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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pető, A. (2021). The New Monument of Victims of Military Sexual Violence in Budapest. *Hungarian Studies Review*, 48(2), 209-216. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-78636-0>

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# The New Monument of Victims of Military Sexual Violence in Budapest

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**ABSTRACT** | In January 2020, a resolution in favor of erecting the “Monument to Women Raped in War” was adopted by the General Assembly of Budapest. The project, which included an international design competition, aims for the construction of a memorial by 2022. The resolution was passed with the support of the parties constituting the opposition of the governing Fidesz party, which is exceptional. The article analyzes the history of this bipartisan intervention in Hungarian memory politics.

**KEYWORDS** | memory politics, sexual violence, rape, memorials

In the last decade, Hungary’s coverage in the press on several issues, including its memory politics, has not been particularly flattering. The government has erected aesthetically strange and politically dubious monuments, such as the Monument to German Occupation on Szabadság [Liberty] Square in Budapest—despite the absence of social agreement. This rightly stirred up a serious storm as the monument formulated a one-sided concept of memory policy which created a united victim category from all victims, whitewashing the responsibility of the Hungarian state in the persecution of its Jewish citizens.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, a new monument to a traumatic event without an iconic visual representation and so far missing from history textbooks might change this trend in the Hungarian memorialization process.

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The project, which included an international design competition, aims for the construction of a memorial by 2022. The resolution was passed *with* the support of the parties constituting the opposition to the governing Fidesz party, which is exceptional.<sup>2</sup>

The planned monument will not be the first memorial to victims of military sexual violence in Hungary: the first was erected in Csongrád, a town in southeastern Hungary, in 2019. That monument consists of a bronze plaque depicting a young naked woman with a youthful body and long hair as she is trying to cover herself with a shroud, clasping her hands in front of her well-formed breasts while threatening hands reach out to her.<sup>3</sup> A quote from the book of Revelation, “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,” is engraved on the plaque.<sup>4</sup> The somewhat coded inscription requires background knowledge to understand and very much reflects the current complex political context. Only the local press reported on the unveiling of the plaque, and it remained largely invisible in national political discourse. Perhaps this saved the monument from potential political attacks because of the Orbán government’s growing closeness with Putin’s Russia; any reference to crimes committed by the Soviet Red Army would have had immediate diplomatic consequences. The monument to female victims was initiated and financed by retired economist József Botos, created by a male sculptor, and inaugurated by a male mayor. As the male journalist reporting about the event mentioned, the only woman who spoke at the inauguration was the initiator’s wife: Katalin Botos, the minister without portfolio in the first government after the collapse of communism (1990–1994). She said, “With this monument, we bow our heads on behalf of women and general human dignity. Their sacrifice was sacred.” The monument said nothing about why the women’s sacrifice was sacred or who the perpetrators of crimes against them were, but probably this lack of specificity was what allowed the project to be realized.

The new monument for victims of military sexual violence planned in Budapest differs from the Csongrád monument in several ways. First, the plans and budget for the project are transparent, as it is being funded with taxpayers’ money. The Municipality of Budapest set up a standing committee consisting of representatives of the two institutions hosting the project, the Budapest History Museum and Budapest City Archive; two art historians (Edit András and József Mélyi); as well as a historian (me). The municipality has also established an advisory committee consisting of historians

and activists from different political camps as well as officials of Budapest, like the city's chief architect and the head gardener. A bipartisan collaboration on symbolic issues like this has been missing from Hungarian public and political life in the past two decades.

Second, the planned monument creates a space for professional dialogue, which will involve broad historical and artistic expertise. The project was initiated in September 2020 with a lecture series on Hungarian and international research on history of military sexual violence and its memorialization processes; this series immediately preceded the announcement of the international competition in the summer of 2021.

Third, the participative character of this memorial project stands in stark contrast to the top-down memorialization behind other Fidesz-sponsored projects. The Budapest City Archive has been collecting ego-documents and interviews about sexual violence during war time. The project follows the example of the *Thinking of You* activist art installation in Kosovo, in which dresses and skirts were collected from victims of sexual violence and exhibited in the main soccer stadium in Pristina,<sup>5</sup> and the 2019 art project by Doris Salcedo in which victims of sexual violence during Columbia's civil war make art pieces by hammering metal plates made from melted guns confiscated after the final peace accord was signed in 2016.<sup>6</sup> The project in Budapest aims to relieve the cross-generational trauma by connecting past experiences of wartime sexual violence with the concept of "continuity of violence." The memorial represents those who have been victims of wartime violence, but it can also feel like a place for those who have been victims of domestic violence and abuse. The emphasis is not on victimhood but on solidarity and compassion, on ending exclusion by talking about the taboo and shameful aspects of war. It is important to understand that the culture of violence that permeates our daily lives is passed down through generations. The memorial must try to break this cycle, as a first step, by talking about this violence. Unfortunately, in the history of many Hungarian families, there is a history of the devastation of various wars, of death, or of victims of violence.

The time has come for dialogue about innovative, inclusive, and public memorialization of the victims of sexual violence during wartime. As was pointed out by the historians involved in the lecture series preceding the announcement of the monument competition, sexual violence during wartime has been part of collective memory even though the sources that

could serve as the basis for a traditional historical analysis are missing or patchy. In this sense, there is not a substantial difference between the challenges of researching sexual violence and finding or recovering sources about the Mongol invasion, the Napoleonic wars, or World War I.<sup>7</sup> In Hungary, an ever-changing memorialization framework consists of novels, films, memoirs, documentaries, and—to a lesser extent—photos released to both create and repeatedly recreate the memory of historical facts. This change in framework can be illustrated through the example of the impact of two films. Regarding mass sexual violence committed by the Red Army in Hungary, Sándor Sára's 1997 movie *A vád* [The Prosecution], which discussed the events based on interviews and court documents, was released and then quickly taken off cinema screens. By contrast, the 2013 documentary *Silenced Shame*, directed by Fruzsina Skrabski (on which I worked as an expert consultant) had a long cinematic run and was even broadcast on Hungarian national public television several times. By the end of the run, the documentary had more than two hundred thousand viewers, and it remains available online today. The difference in the reception of the two films and the documentary's success as opposed to the feature film's rejection is related to the turn in Hungarian memory politics.

