revolution only thirty-three years earlier. Although it might have paved the way for Hungary to become ‘the happiest barrack in the socialist camp’¹⁹ in the 1960s, the direct consequences of the Revolution in 1956 were bloody, violent and forever engraved on Hungary’s collective memory. Despite Kádár’s efforts to forget the tragedy of 1956, and his ‘social contract’²⁰ with the Hungarians to keep silent, it is impossible to disconnect the events of 1956 from the eventual independence of Hungary in 1989, which I believe had a significant impact in not only enabling the final revolution, but dictating the means through which the Hungarians gained their independence.

In contrast to the acts of preservation surrounding the Soviet statues in 1989, public sculpture in 1956 served as a powerful and current reminder of the oppressive regime for the Hungarian people, and

Szkuklik, D., In conversation with the author, 9th November 2014

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Frucht, R., ed. *Eastern Europe: an introduction to the people, lands and culture*, (New York, NY: Garland Pub., 2000) p.369

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Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, p.151.

as a result had a very different fate. The notorious demolition of Budapest's Stalin Statue on 23rd October 1956 stands as one of the most dramatic examples of popular iconoclasm in the twentieth century and as a direct contrast to the more humanist actions towards monumental sculpture in the late 1980s. Controversy surrounding how 1956 should be remembered in national memory has continued past 1989 into the current day. Persisting debate on the various forms of memorialisation of the event demonstrates how Hungary is far less settled on the topic of 1956 than it is on the memory of the entire communist epoch. The abstract steel memorial of the Revolution that was built on the spot of the Stalin Statue in 2006 is still inviting criticism from freedom fighters who survived the Revolution, and politicians of the right.²¹ ²² The memorial is ambiguous as to who are the legitimate heirs of the Revolution: the present day socialists or the dominant centre-right party, Fidesz.²³

Both 1956 and 1989 provide important contextual understanding as to how and why Memento Park came to be. Whilst I have claimed that the relaxed 'Goulash Communism' enabled Hungary to confidently acknowledge the need to preserve the statues of communism, I would also consider that the still-contentious memories of 1956, particularly the iconic dismantling of the Stalin Statue, demanded that such monuments had to be removed out of the city centre, and thus slightly removed from contemporary Hungarian discourse. According to James, the continual reconstitution of memory about 1956 draws upon the archetypal myth of Eastern and Central Europe, that of territory as sacred space.²⁴ Even in 1989, the tired statues of communism stood on hallowed public space for the Hungarians, so their move was essen-

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Rennie, D., 'Hungarians see red over 1956 monument', in: *The Telegraph*, 29th July 2006, Accessed at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1525120/Hungarians-see-red-over-1956-monument.html, Accessed on: 8th October 2014

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Note: On the night of the dedication of the 1956 Memorial, far-right protestors clashed with police. Budapest witnessed the largest disturbance since the Revolution itself, placing 1956 central in current political discourse once more.

Source: Cspike, Z., 'The Changing Significance of the 1956 Revolution in Post-Communist Hungary', in: *Europe Asia Studies*, Vol. 63; No. 1, 2011, p.123

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Rennie., 'Hungarians see red over 1956 monument'

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.18

tial. Rugg notes that in Memento Park *'the authorities divested themselves of any obligation to remember and also relieved the viewer of the burden of memory'*.²⁵

Memento Park is located in the 22nd district of Budapest;²⁶ metaphorically the statues are imprisoned, relegated to the confines of a non-remarkable suburb of the city. Literature on the Park is rich with such allegories: Plachy described it as *'a cemetery of dead statues cut adrift and positioned in suburban wasteland.'*²⁷ The relocation of the monuments was essential for the ideologically-clean slate that Hungary wanted; whatever meanings they had in their original settings were radically destabilised.²⁸ Their exile strongly marks the delegitimisation of Hungary's communist movement and acts as a caesura, dividing communism from post-communism. However, the monuments maintain a complicated existence as their silent and stoney presence in Memento Park resolutely marks their absence from the contemporary city,²⁹ much more so than if they had been destroyed all-together.

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Rugg, J., Hinchcliffe, D., eds. *Recoveries and Reclamations*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2003), p.8.

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Note: In the summer of 1989 it was initially suggested by literary historian Laszlo Szorenyi to establish a 'Lenin Garden' of the statues on Csepel Island, the traditional centre of Hungary's working class movements.

Source: James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p. 29

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Plachy, S., 'Graveyard of the statues: Communist heroes in perspective', in: *The New York Times Magazine*, 2 May 1993, p.46

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.25.

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ibid. p.25.

Chapter 2 – Memento Park: The Consumption of Communism

Memento Park holds over forty statues and monuments that are testament to a socialist past that ended in 1989, yet, as Huyssen notes: *‘[the past] must be articulated to become memory.’*³⁰ The Park’s architect Ákos Eleőd attempts to enter into a philosophical discourse on dictatorship and democracy through his heavily symbolic design. This begins with the entrance to the Park which is a replica facade of a building in classicist style (Fig.3). The facade is characteristic of socialist–realist architecture but it is also used to symbolise communist ideology; the imposing building promises an equally impressive continuation, yet in reality it is a *‘fake Potemkin wall,’*³¹ supported from behind by posts and scaffolding³² – a deliberate allegory for the disappointing reality of socialism.

The symbolism continues once you pass behind the facade, where a path leads you into the open space of the Park. Smaller paths fork off, and from a map it is clear that they connect to form a figure of eight (Fig.4). Réthly emphasises that the figure of eight is chosen because it is the mathematic symbol for infinity,³³ again playing with the utopian promises of communism. Réthly notes: *‘in reality they [the paths]*

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Huyssen, A., *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, (New York; London: Routledge, 1995) p.3.

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Réthly, *In the Shadow of Stalin’s Boots: visitors’ guide to Memento Park*, p.16

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ibid.

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lead to nowhere, always taking you back to the central path which then becomes the only true and right road.’³⁴ This road however, escorts you up until the two final statues where you are met by a brick wall where the visitor is obliged to turn back and walk the way they came. Szkuklik, a representative of the Park, expanded this metaphor by suggesting that the dead-end road to communism turns into the road to democracy as the visitor turns round and returns the way they came.³⁵ As Eleőd fervently notes: ‘Democracy is the only regime that is prepared to accept that our past with all the dead ends is still ours.’³⁶

Fig. 3: The building facade that serves as the entrance to Memento



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ibid. p.21.

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ibid.

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Szkuklik, D., In conversation with the author, 9th November 2014

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Eleőd, *The Designer's Commendation*

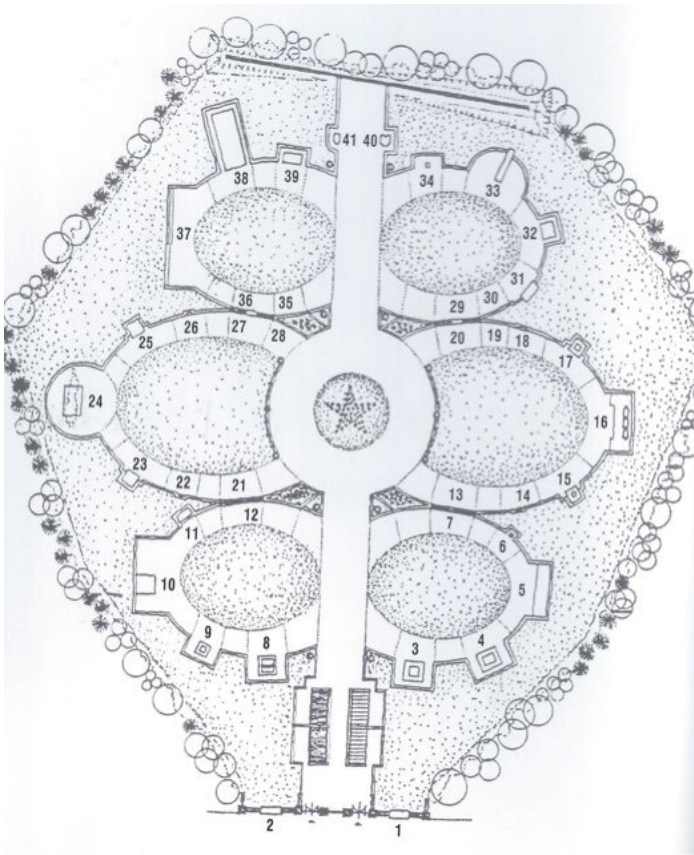


Fig. 4: Map of the layout of Memento Park

The 'Dark' Park and its Western Audience

Memento Park was born in 1993 into an burgeoning world of memorial museums that originated in the West.³⁷ It is necessary to not only acknowledge this trend but also see the Memento Park in a context of post-communism and Western-dominated memorial culture. I will go on to explore how dominant Western theoretical discourses have filtered through into sites such as the Memento Park, and created issues relating to the interpretation, consumption and ultimately, the ownership of post-communist Eastern European heritage.

