



Reimagining Spaces in Central and Eastern Europe or Memory Roulette: Legal, Political and Social Aspects

Mirostaw Michał Sadowski | ORCID: 0000-0002-2048-2073

Lecturer, School of Law, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland

Postdoctoral Researcher, Centre for Global Studies, Aberta University,
Lisbon, Portugal

Postdoctoral Fellow, CEBRAP – Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning,
São Paulo, Brazil

Research Assistant, Institute of Legal Sciences, Polish Academy of Sciences,
Warsaw, Poland

miroslaw.sadowski@strath.ac.uk

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Abstract

If one was to look for a single word to describe the historical experiences of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), roulette comes immediately to mind. Be that the fall of great empires of the region following World War I (WWI), the tragedy of World War II (WWII), the Iron Curtain separating CEE from the rest of the world, the fall of communism, the more recent illiberal 'reckoning' or the Russo-Ukrainian war, the region's history is characterised by unpredictability. Importantly, these moments of ground-breaking change affect not only the political sphere – although the regime shifts and border changes are often amongst the most noticeable – but also the national imaginaries, as the process of collective memory inversion takes place, and official narratives of the yesteryear are replaced by those currently in power. Law plays an important role in managing these modifications, in particular those most visible, relating to public spaces and cultural heritage. The purpose of this paper is to look holistically at the changes that took place in the public sphere in the region since the end of WWI, with a particular focus on the intersection of law, politics and social changes. In the first, theoretical part of the paper, the author explains the relationship between collective memory and public spaces, linking these concepts with the understanding

of the field, violence, habitus, and crisis proposed by Bourdieu. The second part of the paper introduces the major moments of change in the recent CEE history from the perspective of reimagining of public spaces, illustrating them on selected case studies: post-WWI fall of the empires and the destruction of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Warsaw, the WWII atrocities and the erasure of shtetl culture, the times of communism and the construction of the People's Palace in Bucharest, the post-1989 decommunisation and the (not always) meticulous removal of the communist monuments from Estonia, the arrival of illiberalism and the reimagining of museums in Hungary, and, ultimately, the Russo-Ukrainian war and the ensuing derussification of Ukraine. In the third, conclusive part of the paper, the author looks at the big picture, linking the theoretical with the case studies more generally and proposing to draw lessons from Central and Eastern European roulette, which may also be applicable to other spaces in permanent flux.

Keywords

collective memory – cityscapes – cultural heritage – Bourdieu – Central and Eastern Europe – Poland – shtetl – Romania – Estonia – Hungary – Ukraine

1 Introduction*

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a region that has been called tragically 'Bloodlands',¹ somewhat ironically 'God's Playground'² (specifically in regard to Poland, but easily paraphrasable to the whole area) or symbolically 'East West Street'³ – a place perpetually in-between, characterised by repeated ruptures with unknown outcomes, a veritable roulette of history. A myriad of ethnicities and religions, centuries of changing borders, empires rising and falling, and ultimately, the two world wars, the first giving hope and brining independence to the previously suppressed nations and the second not only forever changing the region but also subjugating it to over forty years behind the Iron Curtain.

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- 1 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, New York, NY, 2022).
- 2 Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 1: The Origins to 1795* (Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 2005).
- 3 Philippe Sands, *East West Street: On the Origins of 'Genocide' and 'Crimes Against Humanity'* (Vintage, New York, NY, 2017).

Following every shift, both people and public spaces were affected, with the new authorities always ready to cement their recently acquired power by entrenching it in the collective memories of the society in question, either constructing new elements of cityscapes or engaging in erasure, in certain cases of not only the physical places but also the people living there. The purpose of this article is to focus on these shifts in collective memory affecting CEE cityscapes in the past 100 years, choosing six key moments of change, each with a different case study concentrating on the spatial changes. The two borderline events – World War I (WWI) and the Russo-Ukrainian war – were chosen as key for the region, with the former representing the origins of its current shape and the latter as the symbol of its ever-changing future.

With public spaces understood broadly, as not only cityscapes and landscapes but also their specific elements, such as individual cultural objects and museum displays, I first analyse the destruction of Alexaner Nevsky's Orthodox church in Warsaw following WWI as an example of the post-independence anti-imperial tendencies in the region present at that time. Then, as an illustration of the horrors of World War II (WWII), I focus on the erasure of shtetel culture by Nazi Germany, which forever changed the CEE landscape. Moving on to times of communism, I turn my attention to Bucharest and the construction of the People's Palace (now Parliament Palace), which completely altered the urban fabric of the city. Next, the post-1989 changes are studied using the example of the removal of Soviet statues from Estonia. Turning to the illiberal swerve of the region in the 2010s, I show how museum displays have been affected by the Hungarian right-wing government through its reorienting of the past. Ultimately, the fate of the Soviet statues is analysed once again, this time in the context of the Russo-Ukraine war.

Before moving on to these case studies – analysed throughout the article from a socio-legal and socio-political perspective – a theoretical framework of later research needs to be introduced, including the specific concepts and ideas, such as collective memory, collective forgetting, collective memory inversion, cultural heritage and contentious heritage, cityscape, and Pierre Bourdieu's theories of field, habitus, and crisis.

2 Part 1. The Theoretical Basis: Between Collective Memory and Crises

As noted above, this first part of this article is devoted to theoretical ruminations that will allow for a multidimensional and interdisciplinary analysis of the case studies. Divided into two sections, it will first focus on several different

ideas that will open up the space for a proper investigation of the studied mechanisms and then move on to the analysis of the relevant Bourdieusian concepts.

2.1 *Intersections of Collective Memory and Cultural Heritage within the City*

Collective memory, a concept first introduced by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s, is used to describe the social perceptions of the past that are not created by an individual but the different social groups to which one belongs and in that is heavily impacted by those in positions of authority within the group in question. Collective memories function at different levels and in various forms; of particular interest in this article is urban memory, which, including both a city's tangible (architecture, monuments, streets) and intangible elements (traces of the past carried by physical objects and certain places), establishes a multidimensional cityscape we all inhabit, forever suspending it between past and present with collective memories on hand around every corner, be that in the form of a street name, a statue, or continuous use of the name of a place that no longer exists.⁴

A concept directly linked to collective memory but at the same time its direct opposite is collective forgetting, an act of leaving certain memories of a difficult past aside from the narrative of the group in question to preserve its unity and conserve its authorities' power. While suppressed, the collectively forgotten memories are never erased completely, surviving in the form of counter-memories.⁵ Together, what is collectively remembered and collectively forgotten builds up the official narrative fostered by the authorities governing the group in question.

At the same time, it needs to be noted that moments of rupture and transition most often involve, among others, processes of collective memory inversion that follow the power shifts in a society: as the memories of the former authorities are removed from the official narratives, they become collectively forgotten, while at the same time counter-memories of the former dissidents – the new leaders – become the official collective memory.⁶

4 Miroslaw M. Sadowski, "City as a Locus of Collective Memory. Streets, Monuments and Human Rights," 40(1-2) *Zeitschrift für Rechtssoziologie – The German Journal of Law and Society* (2020), 209–240, at 211–214.

5 Miroslaw M. Sadowski, *Intersections of Law and Memory. Influencing Perceptions of the Past* (Routledge, Oxon, 2024), 36.

6 Miroslaw M. Sadowski and Seyed M. A. Zavarei, "Changing presents, shifting past(s): the diverse interests of transitional justice and cultural heritage in the case of the Iranian revolution," *Law and Humanities* (2023), 1–22, at 5.

As already remarked upon above, collective memories do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are attached to certain cultural objects that further cement the official narrative within society, among which of particular importance is cultural heritage, i.e., both the “tangible and intangible products of cultural past (ranging from buildings through whole urban landscapes and then traditions to digital cultural heritage), of notable historical, social, religious, artistic, architectural, etc., importance for the local, regional, national and (or) global community.” Among other reasons, these objects achieve the rank of heritage due to collective memories attached to them, as they grant them that importance for the community in question, even if the events they relate to took place not far in the past.⁷

As such, not only their preservation and collective remembrance but also their destruction and collective forgetting will have a powerful impact on the group in question. During peacetime, cultural objects that are most often removed belong to the so-called contentious or contested heritage, meaning they either carry with them collective memories of the difficult past from the group’s perspective or are the narrative they are commemorating is somehow exclusionary to parts of the collectivity in question.⁸ Most case studies investigated in the next part of the article can be described as objects of contested heritage belonging to the former group. First, however, the analysis of Bourdieusian concepts needs to be conducted to better understand the changes in public spaces studied there.

2.2 *Bourdieu’s Theory Between Memory, Violence and Crisis*

In his vast oeuvre, Pierre Bourdieu did not investigate collective memory – even in his essay on Halbwachs,⁹ the aforementioned author of the concept, Bourdieu focused on other elements of the French sociologist’s work, hoping, as Dickson notes, to renew interest in those areas of research of his predecessor that he thought would be most relevant to the then current sociological issues.¹⁰

7 Miroslaw M. Sadowski, “Heritage Strikes Back. The Al Mahdi Case, ICC’s Policy on Cultural Heritage and the Pushing of Law’s Boundaries,” *2 Undecidabilities and Law – The Coimbra Journal for Legal Studies (UJCJ)* (2022), 99–119, at 101–102.

8 Miroslaw M. Sadowski, “Heritage and Identity: Contested Heritage. Between Reconstructing the Past and Rebuilding the Future,” upcoming in Antoinette Maget Dominice, Janet Ulph and Sophie Vigneron (eds.), *Elgar Research Handbook on Art, Culture and Heritage* (Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2024).

9 Pierre Bourdieu, “L’assassinat de Maurice Halbwachs,” 16 *Visages de la Résistance* (1987), 164–170.

10 Tiphaine L. Dickson, “America In An Age Of Memory: Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘The Assassination Of Maurice Halbwachs’ – Commentary and Translation,” 181 *Matica Srpska Social Sciences Quarterly*, 111–127, at 116–117.

Today, however, as we live in the age of a veritable memory boom,¹¹ the question of collective memory has not only come to the forefront of Halbwachs' analysis but also Bourdieu's ideas have come to be applied to deepen our understanding of the collective memory processes, which is particularly useful when studying societies experiencing change and crisis, such as in the case of this article. These include the concepts of field, habitus, and conflict.

Bourdieu proposed the field "as a struggle of cultural production, circulation, and consumption,"¹² or, in his own words,

a network of objective relations (of domination or subordination, of complementarity or antagonism, etc.) between positions [...]. Each position is objectively defined by its objective relationship with other positions, or, in other terms, by the system of relevant (meaning efficient) properties which allow it to be situated in relation to all others in the structure of the global distribution of properties. All positions depend, in their very existence, and in the determinations they impose on their occupants, on their actual and potential situation in the structure of the field – that is to say, in the structure and distribution of those kinds of capital (or of power) whose possession governs the obtaining of specific profits (such as literary prestige) put into play in the field.¹³

Such a perception of the field, Olick notes, may be applied to the matters of memory, showing that "different fields produce different kinds of pasts according to different rules, that remembering is a different activity in different fields, and that different kinds of remembering are involved in constituting and reconstituting the boundaries between fields" – with the caveat that, in spite of this competition between different fields, one may distinguish the dominant one in a society at a particular moment.¹⁴ This will most often be the official narrative fostered by the authorities; however, if the widespread perception is that those in power are illegitimate (such as in the case of communist governments in the CEE region analysed here), the counter-narrative will be

11 Miroslaw M. Sadowski, "Law and Memory: The Unobvious Relationship," 16:2 *Warsaw University Law Review* (2017), 262–290, at 265.

12 Anna Reading, "Memory and Digital Media: Six Dynamics of the Global Memory Field" in Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers and Eyal Zandberg (eds), *On Media Memory. Collective Memory in a New Media Age* (Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2011), 241–252, at 242.

13 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1995), 231.

14 Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret. On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (Routledge, New York, NY/Oxon, 2007), 93–94.

in constant struggle with the official one, leading to the memory inversion following rapidly after the change in power (as demonstrated by the case of the removal of Estonian Soviet statues soon after 1991 analysed here).

