

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

Remembering and forgetting communism in Hungary. Studies on collective memory and memory politics in context, by Attila Pók, Kőszeg-Budapest: The Institute of Advanced Studies Kőszeg and The Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2017, 335 pp, 3900 HUF (paperback), ISBN 978 615 5742 01 9

Attila Pók, as justified by the laudatory remarks on the back cover of the book, is an internationally acknowledged historian who not only studied, but also lived through parts of the communist period as a native Hungarian in Hungary. However, *Remembering and Forgetting Communism in Hungary* is not an oral history and does not apply a 'classical' memory study perspective. As the subtitle suggests, Pók places emphasis on memory politics in context, and this latter segment (in context) makes the book unique and valuable, especially for readers unfamiliar with this theme.

The book consists of sixteen chapters that are grouped into three big units called 'Wanting the past', 'Knowing the past' and 'Changing the past'. These titles summarise the general themes dealt with in studies of collective memory and top-down memory politics regarding communism in Hungary. He acknowledges both the top-down and bottom-up approaches to narrating the past in a way that supports an image of the nation which serves contemporary challenges or aims (see, for example, the list of possible answers to the question 'Why was there no "Historikerstreit" in Hungary?' (pp. 257–263)).

However, Pók expands the topic by dealing not only with Hungary, but also with central Europe and beyond. Chronologically, he discusses Hungarian communism in the twentieth and nineteenth centuries. Thanks to this expanded perspective, the author can formalise more theoretical questions that are relevant not just for the past, but for the future as well (by, for instance, comparing the communist politics of memory and the post-communist reinterpretation of the past). These research questions are spread out in the book (p. 79, p. 119, p. 259) and, in individual chapters, the author emphasises that the communist past is not a gap, but a part of national or group identity and thus cannot be subject to the black or white interpretations characteristic of the post-communist master narrative(s). This is why the chapters address actors, institutions, the representational and interpretational possibilities of historical events in memorialisation and cult-creation processes, the role of emotions in memory, history or identity creations, as well as, the notion of bordering in all its complexity.

The sixteen chapters are the edited versions of previously published or presented papers that, besides some minor and obvious repetitions such as Jenő Szűcs' definition of central Europe on page 231 and 254, acquire a new life in this arrangement. All chapters are enriched by footnotes that include not only primary sources, but also examples of previous publications discussing the given topic. This technique enables the reader to engage in the academic disputes and Pók emphasises that, even if the topic is based in the past, the discourse about it is still open and relevant, and therefore influences the formation of national identity even today. A comprehensive index of names and places concludes the publication.

The book has been published within the series 'Studies on Collective Memory and Memory Politics in Context'. In addition to the well-organised chapters and easy-to-follow reading style (thanks to the adaptation of anecdotes on page 147, humour on page 298 and even provocative questions on page 100) the author combines the ideas and findings of international and Hungarian scholars that also fruitfully contribute to the contextualisation of the publication.

Moreover, the book touches upon fields such as literature, fine arts, and sociology that make the publication itself interdisciplinary and emphasise the multiple influences on national identities in Hungary, where 'the refusal of the communist past, that is the negation of communism, gave a common identity to the very mixed group of agents of [this] transition period' (p. 66).

Similar to the adapted scholarly fields, Pók uses primary and secondary sources ranging from academic documents to blog spots, interviews and personal memoirs, as he is 'very much interested in the non-academic uses of history' (p. 28). He even points out that such sources might be subjects of research for different disciplines at different times which can be interpreted in variable ways due to the contemporary context (for example, changes of the collective memory of Horthy pp. 167-182). Pók also underscores the influence of passing time on historical understanding, as sources turn into memories and secondary data. He also stresses that, even though different disciplines use common sources, this use does not lead to the unification of disciplines; the cult of Kossuth, for example, is distinct from the person as a historic figure (p. 123).

His methodology is mainly comparative case-study investigations in time and space through which he points out important and interconnected micro- and macro level research questions investigated by more than one academic disciplines. With this technique he questions popular perceptions about key events of post-1945 Hungarian history that have contributed to the formation of contemporary Hungarian national identity (see the chapter called 'Hungary – a Traumatized State and Nation', pp. 153-162). The author never provides one ultimate narration or truth but emphasises the complexity of interpretations by respectfully introducing often even contradictory understandings.

The choice of language and the broad historical perspective show that Pók is writing for a non-Hungarian audience. At the same time, he addresses numerous unanswered questions (p. 189), and challenges local interpretations (p. 72) that should make Hungarian readers consult this book as well. By discussing the influence of the communist past on identity formation, Pók points to the need of an alternative interpretation and hence (national) self-understanding, which is neither Eastern or Western, but European. By naming the final chapter of the book 'The Challenge of European History', the author suggests that the precondition for Hungary's integration as part of European history derives from its interpretation of its communist past. This should involve acknowledging and fostering knowledge of the period between 1945 and 1989. In order to achieve this, Pók ascribes a central role to historians and the teaching of history by saying that 'the search for European identities and the location of a national legacy in the European cultural and political heritage could be a policy of memory strengthening cohesion instead of deepening old divides' (p. 310). Pók's investigation is unquestionably relevant and still open even thirteen years after first publishing some materials from the chapters in the book, which acknowledges that the task of recognising the communist past of this country still lies ahead. The debate over naming the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which (although established in the late nineteenth century) was discredited as the last institute of the Stalinist area, or the controversy over the exhibition 'The Past as You Order?' exemplify the unfinished task of integrating the communist period into the nation's history. *Remembering and Forgetting Communism in Hungary* will surely contribute towards a more integrated Hungarian national historiography.

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