In their seminal writing on 'Dark Tourism' Lennon and Foley noted that the contemporary tourist sites of death, disaster or atrocity have come to resemble the modern pilgrimage site.³⁸ Although one

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Williams, P., *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

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cannot strictly say that Memento Park is a Dark Tourism site, (it is neither a death site, labour camp, prison nor burial site) I would maintain that it belongs to a similar context of brutal regimes, totalitarian leadership and unflinching ideology. Furthermore, it attracts a similar audience: the Western tourist; sites that have come to fit under the definitions of Dark Tourism³⁹ have frequently been commodified for Western consumption⁴⁰ and its memorial culture.

Light's UK-based study suggests that communist heritage tourism is defined and constructed outside of Eastern Europe, as the countries that undertook a Communist regime in the twentieth century have a specific desire to erase the communist period from their history.⁴¹ Light argues that the identities of post-communist nations are, in part, '*produced and affirmed by the images and representations of a country constructed (or reproduced) for foreign tourists.*'⁴² Therefore, Hungary's new post-communist identity, one could contend, is as ideologically driven as the production of national history by the former Communist governments. This very paradox has become embodied in the statues of the Memento Park, which once represented the communist ideology and now, herded into the Park, help to assert Hungary's newly-reignited national identity.

The friction between Western-constructed communist heritage and Eastern Europe's desire to erase their recent history has led to a confusion over presentation and interpretation of such heritage.

Lennon, J., Foley, M., *Dark Tourism*, (London: Continuum, 2000) p.3.

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Note: Dark Tourism encompasses heritage sites that encompass a broad sense of human anguish and suffering including: places of human incarceration, war and conflict related attractions, natural disasters, sites connected to death, crime scenes and other morbid attractions.

Source: Timothy, D. J., *Cultural Heritage and Tourism: An Introduction*, (Bristol, Buffalo: Channel View Publications, 2011) pp.447-8

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Lennon., Foley., *Dark Tourism*, p.6.

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Caraba, C. C., 'Communist Heritage Tourism and Red Tourism: Concepts, Development and Problems', in: *Cinq Continents*, Vol.1, No.1, Spring 2011, 29-39

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Light, D., 'Gazing on Communism: Heritage Tourism and Post-Communist Identities in Germany, Hungary and Romania', in: *Tourism geographies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2000, p.158.

Sources suggest that the majority of Budapesters had reached a point in 1990 when they were entirely indifferent to the fate of the communist-era statues.⁴³ Hungary's transition to democracy and a free market was not an easy one, with all but the new entrepreneurial class experiencing hardships associated with privatisation.⁴⁴ Observers have found that the people of Eastern Europe were often more interested in practical current, political and economic progress;⁴⁵ the Hungarian public widely regarded the removal of communist monuments as an unnecessary expenditure of scarce public funds.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the Memento Park project went on to spend 50 million forints (£385,000) from public money in the relocation of its statues.⁴⁷ Light identifies that the Park could initially be interpreted 'as an indication of the sense of confidence of post-communist Hungary. It suggests that the country is sufficiently relaxed about its experience of communism to have few reservations about remembering it.'⁴⁸ However, Light goes on to add that Memento Park's ability to 'remember' communism is set within 'tightly defined parameters', and exists, predominantly, as an attempt to rebuild its links with Central and Western Europe.⁴⁹

I would maintain that there still exists a confusion both in the presentation and interpretation of such a park. Its small ticket-booth-cum-gift-shop sells mementos including a 'Best of Communism CD'

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Light, 'Gazing on Communism', p.167

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.35.

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Williams, *Memorial Museums*, p. 115.

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.36

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Light, 'Gazing on Communism', p.167

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ibid. p.168.

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ibid.

(Fig. 5) which uses a design that manipulates traits of Communist visual propaganda through the colour and style of the font and the composition. Evidently intended as a satirical token of the museum, such a CD, however, suggests that the Park offers a consumption of communism. Moreover, Clements claims that by re-inscribing such artefacts with ‘cool irony’ it helps to ‘*obfuscate historical and public dialogue.*’⁵⁰ Such irony, which could be seen to reflect a postmodern ‘openness’ of interpretation, in retrospect may be recognised ‘*as an inscription of market values and ideologies in line with the commodification of post-industrial Budapest.*’⁵¹ In addition, the CD went on to have unexpected retail success, reaching number one in Hungary’s music charts,⁵² clearly indicating an ambivalence, even nostalgia, regarding this period among Hungarians, despite the Park’s resolute attempt to consign the era to the past.



Fig. 5: Best of Communism CD sold at Memento Park gift shop

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Clements, P., ‘The consumption of communism: changing representations of Statue Park Museum and Budapest’, in: *Art and the Public Sphere*, Vol. 2, Issue 1–3, December 2012, p.80.

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ibid. p.83.

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Light, ‘Gazing on Communism’, p.169

James states that the Park itself '*affirms the values of a market economy*'⁵³ by its own economic set-up: it is state-owned but franchised to operate on a self-sustaining basis through entry fees and the sale of souvenirs. However the privatisation of the Park should be questioned; Clements states that its inaccessibility and entrance fee '*questions the extent to which the museum is an everyday urban space for civil discourse.*'⁵⁴ Once again, the Park is transparent in its desire to target Western consumption: by affirming the values of the market economy Memento Park '*symbolically underscores the legitimacy of the nation's efforts to join these [NATO, EU] and other Western institutions and to adopt Western practices and values through its repudiation of their former Eastern counterparts.*'⁵⁵ Furthermore, I would contend that the Park's privatisation enables it to fully undermine the ideology of the socialist icons it displays and therefore is, arguably, necessary. However, ultimately, by adopting such a market philosophy the Park sells off remnants of discredited communism without any real scrutiny and debate about its past.

In attempting to adopt Western practices, the Memento Park can also be found guilty of indulging another Western construct: that of the 'other'. In the Park's defence, such a distinction was necessary in 1993 in order to establish the borders that separate post-communist Hungary from the forty-year experience of communism. Its construction of the 'other' is orientated around the two polarities: 'who we are now' in opposition to 'who we were'. However, concurrently, Memento Park has helped protract Western discourse of the Eastern European 'other'. Writing seventeen years after his initial theories on the Eastern 'other', Said discerned that patterns of dominance between Eastern Europe and the West have prevailed since the fall of the Iron Curtain.⁵⁶ Critics such as Groys and Applebaum have even ventured that the term 'totalitarianism' has become a term which means nothing more than '*the theoretical antithesis of Western society*'.⁵⁷ Urry identifies constructs of the 'other' in the tourist 'gaze', which is often diagnosed

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism* p.33

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Clements, 'The consumption of communism', p.78.

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.33

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Said, E., *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (New York, NY: Penguin, 1995) p.348

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by notions of inversion: the middle-class tourist will seek to be a 'peasant for the day', while the lower middle-class tourist will seek to be 'king/queen for the day'.⁵⁸ On this note, the Western tourist visiting Memento Park will surely seek to be a 'communist comrade' for the day. As a result, despite its attempts to draw a line between communist and post-communist Hungary, Memento Park has also propagated Occidental perceptions of 'otherness'.