Interestingly, when building up her own idea of a 'global memory' (i.e., collective memory born as a result of globalisation and digitisation), Anna Reading adds to the Bourdieusian understanding of the field the question of "a struggle by memory agents over the assemblage, mobilization, and securitization of memory capital," so that one can speak of "a memory field that exists both vertically and horizontally and that is electric, algorithmic, geographic, and psychic."¹⁵ Leaving the issues of globalisation and digitisation aside, I would argue that such a delineation of a memory field may also be applied elsewhere – when analysing the questions of memory and power in the cityscape, such as the case studies in the second part of this article – all the more so given Bourdieu's own thoughts on the problems regarding the relations between cultural objects inhabiting public spaces and power. As he remarked,

social space is inscribed at once in spatial structures and in the mental structures that are partly produced by the incorporation of these structures, space is one of the sites where power is asserted and exercised, and, no doubt in its subtlest form, as symbolic violence that goes unperceived as violence. Architectural spaces address mute injunctions directly to the body and, just as surely as court etiquette, obtain from it the reverence and respect born of distance, or better yet, from being far away, at a respectful distance. Their very invisibility [...] undoubtedly makes these the most important components of the symbolic order of power and the totally real effects of symbolic power.¹⁶

A vital element of this "materialization of ideology" within the cityscape¹⁷ is collective memory, which grants the different structures present in the public spaces the very symbolic power that Bourdieu is analysing here. This further confirms the possibility of the cityscapes' characterisation as memory fields, places where not only the dominant narrative is present (e.g., through a

¹⁵ Reading, *op.cit.* 12, 242.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, "Site Effects" in Pierre Bourdieu (ed.), *The Weight of the World Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1999), 123–129, at 126.

¹⁷ Nimrod Luz, "The politics of sacred places: Palestinian identity, collective memory, and resistance in the Hassan Bek mosque conflict," 26 *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (2008), 1036–1052, at 1043.

monument or a protected object of cultural heritage) but also where different positions (e.g., of the authorities and the protesters) are competing (e.g., in the case of a demonstration taking the form of a counter-memorial, a Lennon wall or toppling and defacing cultural objects already present within the social space) for dominance over memory.

The second Bourdieusian notion of interest from the perspective of collective memory is that of habitus, “the system of durable dispositions to act that is produced by objective structures and conditions but is also capable of producing and reproducing those structures.”¹⁸ He describes the habitus himself as the “presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forth-coming,”¹⁹ the “history turned into nature,” given that “the ‘unconscious’ is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces in the second nature of habitus.”²⁰

As Misztal notes, both memory and habitus organise “the manner in which individuals see the world and act in it,” given that they are both centred around “the dialectic between objective and subjective because our dispositions and frames of perceptions are seen as at once historical, social and individual.”²¹ While one clearly cannot put an equal sign between habitus and collective memory – Pitzalis and Weininger describe it as “not a memory of the past but the incorporation of past experiences into present experience, a practical knowledge allowing the anticipation of the future by a skilled social agent”²² – I would argue that it is possible to perceive collective memory as an element of the habitus, given that it is one of the many different ways in which what happened in the past impacts our perceptions of the present.

Importantly, the concepts of the habitus and the field have a twofold relationship, with the second element relaying on the first one: (1) that of conditioning, as the habitus is formed by the field, being “the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of a field (or of a set of intersecting fields [...]);” (2) that of cognitive reconstruction, as the field itself is impacted by the habitus, which adds to the field’s constitution “as a meaningful world,

18 Barbara A. Misztal, “Durkheim on Collective Memory,” 3:2 *Journal of Classical Sociology* (2003), 123–143, at 138.

19 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2000), 210.

20 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 78–79.

21 Misztal, *op.cit.* 18, 128.

22 Marco Pitzalis and Elliot B. Weininger, “Rupture and crisis in Bourdieusian sociology. Introduction,” LXIII:2 *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* (2022), 281–297, at 290.

a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one's energy."²³ Such a perspective of the links between the two further informs the idea of the memory field, which through its various elements (including cultural objects) impacts collective memory – an element of the habitus – but itself is impacted by it, as it is the collective memory that gives the memory field (in this article in the form of the cityscape) its symbolic power.

The final concept of those introduced by Bourdieu that merits a closer investigation here concerns his perceptions on conflict and crisis, given that, as Pitzalis and Weininger observe, both crisis and rupture are “constitutive of his epistemological posture,”²⁴ to which Gorski adds that “the concern with historical change is a red thread, sometimes thicker, sometimes thinner, that traverses his entire life's work”²⁵ – and the focus of this article is to investigate changes to social spaces – memory fields – in the aftermath of conflict, be that external or internal. Furthermore, as Riley notes, the various crises “contribute powerfully” to the formation of habitus,²⁶ and in that also affect collective memory.

While Bourdieu did not turn his focus to the matter of the crises directly, as Sapiro remarks, “his theory of symbolic violence [...] combined with his field theory, provide heuristic tools and explanatory frameworks for their understanding.”²⁷ The aforementioned question of symbolic violence rises from Bourdieu's addition to Max Weber's definition of the state as having the monopoly of physical violence, which he rephrased as the “monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence, inasmuch as the monopoly of symbolic violence is the condition for possession of the exercise of the monopoly of physical violence itself.”²⁸ This symbolic, soft violence “relies on the complicity of the dominated, because they have interiorized the principles of their domination, through education and or vectors of the dominant ideology,”²⁹ which includes the fostering of official narrative by the authorities and thus impacts collective memory. When political crises

23 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992), 127.

24 Pitzalis and Weininger, *op.cit.* 22, 284.

25 Philip S. Gorski, “Introduction. Bourdieu as a Theorist of Change” in Philip S. Gorski (ed.), *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2012), 1–15, 2.

26 Alexander Riley, “Crisis, habitus, and intellectual trajectory,” XLII-129 *Revue européenne des sciences sociales – European Journal of Social Sciences* (2004), 307–314, 309.

27 Gisèle Sapiro, “Structural crises vs. situations of (political) crisis. A Bourdieuan approach,” LXIII:2 *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* (2022), 299–321, at 300.

28 Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State. Lectures at the College de France, 1989–1992* (Polity Press, Cambridge/Malden, MA, 2014), 66.

29 Sapiro, *op.cit.* 27, 300.

arrive, “they are close to these symbolic struggles of all against all, in which everyone can claim the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence, of naming, with an equal chance of success,”³⁰ which is manifested by an “overproduction of narratives and prophecies”³¹ present in the public sphere during the period of social upheaval. If the forces opposed to those previously in power succeed, collective memory inversion will soon follow as a means of symbolic violence, firmly entrenching the new authorities in their new position.

Reed proposed a Bourdieusian definition of crisis as occurring “when the metafield of power, which dictates the relationship among fields, changes in an extremely rapid manner, due to actions that significantly exceed the logic of the fields in which they would normally be embedded.”³² In regard to change, Boyer distinguished several factors contributing to its processes in Bourdieu’s work, which are interrelated:³³ (1) the capacity of the dominant actors in the field to impose the pace of the transformation; (2) the entry of new agents who have the ability to change the structure of the field; (3) the links between the changes taking place within the field with the changes taking place outside of the field; (4) the relationship with and the competition for power over the state; and (5) a dyssynchronisation between the field and the habitus as the changes affecting the structure of the different fields lie at the basis of the change and crisis in question.³⁴ All five elements may be observed in the case studies analysed below.

Before moving to their investigation, however, it needs to also be noted that Sapiro further distinguishes two types of crises in Bourdieu’s work: reproduction crises and exogenous crises; of interest in this article are the latter, when societies are transformed “due to a coup or to exogenous factors such as war, military occupation, or colonialism, with the ensuing brutal disruption of the social order,”³⁵ which will be the case of the case studies investigated in the second part of this article.

30 Bourdieu, *op.cit.* 28, 66.

31 Sapiro, *op.cit.* 27, 316.

32 Isaac Ariail Reed, “Can There be a Bourdieusian Theory of Crisis? On Historical Change and Social Theory,” 54:3 *History and Theory* (2015), 269–276, at 273.

33 Pitzalis and Weininger, *op.cit.* 22, 285.

34 Robert Boyer, “L’anthropologie économique de Pierre Bourdieu,” 5 *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (2003), 65–78, at 71–72.

35 Sapiro, *op.cit.* 27, 315.

3 Part 2. The Practice: Reimagining CEE Public Spaces Following Crises

As remarked upon in the introduction, CEE is a unique region akin to a cornucopia of different crises over the years. The 20th and 21st centuries have been particular times of transition for its countries, which went from the destruction following WWI to a brief period of independence, next from the horrors of WWII to a long period of dependence, and finally from the breakthrough of 1989 through liberal and illiberal transformation to the tragedy of the Russo-Ukrainian war. This difficult history is written in the region's memory fields, in its monuments, its churches, its countryside, its capitals, and its museum exhibits. In this main part of the article, I take a close look at six instances of symbolic violence taking place across Central and Eastern Europe at six key moments in the history of the region.

3.1 *WWI and the Fall of Empires: The Destruction of Alexander Nevsky's Orthodox Church in Warsaw*

Having for a long time been a part, most often a peripheral one, of one of the three empires – Prussia (Germany), Austria-Hungary or Russia – the newly independent countries of Central and Eastern Europe had to in a way reinvent themselves in the wake of WWI, which proved difficult on a number of levels.³⁶ One of the elements of this national identity building process was the removal of certain remnants of the former empires still haunting public places. Of these, perhaps the most significant was the fate of Alexander Nevsky's Orthodox Church (hereinafter: Nevsky's Church or the Church) in Warsaw, built during the period when the city together with large parts of Poland found themselves under Russian administration and later destroyed in the aftermath of WWI.

Constructed in the years 1894–1912 on the then Saxon Square (now Piłsudski Square), one of the major public spaces in Warsaw, as a “monument to Russian imperialism and Orthodoxy,”³⁷ the Church was an element of russification of

36 Mirosław M. Sadowski, “Central Europe: What's in a Name? Forging an Understanding of the Region as a Socio-Legal and a Socio-Political Space” in Cosmin Cercel, Alexandra Mercescu and Mirosław M. Sadowski (eds), *Law, Culture and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe A Comparative Engagement* (Routledge, New York, NY/Oxon, 2024), 44–62, at 51.

37 Paweł Dettloff, “Rosyjska architektura sakralna (cerkiewna) na ziemiach polskich w odbiorze społecznym i kontekście ochrony dziedzictwa w XIX i XX w.” in Jerzy Malinowski, Irina Gavrash and Natalia Mizerniuk-Rotkiewicz (eds), *Poland – Russia: Art and History. Polish art, Russian art and Polish-Russian artistic relations to the beginning of XX century* (Polski Instytut Studiów nad Sztuką Świata/Wydawnictwo Tako, Warsaw/Toruń, 2013), 257–265, at 262.

Polish culture.³⁸ Following the two unsuccessful insurrections – November in 1831–1831 and January in 1863–1864 – the Russian involvement in the cultural life in Warsaw grew exponentially and, in spite of its lessening in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution, remained strong with hopes of leaving “an unerasable mark” in the cityscape, the “final seal” of its russification, which would dominate over Catholic churches constructed in the city at the turn of the century.³⁹

In spite of the nationalistic goals, finding sources of funding of the enormous costs (3,000,000 roubles) proved to be difficult for the local administration, with the money ultimately coming not only from the Russian government but also from the *de facto* obligatory donations from Polish cities, as well as a tax on Polish citizens under Russian administration⁴⁰ and collected donations throughout the empire.⁴¹ The building was ultimately constructed in the Russian neo-Byzantine style, linking different eras in architecture, including Venetian and Kremlin inspirations.⁴² The imposing Church stood 64 m tall and 48,5 m wide, with golden-plated onion-like domes⁴³ and a 70 m bell tower rising over the Saxon Square – and whole Warsaw.⁴⁴ The interior was no less impressive – it included Carrara marble portals with jasper columns (a gift from the czar), pink Hungarian marble laid on the walls, Finnish granite columns, and many artworks created by famous Russian artists.⁴⁵

The Church was in its intended use only for three years: in the wake of the approaching German army, the evacuating Russians took with them different elements of the interior, including the iconostasis.⁴⁶ The occupying German army stripped the domes of their gold plating, with the new roof soon leaking,

38 Anna Geldon, “Cerkiew św. Aleksandra Newskiego w Warszawie i Zmartwychwstania w Sankt Petersburgu. Nieznane analogie ikonograficzne,” 38 *Perspektywy Kultury* (2022), 289–315, at 290.

