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# Say It With Statues: Brick-and-Mortar Revisionism in Orbán's Hungary <sup>[1]</sup>

*Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's recent defeat at the polls may mark the end of his brand of "illiberal democracy." But it won't be easy to undo its impacts. In a 2019 article for War on the Rocks, CPD Faculty Fellow Vivian Walker explored the dangerous consequences of Orbán's attempts to create a revisionist narrative about Hungary's political identity. "Say It With Statues: Brick-and-Mortar Revisionism in Orbán's Hungary" explores the systematic repudiation of democratic values and implicit defense of authoritarian embedded in outright denials of established historical truths. Peter Magyar and his allies have won the election. But whether they have won the hearts and minds of Hungarians subjected to Orbán's potent mythmaking remains to be seen. As Hungary enters a new political chapter, we republish this article—timely as ever—as a reminder that the struggle over history, identity, and democratic values long outlasts any single election.*

Before dawn on Dec. 28, 2018, authorities in Budapest removed the statue of Imre Nagy, Hungary's prime minister during the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising, from its perch near parliament. Erected in 1996, with the support of current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's political party, Fidesz, the figure on Martyr's Square commemorated Hungary's then-exuberant embrace of democratization after decades of Soviet rule. While Nagy's role in the ill-fated uprising remains controversial, his subsequent execution at the hands of Hungary's pro-Moscow leadership made him a bona fide martyr of Soviet oppression and, for Orbán's Fidesz allies, a symbol of democratic transformation.

Now, it seems, he is no longer. Nagy's slight, bespectacled figure will be replaced by a muscular Hungarian everyman locked in combat with the dragon-like "monster of Bolshevism." This memorial to those who perished during the Red Terror of 1919 is meant to honor the "true" victims of communism—those who suffered at the hands of the Bolsheviks. But this version of history ignores the role that Hungarian far-right ideologues played in the anti-communist purges. Worse yet, the "new" monument actually recreates a memorial erected in 1934, during the pro-Nazi regime of Adm. Miklos Horthy, which imposed stringent anti-Semitic regulations. But more about that later.

Granted, the practice of erecting memorials to a particular regime or ideology is hardly new. But Hungary's brick-and-mortar revisionism is exceptional — and exceptionally troubling — for its apparent repudiation of democratic values and its implicit defense of authoritarian rule. Indeed, it resembles a classic disinformation campaign, including the outright denial of established historical truths and claims of victimhood at the hands of demonized aggressors. Orbán's mythmaking is not just a threat to Hungarians. As Hungary cozies up to Russia, bullies Ukraine, and earns E.U. censure for its retrograde policies on immigration, freedom of speech, and judicial reform, U.S. foreign policymakers had better pay attention. The decline of liberal democracy in the heart of Central Europe undermines the power of transatlantic institutions to protect U.S. interests.

Orban's allies defended the removal of the Nagy statue as an effort to "take back our history and our historical spaces" and to correct the "liberal left wing" tendency to "glorify communism":

*What we see is a direct consequence of the left-wing's spiritual [decline]. They can't figure out anything new... What else could they do to get back to their successful past, when the "glorious" Soviet Republic... was the master of life and death?*

The statue incident is also consistent with the Hungarian government's harsh narrative against the purveyors of "ultra-liberal world views." For those aware of Orban's ad hominem attacks on George Soros — not to mention the recent government-forced closure of the Soros-founded Central European University — this rhetoric is familiar. (As a disclaimer, I previously served as adjunct faculty at the university.)

Orban's critics, meanwhile, described Nagy's disappearance as "the re-establishment of the symbolic politics of the Horthy era" and a signal that Orban seeks to build on Horthy's legacy of nationalist authoritarian rule. Others accuse the government of attempting to erase the "revolutionary" nature of Hungary's past. They point out that the student-inspired revolt of 1956 called for a free press, freedom of opinion and expression, a transparent judicial process, and fair wages, all of which are at risk today in Orban's self-styled "illiberal democracy." Whatever you want to call it, the stealth removal of the statue represents an unambiguous attempt to influence public perceptions in the service of state interests.