The paradox continues, as Hungary continues to push privatised constructs of communist heritage and as the political life is increasingly dominated by the discourse of greater integration with Western Europe, communist heritage tourism has the converse effect of emphasising how Hungary's recent history has been different from that of Western Europe.⁵⁹ Furthermore, as Hungarian locals would prefer to move beyond the event and focus on repairing their standard of living, they are faced with the second paradox: that their economic revitalisation in many cases depends on such tourism.⁶⁰

A Comparison with Similar Parks in Lithuania and Bulgaria

The format of Memento Park is not entirely unique; it sits within a small scattering of similar parks in Eastern Europe and Russia. Its most notable contemporaries are Grūtas Park⁶¹ in Lithuania and The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia, Bulgaria. Unsurprisingly, Russia's relationship with Socialism and public statuary is different to that of countries from the former Eastern Bloc, and therefore Moscow's park merits its own separate comparison. At first glance, Grūtas Park, The Museum of Socialist Art and Memento Park are one and the same. All three have collected the most notorious statues of the Socialist

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Applebaum, A., *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956*, (London: Allen Lane, 2012) p.xxv

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Urry, J., *The Tourist Gaze*, (London: Sage, 2001) p.11

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Williams, *Memorial Museums*, p.115

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ibid. pp. 141-2

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Lithuanian: 'Grūto parkas'

era and exhibited them in an open-air museum for the purposes of education and national heritage. Upon a closer look, it is evident that Memento Park attempts a critical processing of dictatorship, whilst its competition, in the shape of an ironic Lithuanian theme park and a Bulgarian museum of art history, offer very different commentaries.



Fig. 6: Lithuania's Grūtas Park

Lithuania's exercise in Communist memory, flippantly referred to by some as 'Stalin's World', accompanies the bronze figures of Lenin and Marx with a playground, a zoo featuring llamas and bears, and cabins exhibiting mementos of the era including rugs with Lenin's face on and communist toys.⁶² Grūtas Park was born out of a similar situation in 1989 to that of Memento Park; statues facing destruction were rescued, this time privately by entrepreneur Viliumas Malinauskas, to serve as a reminder of Lithuanian history. However, instead of Memento Park's dialogue on democracy, Grūtas Park has provoked criticism for creating a shrine to communism with its effervescent nostalgia, which creates a lax atmosphere more akin to a theme park than museum (Fig.6). The many victims of Communism and their descendants have found Grūtas Park to create tensions between the intended serious messages of such concepts and the irony and laughter that are often the only outcomes. This use of mockery has also been criticised by Williams as an '*effective distancing mechanism*' from the realities of traumatic heritage.⁶³ Despite Memento

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Hancox, D., 'Lithuania's Soviet nostalgia: back in the USSR', in: *The Guardian*, 1st May 2011, Accessed at: www.theguardian.com/travel/2011/may/01/lithuania-soviet-nostalgia-theme-parks, Accessed on: 6th January 2015

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Park having a different philosophy from its Lithuanian counterpart, it too cannot entirely avoid such a sardonic tone in its sale of CDs, posters (Fig. 7) and 'Communism: It's a Party!' mugs.

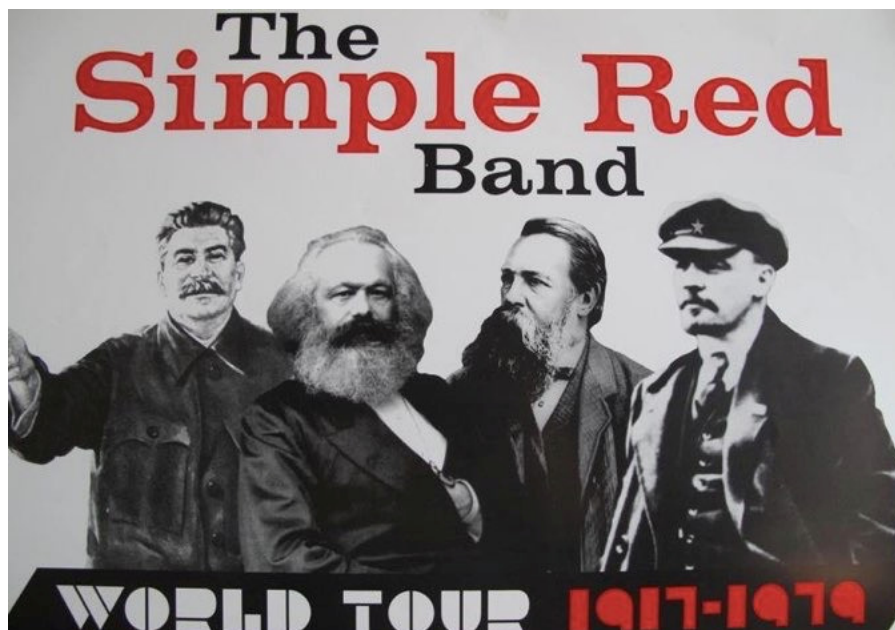


Fig. 7: Humorous 'Simple Red' Poster on sale at the Memento Park shop

Bulgaria has had a delayed response to works of socialist statuary, with the doors of the Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia only opening four years ago. However, you could argue that such a delay has given the museum, and the Bulgarian people, a chance to reflect on how it should, collectively, identify with the remnants of this era. The adjournment between 1989 and 2011 has served the 77 sculptures, 60 paintings and 25 smaller plastic art works well;⁶⁴ for, unlike the Memento Park this collection is regarded by both museum and state to retain artistic worth. As Culture Minister Vezhdi Rashidov stated: '*These are also masterful works, made by some of the finest Bulgarian artists of the time*'.⁶⁵ However, let it be noted that the Museum has not avoided all controversy; following opposition to the concept, it was decided that the Museum was to be located outside the historical centre of Sofia, in a place '*not encum-*

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Williams, *Memorial Museums*, p.91

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'Bulgaria opens its first Museum of Socialist Art', in: *The Independent*, 19th September 2011, Accessed at: www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/bulgaria-opens-its-first-museum-of-socialist-art-2357566.html, Accessed on: 6th January 2015

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ibid.

bered by another historical meaning, which will allow the impartial reception of the exhibition.’⁶⁶ So despite the benefit of hindsight, it is interesting that the Museum’s organisers were obliged to move the Museum away from a potentially contentious topographical dialogue with the centre of the city, just as Memento Park did twenty years earlier. This relocation risks the loss of a discourse through which the residents of Sofia experience their city; indeed, one would argue that Budapesters experienced such a loss when their monuments were removed in 1990–91.



Fig. 8: The Statue Garden of the Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia

Baichev distinguishes three stages in the memory of the socialist period: the first was total rejection, black and white evaluations and the destruction of monuments in the 1990s. This was followed by a phase of irony, caricature and satire, which culminated in the final phase of relaxed understanding and a casting off of propensity for judgement.⁶⁷ A comparison of Memento Park and the Museum of Socialist Art leads to an understanding that whilst both display the same subject, the museums invoke a different memory of the past. Interpreting Baichev’s stages of memory, I would suggest that Memento Park is a remnant of the first and second stages of memory of the socialist period: it offers a stark, polarised view of socialism and democracy with an addition of postmodern irony. The Museum of Socialist Art, however, is a product of the final stage by attempting to break away from prevailing East European views on socialist

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Guentcheva, R., ‘Past contested: The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia’, in: *EuNaMus*, Report No. 8, (Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012) p.124

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Baichev, R., in: Guentcheva, ‘Past contested: The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia’, p.129.

memory. This is manifested in its purely aesthetic vision and display of objects as *'pure art, of the highest quality that painters during the socialist period were able to produce.'*⁶⁸ If, as a visitor to the Museum, you doubted such statues' status as art objects, the curators have attempted to persuade you by placing works on plinths at eye-level (Fig.8), and accompanying them with as little text as possible, reminiscent of any white-cube gallery. Such art objects are a far cry from the *'artefacts of a past epoch'*⁶⁹ that can be seen in Memento Park and Grūtas Park.

Chapter 3 – The Artistic Value of Public Art

Socialist Realism

Whilst the Museum of Socialist Art's aesthetic vision has received criticism from right-wing Bulgarian parties for a *'lack of critical reflection on communism'*,⁷⁰ tangentially I believe it is worth reviewing Memento Park's decision to denigrate the art-object status of the works that it displays. By doing so we will also enter the debate on the artistic value of totalitarian works of art in the public domain, specifically works of Socialist Realism that proliferated around Central and Eastern Europe and Russia in the twentieth century. It is important, whilst considering works belonging to the Socialist Realism movement, to reconcile Soviet and Western attitudes to this period of art history, in order that works like the forty-two constrained to the Memento Park are not passed off lightly as *'stylistically monotonous and aesthetically inferior'*.⁷¹ However, we can suppose that due to their current locality, the artistic value of such works was considered secondary in comparison to their political and social weight. Along with distinctive aesthetic traits of essential descriptiveness, a degree of simplification of the figure, an idealisation of face and figure, and heroic qualities,⁷² Socialist Realism in sculpture is noted for *'its political tendentiousness and*

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Guentcheva, 'Past contested: The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia', p.127

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ibid. p.131.