39 Zdzisława Tołłoczko, “Z dziejów architektury niechcianej. Rzecz o powstaniu i destrukcji soboru Św. Aleksandra Newskiego na placu Saskim w Warszawie” in Andrzej Kadłuczko (ed.), *Historia i współczesność w architekturze i urbanistyce. Tom 2* (Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskie, Cracow, 2014), 5–23, at 6; 8; 10.

40 Grzegorz Michalak, “Sobór pw. Aleksandra Newskiego na Placu Saskim w świetle międzywojennej prasy,” 17:1 *Saeculum Christianum: pismo historyczno-społeczne* (2010), 79–91, at 83.

41 Michał Zarychta, “Rozbiórka byłego soboru Aleksandra Newskiego na placu Saskim w Warszawie. Studium przypadku z dziedziny polityki i administracji władz centralnych i samorządowych odrodzonej Rzeczypospolitej,” 2 *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* (2018), 416–439, at 416.

42 Tołłoczko, *op.cit.* 39, 6–7; 9–10.2

43 Geldon, *op.cit.* 38, 292–293.

44 Zarychta, *op.cit.* 41, 417.

45 Michalak, *op.cit.* 40, 81.

46 Andrzej Golimont, “Ostańce i miejskie legendy – losy pozostałości po prawosławnej katedrze p.w. Aleksandra Newskiego w Warszawie,” 22 *Elpis* (2020), 69–77, at 74.

which deteriorated the frescoes inside.⁴⁷ At the same time, the Germans turned Nevsky's Church into a Lutheran army church dedicated to St. Henry.⁴⁸

The question of the fate of Nevsky's Church became of major importance following the regaining of independence by Poland in 1918, with the first articles calling for its destruction immediately appearing in the press.⁴⁹ As the new Polish state took over all the property belonging to the former Russian empire, including the Church, already in 1919 Prime Minister Ignacy Paderewski raised the question of its razing; however, it was blocked by the Catholic church, which was hoping to keep Nevsky's Church as a garrison church. At the same time, the Warsaw city council called for the Church's destruction, perceiving it as necessary to "return the capital to its Polish appearance."⁵⁰

As the press articles from that period show, opinions regarding the fate of the Church differed not only amongst the politicians but also the people.⁵¹ Instead of razing Nevsky's Church, some proposed rebuilding it in a Catholic style to serve as a church, turning it into a museum of Polish martyrology (an idea propagated by the writer Stefan Żeromski) or reconstructing it as an archive; these ideas were not realised due to readaptation issues and high costs.⁵²

The government reacted by ordering the razing of Nevsky's Church bell tower in its plans for 1920. In response, *Sejm*, the lower chamber of the Polish parliament, convened a special subcommittee within the Public Works Committee to investigate the matter. Among the divided voices of not only experts and members of parliament but also government ministers, the subcommittee put forward three resolutions to vote, regarding: (1) the razing of the bell tower; (2) the raising of the Church; and (3) the beginning of the works immediately following the vote in the *Sejm*. While all three resolutions have been passed by the subcommittee, only the first one was approved by the Committee, which proposed deciding the matter of the Church itself on a later date. The *Sejm* was to vote upon the approval of the destruction of the bell tower and the Church separately on June 1, 1920.⁵³ Following wide discussions, which included arguments ranging from the cost of razing the church to the possibility of reusing its materials, to its undoubted aesthetics, to its place and role in the Polish collective memory, and to the religious significance of destroying a place of worship, the resolution to destroy the bell tower passed

47 Geldon, *op.cit.* 38, 293.

48 Zarychta, *op.cit.* 41, 417.

49 Michalak, *op.cit.* 40, 84.

50 Zarychta, *op.cit.* 41, 418–422.

51 Michalak, *op.cit.* 40, 86–89.

52 Tołłoczko, *op.cit.* 39, 11.

53 Zarychta, *op.cit.* 41, 422–426.

by acclamation, whereas in regard to the Church itself, 124 MP s voted against to 72 voting for its immediate razing.⁵⁴

From this parliamentary debate, two opposing points are particularly worth noting here, as they both speak directly to the power certain cultural objects have over collective memory and the links between the official narrative and the cityscape. Among these are remarks made by Nikodem Hryckiewicz, who invoked the readaptation of mosques into churches by Spaniards and the fact that the Church's destruction would not erase the memories of the difficult past.⁵⁵ In turn, father Władysław Chrzanowski argued that Nevsky's Church should not be considered a place of worship but "a structure which was a slap to the [Polish] nation and to the [Catholic] religion." He also added that should leaving the Church as a memento for future generations be used as an argument, then no Russian street names and monuments should have been removed in Warsaw, further remarking that "they say that razing the Church would be an act of vandalism, I think that leaving the Church would be an act of vandalism, while destroying an act of vandalism is not vandalism."⁵⁶

It needs to be noted that the destruction of Nevsky's Church proved controversial not only in Poland but also abroad, with many foreigners shocked by the ultimate decision to raze the Church.⁵⁷ Among these, particularly vocal was Stephen Graham, who, while noting that the destruction was supported not only by Poles but also by many ethnic minorities living in Warsaw, compared it to the Bolshevik desecration of churches in Russia following the Revolution, remarking that in the young Polish state, even the veneration of God needs to fit the national discourse: "Poland is in truth more important than Poland's God. If God serves Poland He will be honoured, if not He will be dishonoured."⁵⁸

Ultimately, however, in spite of the differing opinions, the Church could not survive as an element of the Saxon Square, the central points of which became the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the monument of the Prince Józef Poniatkowski returned to Poland by the Soviets following the 1921 Treaty of Riga.⁵⁹ As such, following a legal action on part of the Warsaw city council,⁶⁰

54 *Sprawozdanie stenograficzne ze 152 posiedzenia Sejmu Ustawodawczego z dnia 1 czerwca 1920 roku* (1920), 40–65.

55 *Ibid.*, 43–44.

56 *Ibid.*, 46–50.

57 Wojciech Tomasiak, "Śmierć świątyni," 1 *Teksty Drugie. Teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja* (2018), 240–258, at 256.

58 Stephen Graham, *Russia in Division* (Macmillan and co., London, 1925), 145–147.

59 Tołłoczko, *op.cit.* 39, 12.

60 Zarychta, *op.cit.* 41, 429–430.

on February 28, 1923, the Władysław Sikorski government made the decision, in the form of a governmental resolution, to raze Nevsky's Church "in order to provide work to the unemployed."⁶¹ (This was, however, rather an element of propaganda, given that government-ordered expertise proved high costs of any potential renovation, whereas the cost of rubble was supposed to be higher than that of razing of the Church.⁶²)

While minority MPs tried to stall the destruction by requesting an emergency hearing in the *Sejm*, it did not pass and ended up stuck in the Administrative Committee. Thus, the razing process began in 1924.⁶³ As expected, the destruction of the Church provided many different materials, with some of the 38,000 m³ of rubble used in and around Warsaw as a strengthening element of roads, pavements and parkways. The heating system was reinstalled in one of the capital's hospitals, whereas the interior decoration, in spite of the authorities' promises of conservation, was for the most part destroyed due to the lack of expertise on the part of the workers. Only some elements remain, such as the larger part of the mosaics, given to the then newly built Orthodox church in Baranowicze (present-day Belarus), while their smaller elements are preserved at the Warsaw University of Technology's Faculty of Architecture and the National Museum in Warsaw, as well as other places.⁶⁴

From the various elements recovered from the Church, particularly emblematic was the fate of the malachite columns that were used in the renovation of the exit from the crypt of Polish kings at the Wawel Castle in Cracow, which was realised in the years 1936–1938, the symbolism of Poland's perseverance strengthened by placing the Latin inscription *Corpora dormiunt vigilant anmae* ('Bodies are asleep souls stay awake'),⁶⁵ a tangible example of collective memory inversion.

Once the destruction was completed,⁶⁶ in another case of collective memory inversion, on August 15, 1926 (the then Soldier's Day, today known as Army Day, celebrating the 1920 win of the Polish army over the Bolsheviks in the Battle of Warsaw), in the place of the destroyed Church, the Warsaw battalions of the Polish Army stood in geometrical forms, together creating "a hieroglyph of freedom."⁶⁷ Up to this day, this part of the former Saxon Square remains empty, now only with a cross commemorating the first pilgrimage of

61 *Monitor Polski. Dziennik Urzędowy Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej nr 49* (1923), 1.

62 Zarychta, *op.cit.* 41, 431.

63 Zarychta, *op.cit.* 41, 432.

64 Golimont, *op.cit.* 46, 70–73.

65 Tołłoczko, *op.cit.* 39, 12.

66 The final element of the Church that remained was the building of the former boiler house, which was not remodelled until 1931. Zarychta, *op.cit.* 41, 435.

67 Tomasiak, *op.cit.* 57, 248.

John Paul II to Poland present in the memory field once occupied by Alexander Nevsky's Orthodox Church.⁶⁸ Its fate remains a powerful example of the ways in which cultural objects can be used as the tangible carriers of power within the memory fields, which may be impacted both by construction, perceived here as a triumph of Russian over Polish official narrative, and destruction, with the Polish habitus both visibly impacted by and impacting the country's memory field (and at the same time collective memory) following a crisis through symbolic violence.

Nota bene, the fate of Nevsky's Church has often been used as an argument in favour of the destruction of the Palace of Culture and Science (formerly Stalin's Palace), which was constructed following WWII as a symbol of modernisation coming to Poland from the East,⁶⁹ also considered by many as a "symbol of overtaking Warsaw's public space by the Soviet Union;" however, due to political and economic issues, it remains in place and today is often considered a symbol of Poland's capital.⁷⁰

3.2 *WWII and Systematic Erasure: Evoking the Disappeared Shtetels in the 21st Century*

When states engage in the crime of genocide, the goal is to eradicate not only the group in question but also any traces of its existence. As such, along with the atrocities conducted on a collectivity, its culture is also destroyed. In its pursuit of *Endlösung*, or 'The Final Solution to the Jewish Question', Nazi Germany was responsible not only for the murder of millions of Jews but also for the eradication of shtetels, which for centuries were a permanent fixture of the Central and Eastern European landscape as unique cityscapes. Thus, today, shtetels evoke "nostalgic images resembling scenes from Fiddler on the Roof, as well as of pogroms."⁷¹

The world shtetl is a diminutive coming from the Yiddish *shtot*, or town.⁷² Appearing first in Poland (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), the term was

68 Michalak, *op.cit.* 40, 91.

69 Tomasz Zarycki, "Pułapka imitacji" in Antoni Kukliński and Krzysztof Pawłowski (eds.), *Przyszłość Europy – wyzwania globalne – wybory strategiczne* (Rewasz/Wyższa Szkoła Biznesu National Louis University, Nowy Sącz/Warsaw), 301–309, at 302.

70 Andrzej Szpociński, "Nośniki pamięci, miejsca pamięci," 4 *Sensus Historiae* (2014), 17–26, at 20.

71 Pauline Sliwinski, "Museum as Memoryscape: The Virtual Shtetl Portal of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews," *Museums and the Web* (7 April 2012), available at https://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2012/papers/museum_as_memoryscape_the_virtual_shtetl_porta#ixzz1rU5BDsU5.