Nagy's unceremonious demotion isn't the Hungarian government's only recent attempt at historical revisionism. During the night of July 20-21, 2014, a controversial memorial to the "Victims of the German Invasion" was erected on Freedom Square in the heart of Budapest's tony fifth district. A fierce bronze eagle representing the Third Reich hovers threateningly over a statute of the Archangel Gabriel, who, orb in hand, symbolizes Hungary's victimization. One of the eagle's talons is banded with "1944," the year of the invasion. While ostensibly a powerful anti-Nazi allegory, the monument's visual narrative, which lays the blame for the Holocaust in Hungary solely on the German Nazis, disguises a terrible truth. In Hungary, harsh anti-Semitic laws, deportations, and mass murders, all sanctioned by the Horthy regime, began long before the German invasion in March 1944. Moreover, Hungarian authorities knowingly facilitated the deportation of an additional 437,000 Jews well after the Germans arrived.

Orban's chief spokesman argued that the memorial was meant to "[put] back history, or historical perspectives, to where they should be," adding:

*One thing is for sure is that after March 19, 1944, the country lost its sovereignty. It was occupied. And there's a historical fact that before that there was no Holocaust in this country, and then after the Germans came there was a Holocaust.*

Setting aside the categorical denial of Hungarian complicity in the Holocaust, the focus on Hungary's disenfranchisement and loss of sovereignty is striking. And yet, it is perfectly consistent with Orban's oft-repeated conviction that every external power, including the European Union, is a potential threat to Hungary's autonomy.

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While Orban supporters praised the monument for its historical accuracy, a group of Hungarian historians issued an open letter stating, “the memorial falsifies an important period of our history, and [trivializes] the Holocaust in Hungary.” Others went further, accusing the Orban government of deliberately rewriting history in order to absolve the Horthy regime of its role in the deaths of two-thirds of Hungary’s Jewish population. And, in the shadow of the memorial, a pop-up exhibit featuring photos and mementos of Holocaust victims provides a stark counter-narrative. Nevertheless, the damage has been done. The Orban government has managed to transform Hungarian complicity in the Holocaust into a matter of debate rather than a matter of fact. This is disinformation at its finest.


In fact, the Fidesz effort to recast Hungary as a martyr to malign external forces goes back at least to 2002, when the House of Terror Museum was created. Conceptualized by Orban loyalist Maria Schmidt, the House of Terror was originally intended, as scholar Péter Apor puts it, “to convince Hungarians that the political left was dangerously associated with the potential of a brutal dictatorship, and to regenerate national identity and pride as an antidote within society.” Billed on its website as a fitting memorial to the victims of two terror regimes, the museum occupies the former headquarters of the Hungarian Communist Secret Service and, before that, the Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross party. Indeed, the entire museum essentially depicts Hungary as the helpless victim of these two “equally devilish ideologically motivated superpowers.” In equating Communism with Nazism, the exhibit’s narrative plays up the misdeeds of the left while obscuring those of the far right. This redirection of blame is central to Orban’s political narrative.

Effective disinformation campaigns often exploit latent fears and prejudices using violent or terrifying imagery to influence audience perceptions. The House of Terror Museum is no exception. The power of the largely text-free exhibit rests almost entirely on its use of image and sound to evoke instinctual responses of fear and horror. Visitors are led down to an underground labyrinth of interrogation cells with implements of torture. They move through dimly lit audiovisual installations that bombard them with scenes of concentration camps, gulags, show trials, and executions. Instead of being informed in a rational, straightforward way about Hungary’s complicity in both regimes, visitors are left with a triumphant affirmation of the country’s political evolution: “the fight against the two cruelest systems of the 20th century ended with the victory of the forces of freedom and independence.”