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Guentcheva, 'Past contested: The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia', p.128.

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Cullerne Bown, M. Taylor, B., eds. *Art of the Soviets, painting sculpture and architecture in a one party state*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) p.2.

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its subservience to the state'.⁷³ Therefore, even as we focus on the 'state' that is implicit in a lot of these pieces, it is also significant that we do not consider these works to belong to the same canon as Russian Soviet art. The majority of the forty-two works, although Socialist in content, are by Hungarian artists and sculptors⁷⁴ and therefore their relationship with their country today is still up for dispute.

The Stalinist attitude towards art generated a categorical identification of 'good' with 'here' and 'bad' with 'there'.⁷⁵ Mátyás Rákosi's Communist Party was not keen to allow Hungary to fall into Stalin's determining of 'there'. With this in mind, the 'Russianisation' of Hungarian culture began at the hands of the Minister of Culture from 1949–1953, Jozsef Revai.⁷⁶ The rudimentary approach of Socialist Realism was absorbed into Hungarian visual arts and culture through a systematic dissemination of Soviet ideals in a few, transparent steps. From the late 1940s and throughout the early fifties, there was a constant flow of Soviet artists and cultural functionaries into Hungary.⁷⁷ Their mission was simple: they instructed Hungarian writers and artists in the fundamentals of Socialist Realism through exhibits, performances, lectures and workshops. The very best Hungarian artists, in Soviet eyes, were in return invited to visit the Soviet Union to witness the fruitful outcomes of Socialist Realism in Russian museums, art galleries, schools and architecture. Sándor Mikus, sculptor of the 1951 Stalin Statue, was one of the 'cultural tourists' to Russia, and out of the Stalin Statue competition applicants, was the only one who had visited Russia.⁷⁸

73 Lodder, C., 'Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda', in: Cullerne Bown, Taylor, eds. *Art of the Soviets*, p.17

74 Cullerne Bown, Taylor, eds. *Art of the Soviets*, p.10.

75 Szkuklik, D., In conversation with the author, 9th November 2014

76 Bowl, J. E., 'Some Thoughts on the Condition of Soviet Art History', in: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol.71, No. 4, 1989, p.546.

77 James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.42

78 James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.49

An insight into the many sculptural competitions that the Communists held in Hungary, is an indicator of the heavy aesthetic and ideological pressure that Hungary's creative population was put under. Póto's study⁷⁹ reveals photos of the macquettes entered into the Stalin statue competition. Several of them incorporate other figures into the sculptural set up; including one by András Beck where the figure of Stalin shares his pedestal with that of a boy, looking up at Stalin, one arm held out towards him in a gesture of hope. In this submission, the Party felt that it had been an error to place the boy on the same level as Stalin, hence undermining the ideological gravitas required for the statue. Sándor Mikus' winning submission, consisted of a twenty-six foot tall figure of Stalin, who stood on a thirteen-foot pedestal, which was then supported by the twenty-foot tribune (Fig. 5). Mikus was shrewd enough to include Socialist figures, however the sixty-two figures which depict the story of the Soviet army liberating Hungary were carved in high relief into the base of the monument, so as not to distract attention away from the main figure.⁸⁰



ibid.

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Póto, J, *Emlékművek, politika, közgondolkodás : Budapest köztéri emlékművei, 1945-1949 : Így épült a Sztálin-szobor, 1949-1953*, (Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézet, 1989).

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.51

Mikus' indulgence to the Party's ideological whims has exposed the Stalin Statue to attack from contemporary critics. James noted: *'Despite Mikus's gifted touch, the Stalin monument could only be considered remarkable from the twisted aesthetics of socialist realism.'*⁸¹ Whilst Aman calls it *'a figure with no artistic authority'*.⁸² The guidebook to the Park portrays a caustic retrospective image of the communist 'artist': *'Those given the assignments were often charlatans, without real artistic ability. Many times 'artists' volunteered, but in reality the only thing they had going for them was their political sympathies or their commitment to the Communist Party and its leadership.'*⁸³ That being said, Mikus saw success and prominence earlier on in his career, exhibiting at the Venice Biennale in 1930, and winning a gold prize at the Paris World Exhibit in 1937,⁸⁴ which undermines the retrospective views of the artistic 'charlatan'. Instead, I believe Mikus to have been very aware of his fragile status as a sculptor in Communist Hungary. Whilst the majority of his pre-communism works were of the female figure, from the late 1940s he evidently entertained the aesthetic whims of the Communist Party and created works of Socialist Realism in order to maintain his prominence in Hungary's art history.

The Stalinist centrifugal criticism of art meant that it was, according to Bowl: *'incapable of genuine artistic interaction, so that entire movements were discounted (such as Cubism, Surrealism, and abstract art).'*⁸⁵ Considering this makes the Cubist sculpture of Marx and Engels (1971), by Gyorgy Segsdi, which greets visitors on their arrival at the Memento Park (Fig.11), unique in the portfolio of So-

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.50.

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Aman, A., *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era. An Aspect of Cold War History*, (New York: MIT Press, 1992) p.194.

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Réthly, *In the Shadow of Stalin's Boots: visitors' guide to Memento Park*, p.44.

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.44

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Bowl, J. E., 'Some Thoughts on the Condition of Soviet Art History', in: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol.71, No. 4, 1989, p.546.

cialist Realism. When asked if she believes whether the distinctive style gives the work greater artistic value in relation to the other pieces, Szkuklik negated this opinion.⁸⁶ Indeed, despite the work's significant style, its place in the Park demonstrates that artistic worth was of little consideration for the Hungarian State Authorities in 1990 when they selected what works to withdraw from public prominence. Whether Cubist or Surrealist in approach, the piece still tailored to political dictates, and the message of communism that it carried would have been more potent for the people of Budapest, who walked past the statue as it stood outside the Communist Party headquarters,⁸⁷ than any aesthetic style it portrayed. In truth, when considering such works, it is essential that due consideration is not only given to art and culture but also historical memory, as Young rightfully observes: *'these monuments demand an alternative critique that goes beyond questions of high and low art, tasteful and vulgarity.'*⁸⁸ Indeed, the architect of the Park, Ákos Eleőd states: *'This park is not about the statues or the sculptors, but a critique of the ideology that used these statues as symbols of authority.'*⁸⁹ Any view of the statues on display as 'art' is contrary to the Park's design and construct; instead greater importance is given to what Huyssen calls an object's 'memory value'⁹⁰; its ability to yield experience and the sense of the authentic is what has earned it a place in the museum.

At the All-Union Conference on Art History, sponsored by the Union of Artists of the USSR in Moscow, November 1987, the two camps of Soviet art educators clashed in their appraisals of Socialist Realism as a creative method.⁹¹ It is clear that by 1989 even the USSR was joining the USA and the rest

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Szkuklik, D., In conversation with the author, 9th November 2014.

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Réthly, *In the Shadow of Stalin's Boots: visitors' guide to Memento Park*, p.17

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Young, J. E., *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)

p. 10.

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Eleőd, *The Designer's Commendation*

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Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, p.33

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of the West in beginning to devalue Socialist Realism as an artistic movement. The decision-making criteria of which works of public statuary to destroy, preserve or rehabilitate in Hungary in 1990 have never been published.⁹² However, we can suppose that the popular depreciative attitude towards Socialist Realism at the time ensured that the artistic worth of such works was of little consideration to Hungary. Walters notes that, throughout the twentieth century, the peoples of Eastern Europe have considered themselves to be part of the culture of Western Europe.⁹³ In 1990, it was a general consensus that the Socialist monumental works represented a country and artistic movement that had little place or value in Hungary's 'western' future.