72 Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl. The life and death of a small town and the world of Polish Jews* (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, MA/New York, NY, 1997), 11.

later used to describe all towns in Central and Eastern Europe, including in Hungary, Bukovina and Bessarabia.⁷³ It refers to pre-WWII towns acting as intermediaries between the city and the village whereby the Jewish either minority or majority coexisted with its Christian neighbours, together creating a unique socio-cultural and economic space.⁷⁴ While leading separate lives (Jews living in shtetls adhered to traditional customs), they deeply intersected with other ethnicities, who in addition to Poles often also included Ukrainians and Roma:⁷⁵ Jewish “merchants [...] bought and sold the agricultural products of the estates of the local Polish landowners [...]. Its poorer shopkeepers, innkeepers and street vendors eked out their scanty livelihood from the peasant population” coming into town for the market.⁷⁶

As such, Hoffman calls shtetls spaces “where the multicultural experiment was at once most intimate and least tested.”⁷⁷ Various accounts show that the relationship between Poles and Jews in shtetls differed greatly, at times friendly, at others antimonious.⁷⁸ While Jews living there most often considered Poland as their home, traditionally calling it *Po[h]lin*, “a place of rest,”⁷⁹ they created and adhered to their own separate institutions (community governance, schools, social help) and culture, with their own calendar,⁸⁰ fitting well into the Polish social organisation but at the same time separate from the general society.⁸¹

Most shtetls were founded by the Polish nobility as private towns first in the Kingdom of Poland and then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the hopes that the Jewish settlers would revive the countryside areas economically but without endangering the political status of the nobles. As such, Jews were granted “leases on forests, mills, and distilleries, and the latter in turn subcontracted parts of the enterprise to other Jews and thus stimulated more Jewish migration eastward.” With various protections, including a certain amount of self-governance, awarded to the Jewish population, its number rose

73 Samuel D. Kassow, Irina Kopchenova and Mikhail Krutikov, “Introduction” in Irina Kopchenova and Mikhail Krutikov (eds), *The Belarusian Shtetl. History and Memory* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2023), 1–24, at 5.

74 Halina Rusek, “Dziedzictwo i pamięć. Szkic o nieobecnej kulturze polskich Żydów,” 1 *Edukacja Międzykulturowa* (2022), 50–63, at 51; 55.

75 Berenika Koźbiał, “Sztetl – zapomniana historia,” 2 *Euro-Facta* (2010), 167–191, at 171.

76 Dan Miron, “The Literary Image of the Shtetl,” 1:3 *Jewish Social Studies* (1995), 1–43, at 3.

77 Hoffman, *op.cit.* 72, 11.

78 See the account of social interactions in one town: Mirosław Tryczyk, “Sztetl z polską władzą,” 90 *Karta* (2017), 72–85.

79 Koźbiał, *op.cit.* 75, 172.

80 Arkadiusz S. Więch, “Sztetle, Które Zniknęły. Przywracanie Pamięci O Utraconych Wsiach I Miasteczkach W Przestrzeni Dawnej Galicyjskiej Prowincji” 94 *YDK* (2022), 81–90, at 83.

81 Koźbiał, *op.cit.* 75, 185–186.

in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from 30,000 in 1500 to over 800,000 in 1764. Following the loss of independence by the country, the large majority of these found themselves in Russia, which heavily restricted their rights, including the possibility of moving further into the empire.⁸²

Later, the socio-economic changes taking place in the second half of the nineteenth century and in particular in the years before and immediately after WWI further led to extreme poverty among the Jewish population living in shtetls, who were told to 'live on air', a state captured in Marc Chagall's paintings that show the Jewish towns in permanent "suspension."⁸³ As such, in the years 1880–1924, several hundred thousand Jews left for the rapidly growing cities, such as Łódź, Odesa or Warsaw, with up to 2,500,000 Jews emigrating from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe, the US, Argentina and South Africa.⁸⁴

Following WWI, shtetls could have been found most typically in the south (Galicia) and east (Lublin and Podlasie regions) of Poland⁸⁵ – with many others remaining across the border in the Soviet Union.⁸⁶ In regard to the former country, the newly regained independence meant that the situation of its 3,000,000 Jewish inhabitants (10% of the whole population, approximately one-third in big cities, often majority in eastern towns) changed once again, with various political parties taking different approaches in regard to minorities; Jews themselves were also divided in their stance towards Poland.⁸⁷ The situation was worsened by high unemployment and increased economic competition between Jews and other ethnicities.⁸⁸ At the same time, however, in 1928, Poland introduced a law confirming the status of *keheillot* (local communes), thus granting the Jewish communities a certain level of self-governance in regard to taxation, religious jurisdiction and social welfare.⁸⁹ Furthermore, in the 1920s and 1930s, shtetls further cemented their role as Jewish cultural centres, places of not only religious cult but also with "small cinemas, youth associations and political parties, libraries," while continuing their vital "economic function as centres of agriculture, industry, trade, craft and other services."⁹⁰

82 Kassow, Kopchenova and Krutikov, *op.cit.* 73, 5–9.

83 Koźbiał, *op.cit.* 75, 173–174.

84 Kassow, Kopchenova and Krutikov, *op.cit.* 73, 9.

85 Rusek, *op.cit.* 74, 55.

86 Kassow, Kopchenova and Krutikov, *op.cit.* 73, 2.

87 Koźbiał, *op.cit.* 75, 174.

88 Więch, *op.cit.* 80, 84–85.

89 Kassow, Kopchenova and Krutikov, *op.cit.* 73, 9.

90 Natalia Romik, "Post-shtetl: spectral transformations and architectural challenges in the periphery" in Jonathan Bach and Michał Murawski (eds), *Re-Centring the City* (University College London, London, 2020), 129–148, at 130.

The atrocities committed by Nazi Germany during WWII destroyed the Polish Jewish population, and with them shtetl culture: out of 3,000,000 Jews, only between 240,000 and 300,000 remained in the country.⁹¹ As synagogues and, in certain cases, virtually whole towns were destroyed,⁹² most shtetls were turned into ghettos by the Nazi occupiers, whose inhabitants were later deported to concentration camps.⁹³ Even those already dead were not safe: in certain instances, tombstones from Jewish cemeteries were used as building material, for example, to pave roads.⁹⁴

As a result, while physically the towns themselves, for the most part, remained, their former inhabitants – and their culture – did not. The processes of collective forgetting of the difficult past, typical in the wake of cultural trauma, were only strengthened by their Polish repopulation⁹⁵ and reconstruction of buildings, devoiding them of Jewish architectural elements.⁹⁶ The particular historical discourses of amnesia were fostered by the actions of the communist authorities,⁹⁷ which, *inter alia*, included renaming streets associated with the Jewish past, letting cemeteries fall into disuse and either razing the ruined or readapting the remaining synagogues,⁹⁸ as remembrance was restricted to placing a commemorative plaque⁹⁹ or erecting a monument with limited public resonance.¹⁰⁰ Thus, once communism ended, Poland found its memory field in a particular state, with echoes of the collective memories ringing through the decades, despite years of induced forgetting – as Hoffmann notes about the situation in the 1990s,

the villages are still there [...]. A few synagogues still stand, some of them crumbling from neglect and disuse, others preserved and restored to their former dignity. Occasionally, outside the borders of a village, there is a small Jewish cemetery, with weeds climbing up the crooked headstones. A Polish farmer will point up a copse where the Jews were rounded up by the Nazi and shot; in a few places, modest monuments have been erected to those who perished. Relics, scattered and

91 Hoffman, *op.cit.* 72, 2.

92 Romik, *op.cit.* 90, 137; 140.

93 Rusek, *op.cit.* 74, 56; Tryczyk, *op.cit.* 78, 85.

94 Zuzanna Radzik, "Miasteczka odzywają," 558 *Więź* (2005), 31–42, at 33–34.

95 Romik, *op.cit.* 90, 130–131.

96 Rusek, *op.cit.* 74, 57.

97 Hoffman, *op.cit.* 72, 3–4.

98 Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, "The transnational dynamics of local remembrance: The Jewish past in a former shtetl in Poland," 11 *Memory Studies* (2018), 301–314, at 302–303.

99 Rusek, *op.cit.* 74, 57.

100 Törnquist-Plewa, *op.cit.* 98, 306.

enigmatic, as of a lost ancient civilization. But the pulsing Jewish world that was here, the small shops and stalls, the bustle of people, carts, horses, the sounds of Yiddish and Hebrew – these are no more. [...] That life can almost be intuited beyond the curtain of abrupt absence. We think we can almost cross the curtain; but we cannot.¹⁰¹

This erasure of both the shtetls and their collective memory has not been complete, as they became a subject of many Polish literary interventions since WWII: to cite Wojciech Młynarski,

Those towns are no more
 The dust of forgetting set on
 Those streets, fox hats, swarm of merchants
 [...]
 Lilac fog envelopes
 The forgotten world and floats, floats further into the horizon
 With a rooster head and a ram head
 A white cloud disappears far away
 Just like painted by Mr. Chagall.¹⁰²

Or, as Antoni Słonimski put it, also invoking the aforementioned Chagall's imagery to describe the already foreign past,

Disappeared have the last remains, Jewish rags,
 Blood was covered with sand, traces cleaned up
 And grey lime used to whiten the walls clean
 Like after some plague or for a grand holiday.

One moon sparkles here, cold, pale, foreign,
 Just out of town on the road, when night is kindling,
 My Jewish relatives, poetic boys,
 Will not find the two golden moons of Chagall.

Those moons already go over a different planet,
 They flew away scared off by grim silence.
 [...]

¹⁰¹ Hoffman, *op.cit.* 72, 2.

¹⁰² Wojciech Młynarski, "Tak, jak malował pan Chagall," *Wiersze*, available at: <https://wiersze.co/chagall.htm>.

These towns are no longer where biblical chants
Wind joined with a Polish song and Slavic sorrow.¹⁰³

Following the 1989 transition, however, the situation began to change, with the processes of collective evoking, the return of collective memory,¹⁰⁴ slowly taking place in the former shtetls, due to various impulses (for example, a rediscovery of drawings made by a Jewish child in the 1930s¹⁰⁵ or the bringing and translation of the memoirs of local Jewish survivors living in the US¹⁰⁶).

Along with the return of certain property to the Jewish community under the 1997 law,¹⁰⁷ a wide variety of both top-down and bottom-up actions took place, ranging from collecting testimonies,¹⁰⁸ placing commemorative plaques¹⁰⁹ and monuments,¹¹⁰ conserving cemeteries,¹¹¹ renaming natural heritage,¹¹² establishing associations tasked with preserving the memory of the past,¹¹³ preparing edited collections,¹¹⁴ uncovering old signboards,¹¹⁵ readapting old synagogues as cultural centres,¹¹⁶ renovating the more hidden traces of the Jewish past (e.g., private places of prayer),¹¹⁷ leading public walks tracing the local Jewish past,¹¹⁸ organising Jewish cuisine workshops,¹¹⁹ creating new museums¹²⁰ and readapting old exhibitions,¹²¹ establishing an online platform *Virtual Shtetl Portal* tasked with creating “an interactive database of information about Jewish communities from over 2,200 towns across Poland,”¹²² initiating youth meetings with Israel,¹²³ and even organising commemorative sending of

103 Antoni Slonimski, “Elegia miasteczek żydowskich,” *Wiersze*, available at: <https://wiersze.co/elegiaz.htm>.

104 Sadowski, *op.cit.* 11, 270.

105 Więch, *op.cit.* 80, 86.

106 Törnquist-Plewa, *op.cit.* 98, 303–305.

107 Romik, *op.cit.* 90, 138–140.

108 Radzik, *op.cit.* 94, 34.

109 Törnquist-Plewa, *op.cit.* 98, 307–398.

110 Radzik, *op.cit.* 94, 34.

111 Törnquist-Plewa, *op.cit.* 98, 305.

112 Radzik, *op.cit.* 94, 37.

113 Romik, *op.cit.* 90, 144–145.

114 Radzik, *op.cit.* 94, 39.

115 Więch, *op.cit.* 80, 87.

116 Rusek, *op.cit.* 74, 59.

117 Radzik, *op.cit.* 94, 39–40.

118 Więch, *op.cit.* 80, 87.

119 Radzik, *op.cit.* 94, 42.

120 Romik, *op.cit.* 90, 130.

121 Törnquist-Plewa, *op.cit.* 98, 309–310.

122 Sliwinski, *op.cit.* 71.

123 Törnquist-Plewa, *op.cit.* 98, 305.

the letters to former Jewish inhabitants of the shtetl to their now non-existent addresses.¹²⁴

While quite often this remembrance of the Jewish past of the former shtetls takes the form of “separate little islands, each of which emerged of its own accord and which together do not make up a unified archipelago,”¹²⁵ they represent a powerful testament to the force of collective memory in general and urban memory in particular: even when the state attempts to erase them using both physical (Nazi Germany) and symbolic (communist authorities) violence, as long as there are people who remember and certain physical traces of heritage may still be found, these memories will remain permanent fixtures of the memory fields in question, returning from the metaphorical exile even after many years.

