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Roots of illiberal memory politics

Remembering women in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

by **Andrea Pető**

Most studies on memories ignore their own audience, as Wulf Kansteiner warned us some years ago.¹ Because stories matter and because memory can be assigned and attributed to certain social groups, there will necessarily be competing memory cultures. Kansteiner argued that collective memory is a result of complex processes of production and consumption that acknowledge different traditions, values, and interests.² This is very true in the case of the memory politics of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, which has recently been transformed and now includes a new focus on women's experiences and memories, perhaps a surprising development at first glance.

In discussing the gender history of 1956, the main question is whose stories are being told.³ This means that when discussing women's memories of 1956 we need to distinguish the producers and consumers of collective memory from the traditions of gendered memory and the appropriations of memory. Appropriation was used by Michel de Certeau in underlining that consumption is not a passive process. The producers of memory are building on their own meanings and values through the consumption of culture, which is at the same time a revisitation of culture.

Never has so much money been involved in commemorating the 1956 Revolution than for the commemorations in 2016. The *Official Gazette* announced the government decision 1728/2015 to commemorate 1956, which was backed by unprecedented – and not very transparent – public funding.⁴ There were 2,500 proposals submitted for grants from this fund, of which 1,600 were supported. In 650 villages and cities, a total of 1,430 events were held to commemorate the 1956 Revolution.⁵ The history of the 13

days of the 1956 Revolution, which was quickly crushed by the Soviet occupation of the country, was a key foundational narrative of post-1989 Hungarian democracy, and therefore it is no surprise that the Christian-Conservative FIDESZ-KDNP government paid such special attention to this celebration. This article explores the roots of the paradigm change of gender politics of commemorating the 1956 Revolution by the illiberal Hungarian state.⁶ It argues that the women's history turn in commemoration practice is a part of this paradigm change in memory politics and that it has its roots in revisionist history writing.

The absence of women in the historiography of the 1956 Revolution

The bloody foundation of a collaborationist state was laid after the Soviet occupation of Hungary that crushed the revolution on November 4, 1956, and imprisoned or executed many of its participants. Already from the beginning of the Soviet occupation of Hungary, different interpretations of the events have been written both in conflict and in dialogue with one another, and have constructed a divided collective memory. Before 1989, the history of the failed 1956 Revolution was already a target of

meaning-making processes. Collaboration with the Kádár regime was at the center of these debates and became the basis of self-definition for different political actors after 1989. History writing has always been a process in which different groups in communication with each other produce new narratives and create discursive spaces, and this is why it is crucial to trace how women's memories are represented, constructed, and appropriated.

The history of 1956 was taboo before 1989 as the Kádár regime (1956–1989)

abstract

In 2016, commemorations of the 60th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution brought new conflicts in memory politics. This article analyzes the reasons for women's absence from the historiography of the 1956 Revolution and discusses how the polypore state is using the populist turn to introduce hegemonic narratives and to include women in the narrative of "national feminism".

KEY WORDS: 1956 Revolution, revisionist history, memory politics, appropriation, polypore state, illiberal memory politics, familialism, 'new history', women's history.



Erika Szeles on the billboard.

was founded on the crushed revolution in collaboration with the Soviets. The frame of history writing was heavily ideological, and it labeled the 1956 Revolution a “counter revolution”, aiming to fill up the rhetorical space about the events while politics enforced historical amnesia of the revolution through effective censorship and imprisonment.⁷ Forgetting, omission, and amnesia were successful tools for depoliticizing Hungarian society after 1956. Bloody oppression led to the largest wave of migration as 200,000 men and women fled Hungary over the course of only four months.

After many had emigrated, participants in the 1956 Revolution started to write a different history abroad in order to record their version of events. Outside Hungary, for example, the Imre Nagy Institute in Brussels (1959–1963) was focusing on writing about 1956 as the political history of important men.⁸ Hungarian émigrés were writing the history of 1956 without a particular interest in women because their main framework of interpretation was anti-communism and political history. Women were present in the histories as wives and daughters of important male politicians, but they were not seen as worthy of the attention of historians other than as mirrors to the activities of great men.⁹

Inside Hungary there have been different layers of silence about the 1956 Revolution. Members of the democratic opposition, including János M. Rainer – the future director of 1956 Research Institute and biographer of the executed prime minister, Imre Nagy – were writing in samizdat publications.¹⁰ The samizdat *Beszélő* featured an article on 1956 in every issue because it worked with the truth paradigm and its aim was to delegitimize the foundational myth of the Kádár regime. The articles were countering the false statements and narratives of the Kádár regime based on testimonies and archival research in order to set up a hegemonic position for the interpretation of the 1956 Revolution through the truth paradigm. This was a very different form of memory politics from that of the Polish opposition where dissidents were promoting the resurgence of romantic nationalism in opposition to the internationalism of communist historiography. After 1989, the official 1956 Research Institute grew out of the risky process of collecting and indexing the oral history testimonies of distinguished members of the democratic opposition. In the oral history collection, women as wives and daughters only remember the deeds and actions of their fathers, partners, and husbands.