Fig. 11: Installation image of 'Marx and Engels' (1971), by Gyorgy Segesdi in the Memento Park, November 2014

That being said, Dent believes that particular similarities can be found between Budapest's post-1945 statuary and some monuments which appeared before and during the Second World War, despite the eras having strikingly different political atmospheres.⁹⁴ As mentioned earlier, the Park evidently wanted

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Bowlit, 'Some Thoughts on the Condition of Soviet Art History', p.547.

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Szkuklik, D., In conversation with the author, 9th November 2014.

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Garrison Walters, *The Other Europe: Eastern Europe to 1985*, p.361

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Dent, B., *Every Statue Tells a Story: Public Monuments in Budapest*, (Budapest: Europa, 2009) p.292.

to create the distinction between ‘who we are now’ and ‘who we were’. However, statues exist around Budapest that prove Dent’s theory: in the Kobanya district two statues, both from 1941, stand near each other, ‘Worker’ depicts a broad-shouldered proletarian resting his hands on the handle of a pick-axe, (Fig.13) whilst ‘Family’ portrays a proletarian family of two smiling parents and children (Fig.12). As Dent says: *‘Both statues bear the typical, idealised characteristics of 1950s Socialist Realism.’*⁹⁵ Such works demonstrate that the aesthetic attributes of Socialist Realism formed part of Hungarian public statuary before the Iron Curtain was even formed, and therefore, despite the ideology they display, these works should be seen in a greater context of Hungarian public art and sculpture.

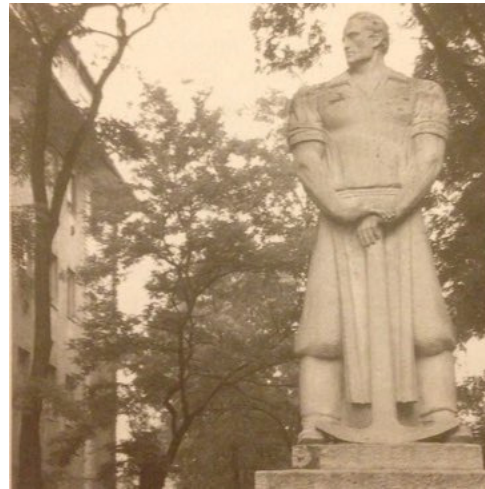


Fig. 12: Györi Dezso ‘Family’, 1941, stone, Pangarat út 11 Fig. 13: Ferenc Csúcs., ‘Worker’, 1941, stone, Pongrácz út 9.

According to Szkuklik, there were over three hundred Soviet monumental works around Hungary when the Iron Curtain collapsed in 1989; of that number only forty two made it to the secure confines of the Memento Park.⁹⁶ The remaining have either been taken up by local museums, or have been destroyed, with a select few altered and left standing. Therefore, the statues selected for the Park, in many cases, are the largest, the most controversial or the most culturally or socially significant. With this in mind, I would argue that a number of them have artistic worth. My main example would be the ‘Béla Kun Memorial’, 1986, and the work and reputation of its sculptor, Imre Varga. The sculpture, cast in bronze, chrome and red copper, is dedicated to Béla Kun, the leader of the short-lived 1919 Hungarian Soviet

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ibid.

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Szkuklik, D., In conversation with the author, 9th November 2014.

Republic.⁹⁷ The governing Communist Party decided to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth by commissioning Varga's monumental sculpture. In the sculpture, Kun stands above the crowd, as a leader, gesturing forward; below him a crowd forms in the shape of a boat, their feet not even touching the ground, carrying Kun forward (Figs. 14 and 15). The figures represent the historical process that took place from 1918–1919: the civilians driving the revolution on the left lead to the demonstrating workers in the middle and then the Red Army soldiers on the right, driving the attack.⁹⁸



Figs. 14 and 15: Installation images of 'Béla Kun Memorial' by Imre Varga, 1986, in the Memento Park, November 2014

The 'Béla Kun Memorial' stands unique in the Memento Park; the use of chrome and copper, as opposed to the usual bronze, gives an air of fragility to the masse of soldiers. Whilst being very dynamic, the floating aggregation of figures creates feelings of insecurity and imbalance, very different from the typical, solitary Soviet soldier stood with two feet firm on the ground. Perhaps what is most striking about the memorial, is the artist himself; Imre Varga (1923–) is one of Hungary's greatest living artists, who has garnered an international reputation along with considerable commercial success. Having worked in public sculpture for the second-half of the twentieth century and beyond, it is perhaps inevitable that his work should have been picked up by the governing regimes. However, his portfolio is characterised by the use of non-classic materials and unusual methods in the creation of his pieces;⁹⁹ his work from the 1960s on–

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Réthly, *In the Shadow of Stalin's Boots: visitors' guide to Memento Park*, p.36

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ibid.

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wards is marked by de-heroicising his subjects, and reducing them to the level of humanity and mortality. Importantly, Varga's work can still be found in public spaces around Budapest and Hungary. The most notable is his Holocaust Memorial, outside the Dohany utca Synagogue in Central Pest (Fig.16). Erected in 1991, it takes the form of a weeping willow in the shape of an inverted Jewish menorah. The metal leaves bear the names of families massacred by the Nazis.¹⁰⁰ By creating a memorial to the Holocaust, Varga had broken one of the taboos of the Communist culture that monopolised and institutionalised its memory.¹⁰¹ Of the several memorials of the Holocaust in Budapest, only two had been erected during the socialist regime, chiefly due to the rising issues of anti-semitism in the USSR.¹⁰² Varga's Holocaust Memorial shows the artist's desire to make an explicit step away from communist ideology in his work. Through such works, Varga attempted to participate in discourses on humanity and its fragilities and abuses during the socialist regime in Hungary. In addition, a collection of Varga's works is housed at the prominent Budapest Gallery, and his works are sold commercially in Budapest's Koller Gallery. Works such as 'Woman Waiting With Lamppost', 1986, are currently being offered by the gallery for 83,000 Euros¹⁰³ which is an indication of Varga's ongoing artistic value and prominence.

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Réthy, *In the Shadow of Stalin's Boots: visitors' guide to Memento Park*, p.36

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Dent, *Every Statue Tells a Story*, p.275

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Piotrowski, P., *In the Shadow of Yalta: art and the avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, (London: Reaktion, 2009) p.408.

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Dent, *Every Statue Tells a Story*, p.272

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'Koller Gallery: Our Gallery', in: *Koller Gallery*, 2015, Accessed at: www.kollergaleria.hu/our_gallery-3.php, Accessed on: 12th November 2014



Fig. 16: Imre Varga's Holocaust Memorial, Dohany utca, Budapest

The Conservation Question – a Comparison with Muzeon

Another striking sign of a statue's worth is the treatment it receives from its own institution. I believe it is significant to note that Memento Park, apart from a cleaning of all the works in 1994, has never entered into any conservation practice of the statues.¹⁰⁴ When asked if the Park would restore such works, Szkuklik responded that the works are the property of the National Gallery who would therefore need to invest the money into the conservation and restoration of such pieces, not the Memento Park. István Kiss' 'Workers' Movement Memorial' (1976) (Fig. 10) is a striking example of conservation demands. The sculpture consists of a pair of hands encircling a globe,¹⁰⁵ representing the perfect ideology, which is protected and fought for by the workers' movement: the hands. The hands are constructed of steel plates have clearly eroded all around the base, revealing to visitors that the core of the structure is made of sponge (Fig.18).

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Szkuklik, D., In conversation with the author, 9th November 2014.

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Note: The original globe was made of plastic, however it was defaced during the 1956 revolution so was replaced by one made of granite, which is the one we see today.

Source: Réthly, *In the Shadow of Stalin's Boots: visitors' guide to Memento Park*, p.45.

Many of the earlier pieces and ones such as ‘Workers’ Movement Memorial’ were made cheaply, in a relatively quick timeframe, and were hollow.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, following years of exposure to the elements, if these works do not receive the funding for conservation, many will begin to corrode and decay. Arguably, this is evidence of a wider case of disinterest in the collective consciousness of Hungary in the value of such pieces of national heritage, or perhaps a negation even of their status as art. On the other hand, some critics condone any intervention with such works, thereby allowing them to become a counter-monument. Impermanence is a key property of many counter-monuments, as they ‘*counter the aspiration to permanence of conventional monuments and their subjects*’.¹⁰⁷ Forty even goes so far as to imply that permanence and conservation are characteristic of Western monumentality, and that monuments should have an ‘age value’, an ability to be reduced to dust.¹⁰⁸



Figs. 17 and 18: Installation images of István Kiss’ ‘Workers’ Movement Memorial’ 1976 in the Memento Park, November 2014

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Szkuklik, D., In conversation with the author, 9th November 2014.