3.3 *The Reconfigurations of Communist Megalomania: Bucharest's Palace of Parliament*

Collective forgetting, which the communist authorities fostered in regard to the shtetl past of many Polish cities, was just one of the many particular forms in which the new regimes engaged in symbolic violence within public spaces of Central and Eastern Europe following WWII. Another was megalomania, the idea to leave a permanent marker on a country's public spaces – such as in the case of the aforementioned Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. Romania was no different in this regard.

The country was a monarchy prior to WWII and the later communist coup, with the second ruler of the independent Romania, later prince and ultimately king Carol I not only actively engaged in the rebuilding of Bucharest to fit the 19th century standards of a modern European capital but also constructing an impressive palace in Peleş planned as “a national monument, the cradle of his dynasty and a visible proof that he was a true and patriotic Romanian.” The country's later communist dictator, Nicolae Ceauşescu, chose not to use the former site of the monarch, not only due to symbolic reasons but also because he believed the palace was haunted and “infected with the deadly fungus *Serpula lacrymans*.” Instead, Ceauşescu decided to raise “his own ‘altar’ in the form of the People's Palace in Bucharest, now the Palace of Parliament, a building that

¹²⁴ Radzik, *op.cit.* 94, 42.

¹²⁵ Mikhail Lurie and Natalia Savina, “Representations of the Jewish Past in Today's Hlybokaye. Memory on Demand?” in Irina Kopchenova and Mikhail Krutikov (eds), *The Belarusian Shtetl. History and Memory* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2023), 171–197, at 189.

eloquently expresses his vulgarity and his destructive megalomania¹²⁶ – to cite John Villiers.

Bucharest, a city with over 550 years of history, has for the most part been shaped by two rivers flowing through its centre, in the 19th century spreading around the Royal Court, expanding into the neighbouring villages and towns during the 20th.¹²⁷ Throughout that time, “street network developed in a natural way, in a complicated system but converging towards the churches.” This organic city tissue was forever altered during the times of communism, when in March 1977 came an earthquake of 7.4 degrees on Richter scale, damaging a significant number of historic buildings in Bucharest, which later were often destroyed, with a particularly large number of churches razed, in certain instances including those that were not damaged by the earthquake.¹²⁸

Following years of the policy of building fast and cheap blocks of flats throughout the country, many of which were placed in Bucharest seemingly intentionally “in positions and at angles that sabotage the perspectives created through the aesthetics belonging to past eras of urban planning,”¹²⁹ the earthquake permitted Ceaușescu to completely change Bucharest’s shape, providing him with “a pretext to create a *tabula rasa*” on which he could construct an imposing Civic Centre inspired by his 1971 visit to North Korea, the focal point of which was supposed to be the People’s House.¹³⁰ The idea was to create a new administrative centre,¹³¹ thus changing, through the destruction of its cultural heritage, ‘the Little Paris of the East’, as Bucharest was often dubbed, into “the first socialist capital for the new socialist man,” as such destroying “any link to the past that did not culminate in his regime”¹³² and establishing new collective memories. These plans were further fuelled

126 John Villiers, “It is the sovereign who makes the palace, as a stone in a field may become an altar’: Bucharest under Carol I and the Building of Peleş,” 15:1 *The Court Historian* (2010), 71–88, at 86–88.

127 Diana Gheorghe and Iuliana Armaș, “Geomorphological Changes in Bucharest City over the Last 150 Years,” 21:2 *Journal of Engineering Studies and Research* (2015), 41–47, at 41.

128 Ionut Sandric, Bogdan Mihai, Ionut Savulescu, Bogdan Suditu and Zenaida Chitu, “Change Detection Analysis for Urban Development in Bucharest-Romania, using High Resolution Satellite Imagery,” *Urban Remote Sensing Joint Event* (2007), 1–8, at 2–4.

129 Jane Goodall and Nicholas Haeffner, “Bucharest in recovery. From the ashes of the past,” 37 *Griffith Review* 1–15, at 6.

130 Ger Duijzings, “Dictators, dogs, and survival in a post-totalitarian city” in Matthew Gandy (ed.), *Urban Constellations* (Jovis Verlag, Berlin, 2011), 145–148, at 145.

131 Renata Salecl, “The state as a work of art. The trauma of Ceausescu’s Disneyland” in Neil Leach (ed.), *Architecture and Revolution. Contemporary perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, London/New York, NY, 1999), 92–111, at 100.

132 Michael Vachon, “The House of the People,” 10:4 *World Policy Journal* (1993/1994), 59–63, at 59.

by Ceaușescu's "obsession with his own grandiosity" and increasing – at that time – megalomania.¹³³

In the hopes of moving away from the historic centre, on Bucharest's outskirts¹³⁴ three whole neighbourhoods were levelled: Izvor, Uranus and Antim.¹³⁵ From historic buildings, only the Mihai Voda church was saved from destruction and moved 600 m outside of the planned construction zone.¹³⁶ As a result of this destruction, 100 hectares¹³⁷ or a fifth of Bucharest was razed, including 9,300 houses, over a dozen churches and one cathedral, almost all of these historic buildings.¹³⁸ Some 40,000 people were relocated to apartment blocks in the suburbs, in many cases forced to leave their dogs, previously living in courtyards of the city centre's houses, behind, leading to a large stray dog issue in Bucharest that continues to this day.¹³⁹

The destruction, nicknamed by the locals "Hiroshima,"¹⁴⁰ took place in two phases: (1) 1984–1987, when whole areas were levelled, and (2) 1987–1989, when selective razing took place, as the raising costs limited the scale of demolition. As such, at the end of 1989, when the transition from communism to democracy took place, in certain parts of the city, only "islands" of the historic Bucharest remained, "preserved behind the communist buildings."¹⁴¹

Of these, the Palace of Parliament stands out as the largest building in Europe and second to Pentagon in the world. Standing on top of a hill on almost 35 hectares of surrounding grounds, with four floors and a thousand rooms filled with marble, silk draperies, handmade carpets, wainscoting and gold leaf covered pillars, as well as crystal chandeliers, it has a surface area of over 12 hectares, with the largest room, Romania Hall, itself boasting almost 200 m². Built by hundreds of architects¹⁴² and approximately 20,000 workers at an estimated (in 1993) cost of US\$1,500,000,000 in a seemingly neo-classical look, it corresponds with the so-called Soviet wedding cake architecture (although it is typically claimed that it was inspired by the local Brâncovenesc style). Ceaușescu was closely involved in the design of the Palace, often

133 Salecl, *op.cit.* 131, 100–101.

134 Andreea Mihalache, "Re-Inventing the Center: Urban Memory, Political Travel and the Palace of the Parliament in Bucharest, Romania" in Arijit Sen and Jennifer Johung (eds), *Landscapes of Mobility. Culture, Politics, and Placemaking* (Routledge, Oxon/New York, NY, 2016), 105–132, at 109.

135 Gheorghe and Armaș, *op.cit.* 127, 46.

136 Sandric et al., *op.cit.* 128, 4.

137 Mihalache, *op.cit.* 134, 111.

138 Vachon, *op.cit.* 132, 59.

139 Duijzings, *op.cit.* 130, 146–147.

140 Goodall and Haeffner, *op.cit.* 128, 6.

141 Sandric et al., *op.cit.* 128, 4.

142 Salecl, *op.cit.* 131, 100.

single-handedly altering the plans, as the wide array of architects responsible for the project were supposedly not allowed to consult one another for fear of sabotage.¹⁴³

Planned alongside the People's Palace was the Boulevard of the Victory of Socialism (now Unity Boulevard); it was "deliberately designed to be two metres wider and six metres longer than the Champs Élysées" in Paris¹⁴⁴ and, four kilometres long, it was "driven through the centre of old Bucharest," further destroying "much of the historic fabric of the city"¹⁴⁵ also impacting the river, a part of which was covered as it did not fit the dictator's grandiose plans.¹⁴⁶ Alongside the Boulevard, blocks of flats were built, to a certain degree corresponding with the abovementioned Brâncovenesc style,¹⁴⁷ but *de facto* eclectic, rendering them a 'kitschy' quality.¹⁴⁸

Following the 1989 revolution and the deaths of Ceaușescu and his wife, as the Palace was not yet finished but at its final stage of construction,¹⁴⁹ different ideas were proposed as to its future, ranging from demolition,¹⁵⁰ to leaving it permanently unfinished as a symbol of regime atrocities, to housing a United Nations headquarters or a casino.¹⁵¹ Ultimately, the idea of readaptation won, and since 1995, a conference centre, the lower chamber of the Romanian parliament¹⁵² and several ministries moved in, followed by the country's Senate in 2005, thus cementing the new name as the Palace of Parliament. Furthermore, several parts of the Palace were made available to the public, and in 2004, the Museum of Contemporary Art opened in the rear part of the building.¹⁵³ Additionally, on a part of the remaining (despite numerous

143 Vachon, *op.cit.* 132, 59–60.

144 Villiers, *op.cit.* 126, 87.

145 Neil Leach, "Erasing the traces The 'denazification' of postrevolutionary Berlin and Bucharest" in Neil Leach (ed.), *The Hieroglyphics of Space. Reading and experiencing the modern metropolis* (Routledge, London/New York, NY, 2002), 80–91, at 81.

146 Salecl, *op.cit.* 131, 102.

147 Vachon, *op.cit.* 132, 62.

148 Salecl, *op.cit.* 131, 103.

149 Salecl, *op.cit.* 131, 100.

150 The reshaping 354

151 Vachon, *op.cit.* 132, 63.

152 Mihalache, *op.cit.* 134, 111.

153 Carmen Popescu, "The Hammer and the Cross: Old Myths, New Symbols in Post-Socialist Bucharest" in Dominique Arel et al., *Twenty Years Later. 1991–2011. The Reshaping of Space and Identity. The Proceedings of the International Congress Moscow, 29 September – 1 October 2011 Moscow* (Russian State University for the Humanities/N.N. Micklukho-Macklai Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology/The Association for the Study of Nationalities/The French-Russian Research Center for Social Sciences and Humanities in Moscow, Moscow, 2012), 353–363, at 355.

international competitions) “urban void” left by the widespread razing,¹⁵⁴ in 2010, in Palace’s vicinity, the construction began of a new cathedral, set to be the largest Orthodox church in the world,¹⁵⁵ thus further cementing the changes that took place on that memory field – realising, in a way, however, Ceaușescu’s vision of totality of state present in one area by linking the political, the cultural and the religious all in one place.¹⁵⁶

Today, the Palace of Parliament is considered to be both Bucharest’s symbol¹⁵⁷ and a top tourist attraction.¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, people’s reactions still vary: “it is beautiful and horrible at the same time, provoking both admiration and disgust.”¹⁵⁹ While no one doubts its status as a tourist landmark, only the younger generation perceives the Palace with pride, both as “a symbol of Bucharest and a representation of themselves.” Conversely, a significant number of people fail to identify with the Palace, in spite of the many years that have passed since 1989, still not feeling that society has an actual “symbolic ownership of the building,” associating it with politicians currently occupying it.¹⁶⁰ It also needs to be noted that, as the area surrounding the People’s Palace was restricted for the large part of the 1980s, locals had to learn how to navigate around it; as a result, even today, older inhabitants of Bucharest often avoid its vicinity.¹⁶¹

These show the limits of symbolic violence and of the power of the official narrative – ever since the 1989 transition, successive Romanian governments worked diligently to change the negative associations with the Palace, hoping that its readaptation as a site of democratic power on the one side and of contestation (as housing also contemporary art) on the other will allow the

154 Mihalache, *op.cit.* 134, 111–112.

155 Amos Chapple, “World’s Largest Eastern Orthodox Cathedral Takes Shape Above Bucharest,” *Radio Free Europe. Radio Liberty* (16.01.2023), available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-cathedral-bucharest-construction-largest-eastern-orthodox/32225509.html>.