The most recent turn in memory politics in Hungary started just after the new millennium and is still in progress. Its first feature is that history became popularized and localized: the everyday layperson became the focus of research and a narrative hero.<sup>8</sup> Historians began digging in local archives and aiding their relatives in researching and publishing their memoirs. Because of this turn in memory politics, information about thousands of individual rape cases that emerged through recollections were all published as historical facts. At the same time, memoirs and individual recollections became prioritized as sources more trustworthy and “truer” than historical works. This privatization of remembrance in postcommunist Europe, by which the individual is a more faithful bearer of truth concerning a past event than the historian who analyzes all accessible sources within their context, was already apparent during the post-1989 turn in memory politics. Against the ideologically omitted, determined, and censored stories from before 1989, individual recollections were considered “true to life.”<sup>9</sup>

The second feature of the most recent turn in memory politics is related to a turn in women's history writing, the “her-story” turn. The statement that women are left out of history is not valid, given that research on women

is flourishing. However much of this history is written exclusively within frameworks that have emphasized women's roles as victims of violence, exploitation, etc. At the same time, a plethora of women and topics that purportedly concern women have been "discovered." However, because of the "her-story turn," analysis has avoided mapping the structural forces that have made women invisible. Instead, the turn has produced a monolithic analytical group of "women" who then became the symbol of national victimhood.<sup>10</sup>

The third feature of the most recent turn in Hungarian memory politics is connected to the growing dominance of the narrative of "double victimhood." Hungary was a victim of the double occupation of the German military and then the Soviet forces, which made it possible to silence questions concerning collaboration with both occupiers. With the expansion of the European Union, the conservative parties of the new Eastern European member states—which instrumentalized anticommunist sentiment as their main source of legitimacy—successfully lobbied for the acceptance of The European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, to be commemorated annually on August 23 (which coincides with the day the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed).

All three changes were necessary for laying the foundation for a bipartisan intervention in memory politics that aims at establishing the new memorial in Budapest; but they would not have been enough on their own. And even though I managed to turn my research on the history of sexual violence during World War II into a bestselling book in Hungarian, that too would not have been enough.<sup>11</sup> What made the difference and led to the bipartisan approval of a public memorial to victims of sexual violence was our willingness to collaborate with Skrabksi, prominent conservative intellectual and filmmaker, which began with my willingness to serve as an expert for her film, *Silenced Shame*. After releasing the film, we accepted joint speaking invitations to present on the topic to different types of audiences—from the newly founded pro-Fidesz *Polgári Körök* (Citizen Circles) to the Bálint Jewish Community House—with a clear agenda: to demonstrate that important symbolic issues can connect people across the political spectrum and that those with different political beliefs can respectfully disagree. For both of us, genuine dialogue and collaboration based on shared values are important, and this type of commitment is rare in Hungary.

The history of so many Hungarian families includes wartime devastation and violence. This memorial to women raped in war will be erected in

Budapest, but its erection is a national cause and the Municipal Assembly of Budapest has unanimously supported it. On the one hand, the history of wartime rape is linked to national borders and historical periods, and on the other hand, it is not. It is linked in that the history of the country and the way the state functions determine whether it can protect its citizens, and how it will punish the perpetrators. And insofar as it is independent of national borders, wartime violence against women is linked to militarism and power as a weapon of war. So, on the one hand it is very much a local story, as there are fine examples of community unions while the state has collapsed, and this power vacuum is exploited by the victorious army. On the other hand, there are the general, universal characteristics, that is, that victims of wartime rape are mainly women, including the socially defenseless. This complexity of studying sexual violence during wartime actually helped to build bridges in the much divided Hungarian context. The politics of memory is about facing and processing, not forgetting.

The task of any memorial that preserves the memory of a tragedy is also to ensure that it does not happen again. This project is a place of remembrance, a reminder that some citizens may be more vulnerable than others in a well-functioning society that has a long history of debt. The monument commemorates women raped during the war. Of course, it is not only about the victims of Soviet soldiers, as in World War II there were also German, Romanian, and Hungarian soldiers among the rapists. But the monument refers to rape in all wars, and this kind of rape and violence has long been a weapon of war throughout global history. The monument will refer to Hungarian women who were victims of violence in wars, if only because of its location in Budapest, but its message is universal. The memorial project aims to create a culture of dialogue, as the whole process has been and is based on dialogue in front of a wide public. This is a message in itself in Hungary today. One can hope that the new memorial will be an excellent opportunity for artists to creatively rethink the process of memorialization and to consider ways to use an innovative visual language that still respects the dignity of victims of sexual violence during wartime independently of the present cruel *Kulturkampf* in Hungary.

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twenty-three languages. In 2018, she was awarded the 2018 All European Academies (ALLEA) Madame de Staël Prize for Cultural Values. Her recent publications include *The Women of the Arrow Cross Party: Invisible Hungarian Perpetrators in the Second World War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and *Forgotten Massacre: Budapest 1944* (de Gruyter, 2021).

## NOTES

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7. See the talks by János Szabó, Tamás Fedeles, Zoltán Fónagy, Csaba Katona, and Fanni Svégel on [www.elhallgatva.hu](http://www.elhallgatva.hu).
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