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Stevens, Q., Franck, K. A., Fazakerley, R., ‘Counter-Monuments: the anti-monumental and the dialogic’, in: *The Journal of Architecture*, Vol. 17, Iss. 6, 2012, p.959

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Forty, A., ‘Introduction’, in: Forty, A., Kuchler, S., eds. *The Art of Forgetting*, (Oxford: Berg, 1999) p.4.

When comparing the Memento Park to its Russian counterpart, Muzeon¹⁰⁹ it is evident that the two parks perceive their works on display differently, due to Muzeon's attempts to not only conserve but also contextualise such works into contemporary Russian identity. Set on the banks of the Moskva river in Moscow, Muzeon is a social and cultural institution that incorporates an outdoor Fallen Monument Park along with a venue for live music and performance, a lecture and discussion theatre and even, a free book exchange library; thereby bringing historical commemoration into a regularly-used outdoor social space.¹¹⁰ Unlike Memento Park, Muzeon seems geared chiefly at engaging Russian citizens in their recent national art history and heritage in a contemporary art setting. Its online presence is entirely in Russian, and offers no translation of the website into English or other popular languages.¹¹¹ However, it is the curatorial decision to reconcile the Soviet monumental sculpture from the thirties and fifties alongside contemporary Russian works, and avant-garde pieces by local sculptors (who for 'ideological reasons' could not be exhibited during the Soviet era¹¹²), that affirms the status of Socialist Realism as a vital aesthetic, ideological and chronological step in Russian twentieth-century cultural heritage.

Furthermore, Muzeon has been actively involved in the conservation of such pieces, with the controversial 'Iron Felix' being a primary example. 'Iron Felix' is a monument of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder and director of the infamous Soviet secret police forces from 1917–1926. Built in 1958 by Yevgeny Vuchetich, the statue dominated Lubyanka Square in Moscow and was a landmark of the city during the Soviet era. Erected to intimidate all opponents of the political regime, the statue came to be a symbol of political repression and so, it was famously toppled by crowds in the square immediately after the failed coup in August 1991.¹¹³ Since its fall, the statue was moved to Muzeon¹¹⁴ where it has come to represent the collapse of the political system that existed for over seventy years.

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Note: formerly known as 'Park of the Fallen Heroes' and 'Fallen Monument Park'

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Williams, *Memorial Museums*, p.78

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Muzeon, 2015, Accessed at: www.muzeon.ru/, Accessed on: 22nd January 2015

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'Museum', in: *Muzeon*, 2015, Accessed at: www.muzeon.ru/pages/museum, Accessed at: 12th November 2014

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The years of exposure have corroded and partially destroyed the fastening system of 'Iron Felix', so, for the first time since its celebrated dismantling in 1991, the monument was taken down in May 2014 by the Park in order to fasten the seams, strengthen the internal parts, and perform anti-corrosion surface treatment. Figure 19 shows the care given to moving the fifteen-ton monument during conservation. Interestingly, this conservation follows several years of controversial petitions for the statue to be returned to its original place in Lubyanka Square. Between the years 1999–2013, a proposal suggesting returning the statue to its plinth was put forth six times, and according to a December 2013 VTsIOM¹¹⁵ poll, forty-five percent of Russians favour the restoration of the statue to its original place. I would suggest that there might be a correlation between popular attention and controversy surrounding Muzeon's statues and the means provided for conservation (Moscow authorities officially designated 'Iron Felix' as an object of cultural heritage in 2012¹¹⁶). With all this in mind, as the pieces in Memento Park have little place in contemporary debates on Hungarian identity and politics, it is of no surprise that the Hungarian authorities have provided no extra funding to maintain their monuments.

Note: Although, the then-Mayor of Moscow, Luzhkov argued in his autobiography that the municipal authorities eventually toppled 'Iron Felix' and nearby ones of Kalinin and Sverdlov with three cranes

Source: Forest, B., Johnson, J., 'Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Russia', in: *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, August 2001, p.536.

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Note: then Park of the Arts

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Note: The Russian Public Opinion Research Center

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'Russia plans to restore toppled Iron Felix statue', in: *Expatica*, 16th April 2012, Accessed at: www.expatica.com/ru/news/country-news/Russia-plans-to-restore-toppled-Iron-Felix-statue_332689.html, Accessed on: 6th January 2015



Fig.19: The Statue 'Iron Felix' being dismantled in May 2014 for conservation works

The conservation of 'Iron Felix' could also be due to the artistic value Muzeon grants to all its Soviet-era statues. Most Soviet-era statues in Muzeon have plaques identifying the subject, artist, material and location where the piece was once displayed. After this description, the plaques end with a depoliticising disclaimer: *'It has historical and artistic value. The monument is in the memorialising style of political-ideological designs of the Soviet period. Protected by the state.'*¹¹⁷ (There is no such a disclaimer for the works exhibited in the Memento Park). That being said, 'Iron Felix' stood in the grounds of Muzeon for over twenty years scored with anti-Soviet graffiti¹¹⁸ (Fig.20). During its conservation, tests were taken of the graffiti to identify the original text from 1991 and preserve it.¹¹⁹ According to Muzeon, they have left the graffiti scrawled on the statue *'because it is just as historic as the sculpture itself.'*¹²⁰ This deliberate preservation of the graffiti suggests that Muzeon are viewing 'Iron Felix' as a historical artefact that lends itself to the narration of a political and societal epoch. If 'Iron Felix' were simply an art

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Forest, Johnson, 'Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Russia', p.537

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Anon, 'Russia plans to restore toppled Iron Felix statue'

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'The Restoration of the Monument Felix Dzerzhinsky', in: *Muzeon*, 2015, Accessed at: www.muzeon.ru/articles/156-restavratsiya-pamyatnika-fe-dzerzhinskomu, Accessed at: 12th November 2014

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Anon, 'Russia plans to restore toppled Iron Felix statue'

object, worthy of a plinth in a gallery, then the graffiti from 1991 would have been removed, let alone given as much conservational attention as the statue itself.



Fig. 20: People trying to topple 'Iron Felix' covered in graffiti on 22nd August 1991

In Muzeon's case, the act of conservation has ambiguous origins: although it might be an act in defence of the monuments' artistic value, observers have noted it could also be a preparatory step towards Russia moving statues like 'Iron Felix' from their current positions.¹²¹ Forest and Johnson have identified that the 'Park of Arts'¹²² illustrates the shifts of 'the political winds'¹²³ towards more or less pro-Soviet views of Russian history. After the Soviet statues were torn down in 1991 they were *'moved from public spaces representing national history, to a literal trash heap, to a tourist attraction, and finally*

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Anon, 'Russia plans to restore toppled Iron Felix statue'

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Note: now known as 'Muzeon'

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Forest, Johnson, 'Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Russia', p.536

to a historical and artistic display.’¹²⁴ Not only does this stress how difficult it is to define Parks such as Muzeon, Memento Park and their contemporaries, it also highlights the uncertainty with which Russians view such monumental works of Soviet propaganda. This is an ambiguity which is not such an issue in Hungary and the rest of Eastern Europe. Although 1989 was a seismic shift for Central and Eastern Europe, historians have argued that 1991 presented Russia with the immense ideological challenge of forging a national identity distinct from the Soviet Union, and thus redefining itself as a nation rather than as the centre of a territorial or ideological empire.¹²⁵ By emphasising the alleged artistic value of the monuments, Muzeon is attempting to politically decontextualise them. Forest and Johnson note that, by trying to achieve this, Muzeon lacks the irony that is reflected in the Hungarian treatment of Soviet-era monuments.¹²⁶ They note that the Memento Park does not pretend that its statuary is anything but political: *‘Rather, the park simultaneously emphasises the statues’ political character and robs them of their emotive power by clearly situating them (and their associated messages) in an anachronistic past.’*¹²⁷ Muzeon and Memento Park are products of their respective pasts: Muzeon presents the narrative of its own national and artistic identity, whilst Memento Park is occupied by anti-Imperialist rhetoric.