156 Salecl, *op.cit.* 131, 104; Mihalache, *op.cit.* 134, 128.

157 Ana-Claudia Țapardel and Florin-Alexandru Alexe, “Strategic Directions for the Bucharest Strategy and City Brand,” 14:6 *Amfiteatru Economic Journal* (2012), 720–737, at 735.

158 Aurelia-Felicia Stăncioiu, Nicolae Teodorescu, Ion Pârgaru, Anca-Daniela Vlădoi and Codruța Băltescu, “Tourism Heritage – An Important Dimension for Assessing/Shaping a City’s Image. Study Case: Bucharest,” *XVIII:4 Theoretical and Applied Economics* (2011), 159–170, at 168.

159 Salecl, *op.cit.* 131, 100.

160 Irina S. Dragomir, “*The building at the outskirts of history.*” *The development of place-meaning and place attachment to the Palace of Parliament, Bucharest, Romania* (Master’s Thesis, University of Groningen, 2019), 41.

161 Duijzings, *op.cit.* 130, 145.

country to “restore moral dignity” and “exorcise the past” in the country.¹⁶² With the new narrative being that “the Palace is the nation, and if Bucharest is the symbolic centre of Romania, then the Palace is the symbolic centre of the city,”¹⁶³ the authorities began altering its story told to visitors already in the 1990s:¹⁶⁴ for example, during the tour of the building, Ceaușescu is seldom referenced and his wife, Elena, not at all;¹⁶⁵ similarly, the history of the demolitions and ensuing displacement is underplayed.¹⁶⁶ Instead, the fact that the building was constructed from Romanian materials by Romanians is continuously stressed, thus creating the new official narrative of the Palace “as embodiment of the Romanian homeland” in an attempt to hide the difficult collective memories of the past.¹⁶⁷ As Mihalache remarks, the once “erstwhile contested edifice has ironically been turned into an identity symbol of the people that it was originally meant to overpower and control.”¹⁶⁸

Nota bene, contemporary Romanian politicians seem to have learned a particular lesson from Ceaușescu: in 2013, a historic market hall in Bucharest was demolished as it stood in a way of a new bypass; the destruction of neighbouring buildings also impacted the local Roma and underprivileged populations, which were forced to relocate.¹⁶⁹ Despite the lack of success, the state’s symbolic violence capabilities over Bucharest’s memory fields seem to be alive and well.

3.4 *The Post-Communist Reckoning with the Past: From the War of Monuments to New Narratives in Estonia*

In addition to the aforementioned fostering of official narratives through the selective policies of renovation and destruction, the induction of collective forgetting and devastating megalomania, the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe also engaged in symbolic violence over public spaces through the construction of numerous monuments more or less directly linked with the new authorities. In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the majority of countries of the region engaged in decommunisation processes taking place on various levels, including the cityscapes, freeing the memory fields of the remnants of the difficult past.¹⁷⁰ On the forefront of this battle over

162 Popescu, *op.cit.* 153, 361.

163 Mihalache, *op.cit.* 134, 121.

164 Vachon, *op.cit.* 132, 60–61.

165 Goodall and Haeffner, *op.cit.* 128, 10.

166 Mihalache, *op.cit.* 134, 125.

167 Leach, *op.cit.* 145, 88–87.

168 Mihalache, *op.cit.* 134, 125.

169 Duijzings, *op.cit.* 130, 148.

170 See, e.g., my study of Poland in this context: Sadowski, *op.cit.* 4, 223–225.

public spaces were the Baltic Countries, of which Estonia is an emblematic example.

Estonia has had a particular history: proclaiming independence for the first time on February 24, 1918, for centuries, the country's territory came under various influences, with notable periods of Swedish (1645–1710) and Russian (1710–WWI) rule. Following the liberation from German occupation in 1918, the young country had to fight for its independence against Bolshevik Russia, with the Estonian War of Independence ended by the signing of the Treaty of Tartu in 1920. Then, during WWII, Estonia came to be occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union (1940–1941), which was followed by German occupation (1941–1944), with the country once again then coming under Soviet influence until 1991.¹⁷¹ The many changes in power impacted the country's memory fields, among which of particular interest here are those in the aftermath of 1991, in which two major examples of collective memory inversion may have been observed: the case of the Bronze Soldier being *de facto* replaced by the Victory Column and the case of the Memorial to the Victims of Communism's recontextualisation of the Soviet Memorial in Maarjamäe.

Before delving into these two cases, a certain background on the Estonian memory policy towards its monuments needs to be given. Already since the end of the 1980s, the process of renovating monuments commemorating the War of Independence, constructed during the interwar period and then “systematically destroyed” by the Soviets, took place, becoming “an essential part of undermining Soviet power and restoring sovereign statehood.”¹⁷² In the wake of regaining independence in 1991, a number of monuments linked to the Soviet Union were removed, first torn down spontaneously, later as a policy of the new democratic government, which often chose to relocate them to less prominent spaces.¹⁷³ That period also saw the proliferation of so-called “banal nationalism,” with Estonian flags appearing on the roads and local products and public spaces illuminated in the national colours.¹⁷⁴

171 Toomas Hiio, “On the historical identity of the Estonians and the politics of memory,” 1 *Institute of National Remembrance Review* (2019), 68–116, at 69–70; 74; 81.

172 David J. Smith, “‘Woe from Stones’: Commemoration, Identity Politics and Estonia’s ‘War of Monuments,’” 39:4 *Journal of Baltic Studies* (2008), 419–430, at 420.

173 Federico Bellentani, “A Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments. An Analysis of the Multiple Meanings of Monuments in Tallinn, Estonia” in José Luis Caivano (ed.), *Actas 14º Congreso Mundial de Semiótica: Trayectorias Buenos Aires Septiembre 2019. Tomo 6. Espacialidades y ritualizaciones* (Asociación Argentina de Semiótica/Área Transdepartamental de Crítica de Artes de la Universidad Nacional de las Artes, Buenos Aires, 2020), 189–201, at 193

174 Francisco Martínez, *Remains of the Soviet Past in Estonia. An Anthropology of Forgetting, Repair and Urban Traces* (UCL Press, London, 2018), 224.

Importantly, it needs to be noted that following the years of Soviet occupation, Estonia is not a monocultural society; a large “Russian-speaking immigrant community” came to live in the country following WWII, and many of them remained there after 1991. With differing levels of integration, these communities have a set of collective memories distinct from the Estonian majority, one for which the now displaced Soviet monuments remain major focal points.¹⁷⁵

It was in such circumstances that the so-called war of monuments took place in the country at the beginning of the 21st century. It began with the construction of a statue of “an Estonian soldier in German uniform, resembling German [Nazi] recruitment posters” in one of Estonian cities in 2002. Following public outcry, the monument was not officially inaugurated but hastily removed. However, soon afterward, a similar monument was built in a different town and once again removed due to controversy. This led to a polarisation of Estonian society, given that the Soviet statue of the Bronze Soldier still stood in Tallin’s city centre (albeit with a different commemorative plaque since the transition).¹⁷⁶

During the 2005 anniversary of the end of WWII, the “monument became the epicentre of tensions between Russia and Estonia,” as the country’s Russian-speaking community gathered around it, leading to clashes with ethnic Estonians and the monument ultimately being sealed off by the police.¹⁷⁷ One of over a hundred Soviet monuments to the WWII left in the country,¹⁷⁸ their issue was not previously regulated, given that Estonia, unlike many other countries of the region, did not sign a particular treaty with Russia regarding the status of Soviet monuments and war cemeteries.¹⁷⁹

As tensions grew among the divided – not necessarily along ethnic lines – society, further fuelled by politicians during the 2006–2007 election period,¹⁸⁰ in January 2007, the country’s parliament promulgated the *Law on the Protection of War Burial Sites*, thus establishing a legal avenue for the relocation of the statue, which ultimately took place in the early morning of

175 Smith, *op.cit.* 172, 420–421.

176 Aliaksei Kazharski and Andrey Makarychev, “From the Bronze Soldier to the ‘Bloody Marshal’: Monument Wars and Russia’s Aesthetic Vulnerability in Estonia and the Czech Republic,” 36:4 *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* (2022) 1151–1176, at 1157.

177 Lina Klymenko, “Forging common history Russia’s cultural statecraft and the Soviet Second World War monuments in Europe” in Tuomas Forsberg and Sirke Mäkinen, *Russia’s Cultural Statecraft* (Routledge, Oxon/New York, NY, 2022), 75–97, at 87.

178 Smith, *op.cit.* 172, 422.

179 Klymenko, *op.cit.* 177, 81–82.

180 Smith, *op.cit.* 172, 426.

April 27, 2007. Proponents of keeping the monument in place engaged in two days of rioting in the capital, the so-called Bronze Night, during which one Russian citizen was killed.¹⁸¹ Russia's reaction was also particularly headed, with attacks on diplomats and a blockade of the Estonian Embassy taking place in the country.¹⁸² Today, despite its relocation, the monument remains of major importance for the Estonian Russian community, approximately 10,000 members of which gather around it annually to celebrate the end of WWII,¹⁸³ with also Estonian politicians acknowledging its importance.¹⁸⁴

At the same time, however, a vivid example of collective memory inversion took place in the city centre, as in 2009, 500 m from Bronze Soldier's former location, the Victory Column was constructed as a memorial to those who fought with Bolshevik Russia during the War of Independence. Despite the frequent lukewarm and even negative public reactions related to its aesthetics and clear politicisation,¹⁸⁵ it is considered the most prominent of Estonia's post-1991 monuments – and it asserted the authorities' position as winners of the War of Monuments.¹⁸⁶

A second example of collective memory inversion in Estonia regards the memory complex in Maarjamäe. A place where approximately 3,000 of German, Russian, Estonian and Finnish soldiers are buried, it was where since 1960, and in particular in the years 1965–1975, the Soviets constructed various statues, monuments and sculptures, including an eternal flame, all commemorating those who died fighting against Nazism. While never completely finished, it was the place of celebration of the final withdrawal of Russian troops in 1994, after which the eternal flame was extinguished and the whole complex left to fall into disuse, despite significant interest among the tourists.¹⁸⁷

In its direct vicinity, in 2018, the Memorial of Victims of Communism was unveiled as an element of celebrations of 100 years of Estonian independence. Listing over 22,000 names of those who were killed by the Soviet regime, it is composed of two parts,¹⁸⁸ as well as an online database component, and

181 Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, "Monument wars in the Baltic states" 6 *New Eastern Europe* (2016) 165–169, at 166.

182 Smith, *op.cit.* 172, 426.

183 Klymenko, *op.cit.* 177, 82.

184 Smith, *op.cit.* 172, 427.

185 Federico Bellentani, *The Meanings of the Built Environment. A Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments in the Post-Soviet Era* (De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, MA, 2021), 110–111.

186 Bellentani, *op.cit.* 173, 196–198.

187 Francisco Martínez, "Memory, Don't Speak! Monumental neglect and memorial sacrifice in contemporary Estonia," 29:1 *cultural geographies* (2022) 63–81, at 69–71.

188 Hiio, *op.cit.* 171, 95.

is complemented by the restored German cemetery with a new monument in its vicinity¹⁸⁹ and the nearby Estonian History Museum, located in a former Museum of Revolution, which houses some of the removed Soviet monuments.¹⁹⁰ Through such a reconfiguration of the memory field, Bellentani argues that, rather than overwriting, a rewriting of memory took place;¹⁹¹ I disagree with such classification, as the lack of maintenance of the Soviet memorial, which is left to the elements, is clearly contrasted with the preserved German cemetery and the new monument, making it clear which official narrative took over the public space of Maarjamäe.