These instances of brick-and-mortar historical revisionism are textbook examples of disinformation techniques. First, the employment of concealment and denial: The disappearance of the Nagy statue and the appearance of the memorial to the victims of German occupation both take place under cover of darkness so that the structure (or its absence) appears suddenly, irrefutably, and without authorship. Second, the use of distortion and reductive symbolism: The new figures tell an unambiguous story of unprovoked violence against innocent victims. Those deemed responsible for the victims’ suffering are embodied explicitly as mythical monsters e.g. Nazis, portrayed implicitly as weak, unreliable actors, e.g. left-wing glorifiers of communism, or, as in the House of Terror museum, collapsed into an undifferentiated evil. Finally, the creation of uncertainty and distraction: These disinformation

narratives obscure ruling party responsibility for national suffering or dishonor. Blame shifts instead to a marginalized, often discredited opposition or an alien and seemingly malign outside force.

In speeches and interviews, Orbán has consistently justified the rise of illiberal, authoritarian rule, citing, for example, China, Russia and Turkey as “stars” of governance. The monument to the victims of the German invasion evokes Orbán’s harsh, often alarmist rhetoric about the risks to national sovereignty posed by outside “threats,” such as immigrants, multiculturalism, and the European Union. With the House of Terror Museum, Orbán and his allies have orchestrated a thorough, public revision of the Hungarian government’s role in two catastrophic events in order to establish the legitimacy — indeed the historic inevitability — of the current regime.

There are two important caveats to Orbán’s elaborate disinformation campaign. First, despite Orbán’s apparent ownership of his narrative, it is not unique to him. It originates with Putin’s Russia. As a recent report suggests, Russia is currently projecting its power in Central Europe  “with the overall aim of restoring its influence in the region and weakening the EU and NATO.” This study indicates that among the so-called Visegrad Four countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia), Hungary has the “highest vulnerability to subversive Russian influence” thanks to its repudiation of liberal democratic values and “the attraction of Hungarian political elites towards the Russian geopolitical orbit.” In other words, Orbán is more willing acolyte than independent actor.

Second, Orbán’s disinformation narrative remains, for now, a relatively closed loop. His government’s embrace of anti-Western sentiment is significantly at odds with Hungarian public opinion. According to a recent poll, Hungarians clearly still prefer a pro-Western geopolitical orientation and demonstrate relatively stable support for the European Union, NATO, and the West. For example, 58 percent of respondents supported E.U. membership, and 75 percent would vote to stay in the European Union. Similarly, 54 percent of Hungarians agree that NATO membership is a good thing, and 76 percent would elect to remain in NATO. Finally, 57 percent of Hungarians in the 18–24 year old range, the generation that Orbán needs to co-opt in order to sustain his long-term political survival, believe that Hungary belongs fully in the West.

However, while these indicators are encouraging, they are not as strong as they were just one year ago. The historical revisionism at work in Hungary may already be eroding public commitment to the principles of freedom, tolerance, and justice upheld by Hungary’s NATO and E.U. partners. And given that Orbán’s allies have near-total control of Hungary’s independent media outlets, there are few opportunities to contest this narrative.

Moreover, as the 2019 U.S. National Intelligence Strategy warns, Orbán's revisionism could well represent a growing risk to American national security. The report argues that "traditional adversaries" like the Russians and their cut-outs "will continue attempts to gain and assert influence" by taking advantage of "the weakening of the post-WWII international order and dominance of Western democratic ideals." This poses a serious threat to "U.S. goals and priorities in multiple regions." Should Putin, Orbán, and those of their ilk start to win the narrative of unrepentant illiberalism, what happens to NATO solidarity and influence? This is not a hypothetical question. Recently, in response to calls for a tougher stance on Russian and Chinese influence in Europe, Orbán told U.S. diplomats that he wants his country to be "neutral, like Austria."

As statues come and go, and as Hungary's history devolves into anti-Western political allegory, the U.S. government should stand by the Hungarians who still believe in liberal democratic values and Euro-Atlantic integration. Support for independent investigative media outlets as well as local organizations devoted to fact-checking and debunking can help. So can targeted training sessions that sensitize ordinary citizens to the siren call of fake news. Ukraine and Moldova, for example, have made some progress in countering Russian disinformation thanks to such initiatives. Without help in pushing back against Orbán's disinformation efforts, the people of Hungary may not be able to sustain liberal democratic ideals when they matter most — for themselves and for their allies.

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