124

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ibid.

125

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ibid. p.524.

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Forest, Johnson, ‘Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Russia’, p.540

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ibid.

Chapter 4 – Hot and Cold Memory: A Comparison with the House of Terror

The historian Charles Maier, in attempting to contrast the memories of Fascism in Germany and Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe, uses the metaphor of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ memory to argue that *‘the memory of Nazi crimes has not faded but that of Communist crimes has.’*¹²⁸ Maier emphasises that his controversial theory is not an argument about which experience was more atrocious, but which one has remained engraved more indelibly in historical and personal memory.¹²⁹ This theory is also centralised on the aforementioned Western collective memory and can be applied to the rising trend of memorial museums, particularly those relating to the Holocaust, that have emerged in the second-half of the twentieth century. According to Maier, the traumatic collective memory of the Holocaust in the West is still hot, still a living, ‘radiating’ memory, which still keeps the past open.¹³⁰ Subsequently, we can conclude that the past remembered in a cold way is closed, not kept open and not worked through.

There are several purported reasons behind why memory of the Nazi regime remains hot, whilst Communism in Eastern Europe is cold. The key reason, however, is associated with the differing ‘com-

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Maier, C. S., ‘Hot Memory... Cold Memory: On the Political Half-Life of Fascist and Communist Memory’, in: *Tr@nsit online*, No. 22, 2002.

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ibid.

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Turai, H., ‘Past Unmastered: Hot and Cold Memory’, in: *Third Text*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2009, p.99

munities of memory'¹³¹ targeted by the Nazis and by Communism. Whilst the West, specifically the United States, can imagine itself as bystander in the Holocaust due to its involvement in the Second World War, it is still difficult for the Western community to imagine being targeted by Stalin's stochastic terror, principally as his regime was not ended by war or intervention. As a consequence, this results in less painful soul-searching for the West.¹³² Despite this dominant Western view, the communities of Eastern Europe have continually attempted to reignite a 'hot' response to their Communist regimes: in Hungary 200,000 signatures were collected, calling for a referendum on removing a Soviet war memorial in the heart of Budapest¹³³, Romania issued a 650-page report detailing and condemning communist atrocities,¹³⁴ and in 2005 members of the European Parliament from the former satellite states demanded that communist symbols be banned along with the swastika; the initiative was rejected and the Soviet war memorial in Budapest still stands.¹³⁵

Turai adopts and expands on this metaphor to compare and contrast the Memento Park with its key competitor in Budapest, the House of Terror,¹³⁶ a museum of the fascist and communist regimes in twentieth-century Hungary and a memorial to those detained, interrogated or killed in the building. The museum is housed in the building which was the headquarters of the fascist Arrow Cross police and after 1945 belonged to the communist AVH, the secret police. Concurring with Žižek that we do not, yet,

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Maier, 'Hot Memory... Cold Memory: On the Political Half-Life of Fascist and Communist Memory'

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ibid.

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Eorsi, M., 'Attitude to Memorials Exposed to Different Historical Interpretations in Council of Europe Member States', in: *Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe*, 14th October 2008, Accessed at: <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewHTML.asp?FileID=12151&Language=EN>, Accessed on: 16th December 2014

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ibid.

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ibid.

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Note: Hungarian: Terrorhaza

have an 'etiquette' for talking about and remembering communism,¹³⁷ Turai compares both museums in an attempt to demonstrate Hungary's need to find a universal language in which to remember communism.



Fig. 21: The House of Terror outside design

Turai notes that in the case of the Memento Park, it deliberately creates a distance from the current political environment and any party political issues.¹³⁸ However, it is worth remembering Forest and Johnson's aforementioned view that Memento Park retains the political dimension of the monuments. To an extent I agree with both Forest and Johnson *and* Turai; the Park emphasises the works' historico-political character, however, it does not acknowledge their significance in contemporary politics. According to Turai, this attempt to de-politicise the works, creates a cold memory of Communism; the statues and their earlier efforts to control peoples' thoughts are now ridiculous and the visitors are unsure of how to react. I agree that this attempt at postmodern irony ensures that the Park serves as '*a gatekeeper repelling all direct political issues from the park*'.¹³⁹

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Žižek, S., 'Two Types of Totalitarianism', in: *London Review of Books*, 27:6, 17 March 2005

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Turai, 'Past Unmastered: Hot and Cold Memory', p.101

139

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ibid. p.106

In contrast, the state-funded House of Terror attempts to keep the outrage and hate that was present in 1956 and 1989 a 'hot' memory, representing a very different will to remember than the one embodied by the Memento Park. Due to curatorial effects such as warped images of Lenin, Rákosi and Stalin, emotive sound effects of dripping in the old torture chambers, and the analogous design of the building's facade (Fig.21), the purpose of House of Terror *'is totalising, if not totalitarian. No one forces you in, or keeps you from leaving, but inside it is a closed ideological box, without room for doubt, irony or dissent.'*¹⁴⁰ In its own promotion material it describes itself as being *'no longer simply a building. 60 Andrassy Boulevard has become a sculpture in the shape of a building,'*¹⁴¹ With such a statement House of Terror is self-identified as a work of art and implies that the 'sculpture' retains the aura and authenticity that an artwork does. Such a statement emphasises the social significance of the museum, aided by the social significance of the art form. Furthermore, the art-object status provides aesthetic autonomy that protects its portrayal of historical and political bias. However, Groys questions whether art is ever autonomous, and notes that *'it could be at best merely a supplement to politics.'*¹⁴² This leads me to believe that, House of Terror manipulates artistic identity, the building and its content to 'supplement' dominant political ideology.

Opened in 2002, during the general election campaign, House of Terror was inaugurated by Viktor Orbán, the leader of the party Fidesz¹⁴³ that formed the government at the time and who was, himself, running for a new term.¹⁴⁴ Commentators have argued that House of Terror was politically motivated and designed to provide visual evidence linking the Stalinist terror of the 1950s with the contemporary

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Turai, 'Past Unmastered: Hot and Cold Memory', p.102

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House of Terror promotional leaflet, (Budapest: House of Terror, 2014) p.10

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Groys, *Art Power*, p.13

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Note: Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége: The Alliance of Young Democrats

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Turai, 'Past Unmastered: Hot and Cold Memory', p.102

Socialist party who were running against Orbán and his party in the 2002 elections.¹⁴⁵ Critics, like Turai, highlight that the museum's director, Maria Schmidt is a close advisor of Orbán, and state that the museum 'is used for direct political purposes: it does not encourage memory work but rather embodies memory politics, instrumentally controlling memory for political ends.'¹⁴⁶ Here, Turai is referring to House of Terror's depiction of Hungary as a nation that was the innocent victim of two terror regimes and crimes carried out by foreign elements without and within, whilst maintaining that Hungary itself is innocent.¹⁴⁷ Huyssen has noted that monolithic notions of identity, such as the House of Terror, are 'often shaped by defensiveness or victimology'¹⁴⁸; such victimology also being a key trait of post-communist revisionism.¹⁴⁹ Through curatorial techniques such as its Walls of Victims (Fig.22) and Victimisers, the museum portrays its simple message, which Karsai describes as: 'Almost every Hungarian is innocent. The main guilty are foreign forces; first the Germans, then the Russians, then the very few collaborators.'¹⁵⁰

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.3

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Cspike, 'The Changing Significance of the 1956 Revolution in Post-Communist Hungary', p. 102

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ibid. p.106.

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Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, p.5.