Nevertheless, looking at the big picture of the Estonian memory field today, it may be characterised as lacking consistency: while in principle the Soviet cultural heritage has been rebuked, rather than destroyed, it quite often has simply been removed and placed in less prominent locations, such as the 1905 Revolution memorial in Tallin's Tammsaare Park,¹⁹² or coexists with the new or renovated Estonian heritage, such as in the case of Narva, whereby it stands next to the reconstructed Swedish Lion and monument to the independence and Soviet deportations; in this case, even the Lenin statue has been relocated to the city's castle rather than destroyed, standing next to a commemorative plaque referencing Finnish anti-Bolshevik fighters.¹⁹³ As such, in its goals of placating both the Estonian majority and the Russian-speaking minority, the symbolic violence exercised by the authorities over public spaces may be characterised as contradictory.

Another reason behind this phenomenon might be that, as Martínez notes, at the beginning, "the degradation of the Soviet past arose as *ad hoc* to the abrupt social transformation and the need to build up the new state;" however, in the present day, processes of distancing itself from the difficult past can be observed, particularly within the younger generations, as evidenced by the renaming of Tallin's Museum of Occupation to House of Freedom.¹⁹⁴ It is rather likely, however, that the Russo-Ukraine war, which has impacted the memory fields in the whole region by exhuming the difficult collective memories of Russian nationalism, will slow down, if not reverse, that trend – already following the invasion of Crimea, certain remaining Soviet memorials in the Baltic States have faced vandalism or artistic reconfigurations.¹⁹⁵

189 Bellentani, *op.cit.* 185, 134–136.

190 Martínez, *op.cit.* 187, 75.

191 Bellentani, *op.cit.* 185, 135.

192 Vaike Haas, "Tammsaare Park's lost landmarks of revolution, Sovietera path layout, and pedestrian use: Tallinn, Estonia," 52:2 *Journal of Baltic Studies* (2021), 193–220, at 217.

193 Smith, *op.cit.* 172, 423.

194 Martínez, *op.cit.* 174, 225–226.

195 Kuczyńska-Zonik, *op.cit.* 181, 168.

3.5 *The Illiberal Return to the Past: Hungary's Museums and FIDESZ*

With the exception of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe followed a similar path in the aftermath of the post-communist transformations, with liberal democracy replacing the Soviet authoritarian systems and capitalism taking the place of central planning; that period was also characterised by increased future orientation and the idea of living the past behind. This changed in the second decade of the 21st century, with illiberal democracy taking hold first in Hungary in 2010 and then Poland in 2015. The new system has been characterised as constructed in opposition to liberal democracy, a majoritarian democracy centred around the idea of the state, at the same time rejecting liberal values and norms and upholding human rights – all implemented using a variety of legal and political means.¹⁹⁶ Among these particularly notable is the turn to, or return of, the past, as, unlike the liberal parties of the region focusing on the future and modernity, the illiberal regimes take a particular interest in tradition, remembering the glorious past and the intertwined mechanisms of collective evoking and forgetting,¹⁹⁷ which also leads them to reconfigure public spaces.¹⁹⁸

Among these, of particular interest here are museum exhibitions, which, as any element of memory fields, are susceptible to symbolic violence, taking on a major role in the construction and strengthening of the official narrative. As Pető notes, museums grant authenticity to the “events, customs, and emotions” on display, thus allowing the authorities to ‘redefine’ heritage so that it shapes a society’s collective memories along the lines supported by the authorities.¹⁹⁹

Hungary has a long museum tradition: the National Museum was established in 1802, and over the next 150 years, it was joined by many local and private initiatives; as such, coming out of WWII, Budapest could boast five large museums, based on the divided collection of the National Museum, as well as many others around the country. The new communist authorities centralised the governing of the museums, which came under the purvey of the Ministry of Education, while their research was supervised by the

196 Mirośław M. Sadowski, “Central Europe in the Search of (Lost) Identity. The Illiberal Swerve” in Alexandra Mercescu (ed.), *Constitutional Identities in Central and Eastern Europe. The CEE Yearbook vol. 8* (Peter Lang, Berlin, 2020), 173–193, at 176–177.

197 See Mirośław M. Sadowski, “Law and Collective Memory in the Service of Illiberalism. Through the Looking-Glass: Transformation or a Reactionary Revolution?,” *XVIII:1 Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe – Krakow International Studies* (2021), 107–128.

198 See Sadowski, *op.cit.* 4, 221–225.

199 Andrea Pető, “Revisionist histories, ‘future memories’: far-right memorialization practices in Hungary,” *18:1 European Politics and Society* (2017), 41–51, at 46.

Hungarian Academy of Sciences.²⁰⁰ In the next forty-five years, the network of museums grew exponentially, as almost every locality in the country boasted “an ethnographic exhibition of some kind,” with “almost all county seats” presenting “archaeological displays.” These exhibitions were not only, for a large part, lacking in historical content but also rather than visitor-oriented, presenting the official narrative chosen by the communist authorities. As such, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, exhibits in Hungarian museums were often limited, while the institutions themselves chronically underfinanced.²⁰¹

In the years since the 1989 transition, Hungarian museums underwent a number of changes. They came under the purvey of the Museum of Culture which, following the weakening of centralisation in the spirit of the democratisation, while respecting their autonomy in 2000, re-established Museums Supervision Authority, with the supervisors (*szakfelügyelő*) able to carry checks in the different institutions. Furthermore, in 2003, a country-wide museum strategy was developed for the first time since the transformation. At the same time, museums started receiving increased funding (although reduced since the budgetary cuts beginning in 2006), also coming from the European Union.²⁰²

Such was the situation when Viktor Orbán's second administration began its work at turning Hungary into an illiberal democracy in 2010. Its policy in regard to the past, however, appeared already during the first time in power (1998–2002), with the fundamentals for what I would call the illiberal museum policy firmly laid already back in the day, and only amplified in the years since 2010.

Perhaps one of the first signs of the new approach was the moving of St. Stephen's (first king of Hungary) Holy Crown from the National Museum to the country's parliament, following a cruise down the Danube to Esztergom, Hungary's former capital in 2000.²⁰³ This move of an object of cultural heritage of not only historical but also religious and political significance to the heart of the governing power in a democracy – the legislature – can only be perceived

200 Ferenc Fülep, “La reconstruction des musées hongrois,” 8:2 *Museum International* (1956), 88–100, at 88.

201 Géza Buzinkay, “Museums in Hungary: special privileges versus the community,” 47:3 *Museum International* (1995), 35–39, at 35–38.

202 Gábor Ébli, “From Ivory Towers to Visitor Centres? Hungarian Museum Policy in the Context of the European Union” in Lill Eilertsen and Arne Bugge Amundsen (eds), *Museum Policies in Europe 1990 – 2010: Negotiating Professional and Political Utopia. EuNaMus Report No 3* (Linköping University Electronic Press, Linköping, 2012), 102–125, at 102–112.

203 Victoria Harms, “A Tale of Two Revolutions: Hungary's 1956 and the Un-doing of 1989,” 3:3 *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* (2017), 479–499, at 490.

as an element of the illiberal official narrative, foreshadowing the later course of the symbolic violence used by Orbán's government.

Ultimately, the illiberal museum policy came to be epitomised by the construction of the House of Terror (*Terror Háza*), a museum dedicated to the fascist and communist atrocities committed in Hungary, which opened in 2002. Its director, historian Mária Schmidt, used to be a political advisor to Viktor Orbán.²⁰⁴ Housed in the former headquarters of the fascist Arrow Cross party, later used by the Stalinist secret service, it was inaugurated on February 24, the day commemorating the Victims of Communism, as an institution dedicated to “the period from 1944 to 1989 as an unbroken reign of terror,”²⁰⁵ with a particular focus, however, on the communist atrocities – out of forty-four rooms, only three discuss the Hungarian fascism and the Holocaust.²⁰⁶

At the same time, the museum's “curators pay very little attention to the materiality of the site or the reconstruction of its actual history” and are rather interested in presenting a particular narrative,²⁰⁷ as the institution “offers a curious mixture of original, unidentified, replica and decoration objects throughout its exhibition rooms.” Departing from a traditional museum approach, the House of Terror uses a mixture of multimedia installation and material objects, creating a “spectacle,” an “experience of such history” evoking “various contexts for those who possess memories about them” to install its narrative in the visitors – which, contrary to what Apor suggests, rather than creating depersonalised, political “abstract allegorical meanings” and generating a distance with the victims,²⁰⁸ in my personal experience of visiting the museum succeeds in establishing an underlying sense of identification with the fate of the Hungarians.²⁰⁹

In its content, the museum “symbolically equalizes the Nazi and the communist eras,”²¹⁰ as its exhibit ignores the antisemitic discrimination in Hungary prior to 1944, placing the blame for the deportations of Hungarian Jews solely on the upper echelon of the Arrow Cross party, while the general

204 Anna Manchin, “Staging Traumatic Memory: Competing Narratives of State Violence in Post-Communist Hungarian Museums,” 45:2–3 *East European Jewish Affairs* (2015), 236–251, at 238–239.

205 Harms, *op.cit.* 203, 490.

206 Manchin, *op.cit.* 204, 240.

207 Ljiljana Radonić, “The Holocaust Template – Memorial Museums in Hungary, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 32 *Anali Hrvatskog Politološkog Društva* (2019), 131–154, at 139.

208 Péter Apor, “An epistemology of the spectacle? Arcane knowledge, memory and evidence in the Budapest House of Terror,” 18:3 *Rethinking History* (2014), 328–344, at 329–332; 339–341.

209 The author of this article visited the Terror House in April 2016.

210 Ljiljana Radonić, “Our’ vs. ‘Inherited’ Museums. PiS and Fidesz as Mnemonic Warriors,” 69:1 *Südosteuropa* (2020), 44–78, at 52.

Hungarian population is “either equated with the victims of the Holocaust, or posed in competition with them.”²¹¹ Furthermore, it establishes a narrative that “shameful periods of the national past are regarded as regrettable accidents caused by various external forces and, hence, as embarrassing the historical narrative of the nation,” disassociating both the fascist and communist perpetrators from the Hungarian people.²¹²

All in all, the House of Terror “gives simple answers, externalises guilt, promotes Hungarian collective victimhood, and does not afflict one’s own collective,”²¹³ being rather “a spectacular example of directly abusing history for political aims in a postdictatorial country,”²¹⁴ a case of symbolic violence *par excellence*.

Furthermore, it also needs to be noted that the House of Terror exhibition makes a clear link between the 1920 Treaty of Trianon (which confirmed Hungarian loses of two-thirds of the country’s territory following WWI) – with the map of pre-WWI Hungary presented as “an objective, neutral, historical document and the starting point of Hungary’s twentieth-century history, is also a politically and emotionally charged image that serves to establish Hungary’s victim status”²¹⁵ – and the country’s siding with Nazi Germany in the 1930s and the later German and Soviet occupations. Importantly, similar narratives may be found in Budapest’s National Museum and Military Museum.²¹⁶

The collective memories of Trianon are also housed outside of the capital in a dedicated illiberal museum. In 2002, the Trianon Foundation, established a year earlier, acquired a vacant castle in the small city of Várpalota for the purposes of constructing a museum dedicated to the memory of Trianon at a planned cost of 214,000,000 forints (€800,000), which were supposed to come from the state. While as noted above, Orbán’s party, FIDESZ, lost power in the 2002 elections, the foundation continued its operations, succeeding in creating a museum, with public funding flowing since 2010 (among cuts to other cultural institutions), despite controversies surrounding the fact that it does not pass the formal criteria for a museum. Nevertheless, it continues to educate Hungarians, furthering an often revisionist narrative regarding the Treaty of Trianon and its aftermath not only through its exhibitions but also through its publishing house.²¹⁷ It needs to be noted, however, that Trianon remains a

211 Briga U. Meyer, *Difficult Displays. Holocaust Representations in History Museums in Hungary, Austria and Italy 1990* (PhD thesis, University of Bremen, 2006), 138–139.

