

**Erinnerungskultur in Mittel- und Osteuropa: Die Auseinandersetzung mit Nationalsozialismus und Kommunismus im Vergleich.** Ed. Hendrik Hansen, Tim Kraski, and Verena Vortisch. *Andrássy Studien zur Europaforschung*, 20. Budapest: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2020. 230 pp. Notes. Bibliography. €49.00, hard bound.

doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.31

Much has changed in the politics of memory in central and eastern Europe (CEE) since the 1980s when the “historians’ dispute” first flared. The former “communist” states are now mostly run by conservative or liberal authoritarians. Germany, having reunified and shaken off its occupiers, presents itself to the eastern neighbors it once occupied as their guide in the politics of memory.

This volume is majority German in its editors and authors, while the conference from which it stems was co-funded by the German and Polish governments and a Hungarian university. Its introductory chapters, by the conservative historian Hendrik Hansen, carry the rather smug conviction that “we Germans, having properly atoned for our past, can be confidently patriotic again.” The past, here, refers to the Nazi and communist regimes, two totalitarian systems under which, Hansen observes, Poland and Hungary and other CEE societies have also suffered. To what extent, the volume asks, does this common history—the shared subjugation under totalitarianism—facilitate a unified European memory landscape?

Hansen, hewing closely to the Ernst Nolte / Michael Stürmer wing of the historians’ dispute, sets out to relativize Nazi crimes through comparison with those of communism, from which he believes Nazism took its inspiration. By cherry-picking some paraphrased ideas from Karl Marx (Marx scholarship is emphatically not Hansen’s strong suit) and running them alongside ideas from *Mein Kampf*, he tries to demonstrate that genocidal terror is fundamental to both philosophies. Marxists and Nazis, through Hansen’s eyes, are alike in their determinism, materialism, contempt for human individuality and dignity, and propensity to slaughter people by the million. From this flows his objection to those who treat the Holocaust as a singularity. In their fixation on 1933–45 they marginalize the crimes of the GDR, downplaying the similarities of these two totalitarian regimes and exaggerating the importance of racism (39). The same obsession with Nazism has led the German state to systematically repress right-wing extremism while giving left extremism a free pass. His main evidence for this highly unorthodox charge is that Germany’s security services turned a blind eye to the justification of some forms of violence in some chapters of a book published by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (41). From this we must infer that Hansen is a pacifist. Yet he is not. This mystery is never resolved.

The volume is no monolith and Hansen’s chapters are followed by a bracingly different perspective from the Austrian historian Heidemarie Uhl. For her, totalitarianism is an unsatisfactory concept, a polemical “Kampfbegriff” that was seized on by German and Austrian cold-warriors to relativize their nations’ hideous recent histories (75). That the Holocaust is more widely memorialized than the Gulag is perfectly understandable, not only because the fascist menace remains alive today, but also because it represented the Nazi regime’s culmination whereas communist states lasted much longer and in far less ghastly form, and the Holocaust targeted specific groups for genocide (77–78). This latter argument is unintentionally buttressed by the volume’s composition, in that the only chapter that discusses a genocidal crime in any detail concerns the Nazi atrocity at Babi Yar: the murder of tens of thousands of Kyiv’s Jews (followed later by communists, Roma, Ukrainian nationalists, and Soviet POWs). Its author, Verena Vortisch, offers insightful reflections—via a discussion of Katja Petrowskaja’s novel *Maybe Esther*—on the agonies and difficulties of memorializing humans who have been massacred anonymously and dumped in a ravine. Ukraine was of course an epicenter of

mass death under Iosif Stalin too: the Holodomor. The scale of suffering was enormous. Yet it illustrates Uhl's observation about targeted groups. The extermination of Ukrainians came principally through famine, not murder; and although markedly worse than the famine and repression being visited on Russians that same decade, it was of similar type.

Memorializing communist crimes in central and eastern Europe today, Uhl observes (74–78), is frequently instrumentalized; it serves to de-legitimize the antifascist resistance and to present the nation simplistically as a victim of foreign powers, whitewashing the collaborations with Nazism. Such memory-political abuses in Hungary are thematized in Catherin Horel's chapter. The equation of the two totalitarianisms, she observes (133), is used to exculpate the proto-fascist (yet, arguably, non-totalitarian) regime of Miklós Horthy. Réka Szentiványi's chapter discusses Budapest's House of Terror, a museum that, although ostensibly dedicated to the examination of fascist and communist dictatorships, focuses almost exclusively on the latter, and depicts all Hungarians as victims (166). Fidesz and its leader Viktor Orbán, she shows, deploy memory politics strategically: to polarize society and cement their power, in pursuit of conspicuously undemocratic ends.

The undoubted quality of some chapters notwithstanding, the volume overall is limited by its framing assumptions, notably the categorical coupling of Nazism and communism as brutal totalitarian systems. Defining communism as a "criminal system" effaces the heterogeneity of its historical record, which included 1930s Russia but also 1960s Yugoslavia and 1980s Hungary. It posits a Manichean dualism of totalitarian regimes (criminal, violent) and liberal democracies (legitimate, non-violent). Yet if one compares, say, communist East Germany (1949–89) with Britain or the US in the same decades, one finds that the two democracies undertook an enormously higher number of political killings, including massacres and other atrocities, than did the communist dictatorship. Or consider 1930s Ukraine. The Holodomor was not simply a manifestation of Stalinist terror and the Gulag, it was simultaneously the reimposition of a colonial relationship that, initially established under tsarism, had been abolished in the 1920s. Germany's own history exhibits a parallel course. The semi-democratic Wilhelmine regime enacted horrific colonial violence, notably the genocide of the Herero and Nama. Following Versailles, Weimar Germany was largely non-colonial (even as some forces, notably Konrad Adenauer's German Colonial Society, agitated for re-colonization). Nazism committed to colonization across central and eastern Europe and beyond, a goal that drew inspiration from Germany's own colonial record, and from American and British racism and imperialism. Germany's refusal today to offer reparations for its genocides in Africa flows from a memory politics that recognizes evil only when it was perpetrated by a so-called totalitarian regime.

In the concluding chapter, Frank-Lothar Kroll asks if there can be "pan-European sites of memory" (220). If we are guided by the progressive core of Holocaust memorialization, that is, repentance for the oppression and murder inflicted by European regimes upon minorities, such sites, while including the locations in central and eastern Europe discussed in this volume, will be global in reach.

Gareth Dale

Brunel University London