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Rév, I., 'Parallel Autopsies', in: *Representations*, No. 49, 1995, p.33

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Karsai, L., in: Kim, L., 'Budapest Revisits Its Recent Horrors: Museum Stirs Debate on the Past', in: *Boston Globe*, April 6, 2003, Accessed at: <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-7782949.html>, Accessed on 9th February 2015



Fig. 22: The House of Terror 'Wall of Victims'

The House of Terror's manipulation of Hungary's victim status is detrimental to the nation's collective memory. As Young reminds us, '*If societies remember, it is only insofar as their institutions and rituals organize [sic.], shape, even inspire their constituents' memories.*'¹⁵¹ By over-emphasising Hungary's victimhood, at the hands of the socialists in particular, the House of Terror neglects a nation's memory of the Arrow Cross regime and the part Hungary played in the persecution of the Jews. Only four of the total sixteen rooms of the museum deal exclusively with fascism and the Arrow Cross Party's role in the death of some 550,000 Hungarian Jews,¹⁵² and only one room explicitly deals with the Holocaust.¹⁵³

As the above evidence suggests, Memento Park and House of Terror both contribute to a post-communist discourse on history and society in Hungary. Unfortunately, House of Terror is unable to avoid partisan politics and its lack of multiple narratives fails to provide a site for coming to terms with

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Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, p.xi

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Williams, *Memorial Museums*, p. 117

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Author's observation from visit to House of Terror, 9th November 2014

the past.¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, Memento Park's disengaged presentation of communism resists translation into contemporary Hungarian politics and society; evidently both 'hot' and 'cold' treatments of memory impede the delivery of a balanced presentation of communist heritage. Unfortunately this binary dialogue offered by Memento Park and House of Terror is the predominant source of history offered to help form the Hungarian national memory of socialism.

Conclusion – Twenty–five Years Later: Memento Park in Contemporary Budapest

Memento Park, whilst creating a philosophical discourse on totalitarianism and democracy, resists entering the current political environment in Hungary. Regrettably, the initial confidence in democratic Hungary in the 1990s, that was reflected in the concept of Memento Park, has been overshadowed by an increasing wave of nationalism and Russocentric politics.¹⁵⁵ Fidesz dominates Hungarian politics, with a two-thirds supermajority in the National Assembly,¹⁵⁶ and the radical nationalist party Jobbik (The Movement for a Better Hungary) has seen a recent rise in popularity.¹⁵⁷ Post-communism, has been described as democratic in form, yet nationalistic in practice¹⁵⁸ and examples of an increasingly nationalist guise of post-communist revisionism have therefore been taking place across Hungary, most notably in

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Note: Hungary's government took the official stance of sympathising with Russia in the conflict over Ukraine. Viktor Orbán also has publicly expressed admiration for Vladimir Putin's system, declaring he wants to build an 'illiberal democracy' in Hungary.

Source: Luhn, A., 'Russia's Turbulent ties in Europe – The Guardian Briefing' in: *The Guardian*, 17th October 2014, Accessed at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/17/-sp-russia-relations-europe-guardian-briefing> Accessed on: 2nd February 2015

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Traynor, I., 'Budapest Autumn: hollowing out democracy on the edge of Europe', in: *The Guardian*, 29th October 2014, Accessed at: www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/29/budapest-viktor-orban-democracy-edge-hungary, Accessed on: 30th October 2014

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Paterson, T., 'Hungary Election: Concerns as neo-Nazi Jobbik party wins 20% of vote', in: *The Independent*, 7th April 2014, Accessed at: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/concerns-as-neonazi-jobbik-party-wins-20-of-hungary-vote-9244541.html, Accessed on: 19th January 2015

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the recent erection of several busts of war-time leader Admiral Miklós Horthy¹⁵⁹ and in the controversial Monument to the Victims of Nazi Occupation.

I would contend that Memento Park's multiple paradoxes regarding its identity positions it, ambiguously, in current debates on Hungarian identity and memory. The nondirective, polysemic discourse of the Park is thankfully not an attempt to correct the 'monopolistic authority'¹⁶⁰ of the communist past, however, regrettably this non-direct method also ensures the Park does not question how Hungary constructs its present. Unfortunately, the national crusade to 'own' the past in Hungary, has disregarded the Memento Park and its idealistic commentary on democracy, ethics and the past. As James concludes her writing: '*In a sense, the monuments preserved there were insignificant and their relocation was inconsequential [for most Hungarians]*'.¹⁶¹ Hungary has overlooked the Park, partly because by removing the statues, Budapest lost the discourse through which the inhabitants experienced their city.¹⁶² Although Budapesters of certain generations enjoy the communist-era nostalgia provided by the Park and its merchandise, the Park supplies little critical engagement with which to process such nostalgia. The House of Terror has proven more successful than its counterpart in generating political and historical discourses amongst Budapesters.¹⁶³ Furthermore, for the tourists, despite an initial boom in the 1990s,¹⁶⁴ Memento

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Note: Horthy was a close ally to Hitler and is responsible for anti-Jewish laws and the deportation of more than half a million Jews to death camps.

Source: Schiff, A., 'Hungarians must face their Nazi past, not venerate it', in: *The Guardian*, 11th December 2013, Accessed at: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/11/hungarians-must-face-nazi-past-not-venerate-it, Accessed on: 30th October 2014

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James., *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.35

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ibid. p.37

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James, *Imagining Postcommunism*, p.37

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Note: Fidesz's attempts to 'own' the memory of 1956 and communism are manifested in House of Terror and anniversary events for 1956. This 'ownership' has made them central to political debate in Hungary, and the anniversary of 1956 and sites of remembrance, including House of Terror have been the site of far-right protests.

Source: Cspike, 'The Changing Significance of the 1956 Revolution in Post-Communist Hungary', 99-128

Park has not aged well, already it feels neglected; the laborious journey out of the city is not popular with foreigners who opt for an experience of Budapest that is located generally in its pre-fascist and communist past.¹⁶⁵

The comparisons with sites dealing with similar communist heritage demonstrate that Grūtas Park, Museum of Socialist Art, Muzeon and Memento Park are all faced with universal issues relating to where to locate their monuments, the use of irony and humour, a presence or lack of political agenda, and all gratify to an extent, the dominant Western discourse on communist heritage and consumption. Unlike the Memento Park, the Museum of Socialist Art and Muzeon, have taken several years to process how to treat communist heritage and public art according to their own changing post-communist national identities. However, Memento Park still belongs to a previous age: not the age of communism, but the years of initial post-communism, before the eurocentric rhetorics of democracy were overshadowed by burgeoning nationalism and a trend of historical revisionism. One could contend that perhaps the Park arrived too soon; so eager were the Hungarians to draw the line between communism and post-communism that the present was coerced into becoming the past prematurely. I believe, in the Memento Park, the state was too willing to gratify the Western memorial culture of the 1990s, and thereby assimilate itself into the Western economic, political and cultural sphere, that it did not allow time to let discourses around communist heritage fully develop.

Considering Memento Park and its comparison sites, it is evident that many countries under socialist rule have been prevented from coming to terms with a key chapter in their twentieth century history. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe found, in 2008, that the totalitarian communist regimes of the USSR and Central Europe have not been subjected to the same universal condemnation or international investigations as the earlier totalitarian regimes of Spain, Italy and Germany,¹⁶⁶ which

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Light, 'Gazing on Communism', p.167

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Note: Memento Park is ranked 90 out of 298 on Trip Advisor's Website. Reviews have listed it as: 'a bit of a trek', 'much too far out of town' and 'not sure the journey was worth it.' The top ten tourist attractions in Budapest include; Museum of Fine Arts, Underground Railway Museum, Museum of Applied Arts and Budapest Operetta Theatre.

Source: 'Top Things to Do in Budapest', in: *Trip Advisor*, Accessed at: www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attractions-g274887-Activities-Budapest_Central_Hungary.html Accessed on: 19th January 2015

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leads me to think that if they were, perhaps sites such as Memento Park would be able to resolve Hungary with its past more legitimately and authoritatively.

Finally, from a museological perspective, as Memento Park’s paradoxes ensure that it is neither stable museum institution nor staid mourning place, it therefore enlarges the standard and accepted concepts of the museological, and contributes to universal discourses on museums and difficult heritage. Research on the Park and its discourses requires expansion, and I believe it needs to be led by academia from post-communist nations in order to gain further relevance. Memento Park has revealed plans for expansion in the future: building an Artistic Centre, Tourist Centre and Educational Centre,¹⁶⁷ although there has been no indication *when* these plans will be realised. With the Park’s acknowledgement of the need to develop its identity so should accompanying discourses adapt. Ideally, in the future, Memento Park’s treatment of communist heritage will be able to secede from its spatially and temporally prescribed parameters. It is then that already-dated theories on post-communism will have to be restyled in order that the discourses that follow will have a valid impact on the communities they apply to.

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