212 Apor, *op.cit.* 208, 335–336.

213 Radonić, *op.cit.* 210, 54.

214 Apor, *op.cit.*, 330.

215 Manchin, *op.cit.* 204, 240.

216 Meyer, *op.cit.* 211, 139–141.

217 Pető, *op.cit.* 199 46–48.

universal and powerful symbol within Hungarian collective memory,²¹⁸ and as such, its use by authorities as an element of symbolic violence is a natural element within the country's memory field.

Importantly, illiberal museum policy affects museums all around the country. For example, in the small city of Hódmezővásárhely, both the Holocaust Museum and the Point of Remembrance, a museum dedicated to the times of communism, were founded and are financed by the Institute for the 20th Century, closely associated with the House of Terror, with the former institution at a certain point housing an exhibition curated by the aforementioned Mária Schmidt.²¹⁹

Along with the House of Terror, the first Orbán government also established the Holocaust Memorial Centre (HDKE) in Budapest; however, given its loss in the 2002 elections, it did not have an impact on its exhibit. Criticised for its obscure location, the museum nonetheless clearly distinguishes between the victims and the perpetrators. While its narrative has not changed – in spite of verbal declarations – since the second Orbán administration thanks to a 1999 law protecting the copyright regarding exhibitions, a veritable merry-go-round of the upper management of the museum, as well as the (not realised) idea of relocating it as a part of the planned House of Fates (analysed below), and, most importantly, issues with the payment of salaries were used to undermine the institution,²²⁰ showing yet a different way for the state to engage in symbolic violence.

In a way as a response to this lack of direct changes to the Holocaust museum, the Orbán government embarked on another project constructed according to its illiberal museum policy, the House of Fates (its name chosen to establish a parallel with the House of Terror).²²¹ Once again, the idea came from Mária Schmidt, who proposed a new Holocaust museum located in the outskirts of Budapest in the building of a former railway station from which several transports to concentration camps left in 1944.²²² While the project began in 2012 and was supposed to be realised by the Hungarian Holocaust

218 Miroslaw M. Sadowski, "Peace without Transitional Justice. Cultural Heritage as a Means of Taming Collective Memory on the Example of Post-Trianon Hungary" in Lucas Lixinski and Yujie Zhu (eds), *Heritage, Conflict, and Peace-Building* (Routledge, Oxon, 2024), 41–61.

219 Meyer, *op.cit.* 211, 142.

220 Radonić, *op.cit.* 210 54; 58–61.

221 Aurél Benárd, "Remembrance and Architecture. The House of Fates project," 4:1 *YBL Journal of Built Environment* (2016), 49–59, at 50.

222 János Gadó, "The Splendour and the Misery of the House of Fates," *Cultures of History Forum* (2019), 1–12, at 2–3

Memorial Year, 2014,²²³ it did not open according to schedule following controversies regarding planned exhibits that were criticised by the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities (*Magyarországi Zsidó Hitközségek Szövetsége*, Mazsihisz).²²⁴ According to the published plans, the museum was to focus on the deported Jewish children “as the most innocent victims” and those Hungarians who saved Jews.²²⁵

The construction of the impressive building, taking over the old railway station not only with a new exhibition area but also two “diagonal brick-like towers – as if they were freight wagons standing on end – impaled by a Star of David” and a contemplative garden over almost 1,5 hectares, cost US\$30,000,000 and finished in 2015. At that moment, the government decided to continue with the plan for the museum by reaching out once again to the Jewish community. The new partner, since 2018 in control of the museum, is the United Hungarian Israelite Congregation (EMIH), headed by rabbi Slomó Köves, who succeeded in recruiting several international experts to curate the museum’s exhibition.²²⁶ He was, however, heavily criticised for cooperating with the government, whose plans for the museum’s narrative remained unclear,²²⁷ all the more so following a 2019 leak of the master plan for the exhibitions that glossed over and whitewashed some of the most difficult events relating to the Hungarian co-complicity in the Holocaust, putting the blame solely on the Arrow Cross authorities, with the main focus still on children and Hungarians who saved Jews.²²⁸ At the moment of writing this article, the museum remains closed,²²⁹ with a plan to open in 2024.²³⁰ As the case of the House of Fates shows, instituting symbolic violence through the illiberal museum policy faces the same limitations in the propagation of the official narrative as in the case of other ways in which the state attempts to reshape the memory field when contradicting the collective memories already in place – unlike the Trianon and, to a certain extent, House of Terror museums, whose narratives fall into the already fertile memory fields.

223 Benárd, *op.cit.* 221, 50.

224 Gadó, *op.cit.* 224, 3.

225 Radonić, *op.cit.* 210, 70.

226 Cnaan Liphshiz, “Budapest’s new \$30m Holocaust museum sits in limbo as Hungary debates its contents,” *The Times of Israel* (26 November 2021), available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/budapests-new-30m-holocaust-museum-sits-in-limbo-as-hungary-debates-its-contents/>.

227 Gadó, *op.cit.* 224, 4.

228 Radonić, *op.cit.* 210, 73.

229 It is listed as “temporarily closed” on *Google Maps*, available at: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/JReTBVPnjiWMvjoPA>.

230 Liphshiz, *op.cit.* 226.

3.6 *A Late Revision of the Official Narrative: Ukraine's Soviet Memorials after 2014*

The final, open-ended and as such brief case study of this article, that of the decommunisation of Ukrainian public spaces, is of particular interest at the current historical moment due to the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war. Having already studied the country's pre-war process of desovietisation elsewhere,²³¹ it needs to be pointed out once again here that the removal of the remnants of the Soviet past in Ukraine has taken place in three phases so far: (1) following its independence in 1991, focusing mostly on the Western provinces (which often turned to the commemoration of the OUN and UPA, WWII pro-independence organisations regarded as criminal by Jews and Poles, instead) and characterised by the disappearance of Lenin statues from some of the main cities; (2) following the 2004 Orange Revolution, with the turn to commemorating the 1930s Great Famine (Holodomor), as well as increased remembrance of the OUN and UPA; and (3) following the 2013 Euromaidan protests, with over 500 Lenin statues, including the one in Kiev, removed, and decommunisation institutionalised in 2015 within the *Law on the condemnation of the Communist and National-Socialist (Nazi) regimes and prohibition of the propaganda of their symbols*, which put an obligation on municipalities to remove the relevant street names and monuments – an obligation the realisation of which proved to a certain extent difficult and contested.

Since the beginning of the 2022 war, we may distinguish a fourth phase in the decommunisation in Ukraine. While the conflict is still ongoing, and as such continuously impacting the country's memory field, it is worth noting that the changes to the Ukrainian cityscape accelerated since February 2022, with the Ukrainian parliament explicitly noting “that the Russian invasion has increased public demand to establish a national identity of the Ukrainian people.” Symbolically, among a number of removals under the new framework approved by the country's Ministry of Culture – which stated that “‘the purification’ of public space should be balanced but at the same time ‘cannot be postponed because it is an important component of mental resistance to aggression’” – a monument of Catherine the Great was removed from Odesa in January 2023.²³²

As the above observations show, the changes to the Ukrainian public spaces were less linked to the country's regaining independence (as in the case of

231 Sadowski, *op.cit.* 4, 225–227.

232 Mark Dunkley, “Monumental Decisions: The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Soviet War Memorials,” 14:2 *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* (2023), 227–235, at 230.

Estonia) and more with particular moments in history, each motivating further desovietisation of its cityscapes. At the same time, Ukrainian memory fields came to be repopulated with problematic historical figures, showing that the removal of one difficult official narrative may bring another set of thorny collective memories. The – hopefully – swift and successful resolution of the current war will certainly bring a yet another official narrative for which space will need to be found within Ukraine's memory fields. Following the Iraq-Iran war, a number of streets in Tehran were renamed after the fallen soldiers;²³³ a similar process is likely to take place in Ukraine, giving a country still searching for its national identity – as noticed by its parliament – as well as uncontroversial heroes, a sturdy collective memory base.

4 Conclusion. Reimagining Spaces in Central and Eastern Europe or a Memory Roulette

This article aimed to analyse the changes that took place in Central and Eastern European public spaces over the course of the past 100 years. Proposing a rereading of key concepts of collective memory, cultural heritage and the cityscape through the Bourdieusian notions of field, symbolic violence, habitus and conflict, I followed Reading's notion of a memory field, which I applied to the question of cityscapes. I then distinguished six key moments for the region's public spaces, each illustrated in a dedicated case study analysed using the chosen methodology.

The aftermath of WWI and the fall of empires was studied on the razing of the Alexander Nevsky's Orthodox Church in Warsaw, which showed not only how difficult it is to decide the fate of symbolic buildings at the moment following a regime change but also how impactful such decisions may be for the shaping of collective memory in following decades. The destructive impact of Nazi German totalitarianism was researched on the disappearance of the shtetl culture, a case that demonstrates both how resilient collective memories of the past are and how bottom-up initiatives may impact the official narrative. The megalomania of communism was analysed on the construction of the People's Palace in Bucharest, which shows on the one hand how authoritarian and totalitarian systems may destroy the natural ways in which the city develops and functions to establish particular narratives, but on the other hand how difficult it is for these collective memories to actually take hold if the society is unwilling to do so. The changes following the fall of the Berlin Wall

233 Sadowski and Zavarei, *op.cit.* 6, 17.

were studied on the decommunisation of Estonia's cityscapes, which shows the difficulties surrounding the implementation of the collective memory inversion process in places with conflicting collective memories and narratives held by different parts of the population. The illiberal reckoning with the past was researched on the Hungarian museum exhibits which demonstrate how the increasing politicisation of the past in the 21st century seeps into the many different levels of the governance of memory, including changes to the already existing museum exhibits and the construction of new institutions. Ultimately, the Russo-Ukraine war is analysed on the desovietisation of the latter country's memory fields, which demonstrates the difficulties of (re)constructing national identity after centuries of subjugation, furthermore in a memory field filled with the remnants of the previous regime.

Looking at the big picture, these case studies clearly show that the CEE region is prone to changes in its cityscapes: every shift in power and each memory inversion that follows become memorialised through visible modifications of memory fields. This, as I propose to call it, process of memory roulette is unpredictable – the transformations of public spaces can take the form of destruction, readaptation, construction, recontextualisation, removal, reimagination, and, in certain instances (such as in the case of Bucharest), all of the above. At the same time, certain mechanisms of the memory roulette work similarly in comparable circumstances, in spite of temporal distance, such as the removal of monuments left by the previous regime, which we may observe in Poland after 1918, in Estonia after the fall of the Berlin Wall and in Ukraine after 2014, or engaging in enforced collective forgetting by removing and sometimes also replacing heritage deemed unacceptable by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, such as in the case of the shtetl culture and the reconstruction of Bucharest. Ultimately, the historical, aesthetic or cultural value of cultural heritage objects is always secondary to the current political goals.

Importantly, while the final result may differ, the 'bullet' in the memory roulette almost always takes the form of law, which remains the preferred method of engaging in symbolic violence in the region: in the case of Nevsky's Church, as well as Estonian and Ukrainian monuments, it took the shape of dedicated acts of government and or parliament; in the case of the shtetl culture, the construction of the People's Palace and Hungary's museums, the changes came from government policies implemented through various administrative decisions; in all six, the intersection between the legal and the political with the goal of initiating lasting changes to collective memory through the impact on memory fields was almost palpable.

Importantly, the results of my investigations inform not only our perceptions of Central and Eastern Europe; the phenomenon of collective memory inversion within the memory fields that follows exogenous conflicts is by no means limited to that particular region. In the world plagued by both local and international strife in which competing narratives about the past are often a significant factor (as the case of the Russo-Ukraine war shows), issues surrounding the coming to terms with difficult collective memories represented in public spaces uncovered in this article can help navigate the aftermath of conflicts in regard to changes to memory fields, showing the methods most advantageous for social cohesion and reconciliation in a given situation. Whether or not lessons from other countries of the region will be reflected in the way in which the Ukrainian memory fields are ultimately going to be reconstructed following the ongoing war will provide for another particularly engaging study, one to be hopefully written soon.

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