THIS APPROACH OF writing the history of 1956 without women both in Hungary and internationally is far from innocent. Horowitz warns in analyzing the gendering of the Holocaust that, while the gender-neutral approach produces a unified version of the past “that unintentionally ends up occluding experiences particular to women”, the concentration on essentialist differences “inadvertently reproduces the marginalization of

women”.¹¹ When women are denied the acknowledgement of their active role, they are also denied future involvement in political processes. Writing a history of their own was a key political demand of emancipatory struggles like the women’s movement and worker’s movement and meant revising the already existing canon and writing a counter-canon.

After 1989, one might wrongly assume that the collapse of communism brought a major change in the historical narrative about 1956, especially because forced amnesia together with the meta-narrative of “counter-revolution” had produced a variety of conflicting meanings of 1956 that were already visible during the festive reburial of Imre Nagy on June 16, 1989. Stefan Auer warned in 1989 about the real political dilemma regarding the legacy of 1956, namely how a regime that was set up as a result of

peaceful roundtable negotiations could relate to the legacy of a violent revolution. Intellectuals, the driving force of the 1989 transition, were advocating the concept of a “self-limiting revolution”, the idea of a “return to normality”, and the ideals of an ethical civil society and “anti-politics”.¹² For Hannah

Arendt, 1956 was an example of a “spontaneous revolution”, in the term coined by Rosa Luxemburg, and this was diametrically opposed to the ideals and values of the participants in the Hungarian Roundtable Talks.¹³ The popular memory of the “boys of Pest” – very young, working-class men who were fighting with weapons against the occupying Red Army – was sidelined in the canonized historiography of 1956 after 1989 as being an example of political radicalism. Workers’s councils that played a key role in 1956, praised by Arendt, as alternatives to the party system, were difficult to appropriate in the transition process driven by political parties and not by movements.¹⁴ The post-1989 neoliberalization of Hungary was based on stripping workers of their rights and slicing up the trade union movement and privatizing its property. This transformation was led by political parties attempting to create apolitical neoliberal subjects, and not by a popular movement.¹⁵

AFTER 1989 THERE was a great public need for consumption and appropriation of the past and for access to new information, which led to the opening up of formerly closed archives. Narratives written by professional historians and individual stories about the events remained necessarily separate. As part of this new division of memory, the story that could be told after 1989 in the public sphere was exported by Hungarian dissidents and followed the traditional gender stereotypes. Instead of a meta-narrative of “counter revolution”, family stories were told in which women were seen only as wives and victims.

After 1989, the variability and plurality of the interpretation of past events also gave legitimacy to the 1956 Revolution. A remembered past is connected to identity formation, and omitting and ignoring the memory of women in the events of 1956 occurred in parallel with excluding women from political citizen-

“THIS APPROACH OF WRITING THE HISTORY OF 1956 WITHOUT WOMEN IN AND OUTSIDE HUNGARY IS FAR FROM INNOCENT.”

ship and the revival of stereotypical male and female images in the collective memory.¹⁶ Women's memory of 1956 was missing from the historiography because it could hardly fit in the framework for constructing gendered political citizenship after 1989, and this for several reasons.

FIRST, BECAUSE the image of the armed female fighters was disturbing to the social order, there was also little discussion of women as leaders or as politicians. Women's agency and autonomy were non topics. Second, the 1956 Revolution was also fought against communist emancipatory politics, and it was in several aspects a conservative revolution. It lasted for only 13 days, which was not enough time for the internal political conflicts and contradictions to play out publicly. Demands of the workers' councils, such as overturning the liberal abortion laws in Hungary and installing a nationalist, pro-natalist agenda labeling the right to abortion a communist trick to destroy the nation, were not generally publicized during important debates about redefining reproductive rights after 1989.¹⁷ Third, in their life stories, conservative and far-right female politicians entering political life after 1989 narrated 1956 as a turning point in their lives – as the moment when they became anti-communists. Therefore, the memory of 1956 was necessarily more empowering for conservative and far-right female politicians than for progressive forces.¹⁸ For the few female politicians on the progressive side, relating to these events of 1956 was not an option because they had a strong anti-communist agenda and progressive politics failed to relate critically to the state communist period. Instead, the rhetoric of anti-communism was successfully used to discredit the traditions and values of progressive politics. Fourth, due to the continuity of gender stereotypes in family memory, the history of 1956 has been the story of heroic men and loving female relatives who also suffered but who cared for their beloved sons and partners. Remarkable female politicians were rare during communism, and also rare in the democratic opposition.¹⁹

Including women in history: framing matters

This historiography based on the omission of women fundamentally changed when the history of the women's silent demonstration of December 4, 1956 was written by Borbála Juhász as a master's thesis submitted to CEU in Budapest. Juhász analyzed women as political actors and identified the different axes of forgetting in historiography.²⁰ The history of tens of thousands of women who silently protested against the Soviet occupation in Budapest and in some other cities, the only public protest against the Soviet occupation, has been omitted from the historiography of 1956. Silence about the event is even more disturbing as Hannah Arendt, in her reflection on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, considered this women's demonstration to be the last revolutionary political action: "The silent procession of black-clad women in the streets of Russian occupied Budapest, mourning their dead in public."²¹ Although this demonstration was not broken up by the Soviet Army, as Arendt claimed, it was still the beginning of a new era of women's participation in politics.

Mourning and maternal feminism proved to be powerful political strategies during the military occupation.²²

WOMEN SLOWLY BECAME acceptable and worthy topics of historical research, but without the traditional framing being questioned. The first step in the analysis of women's presence in 1956 is to count them in photographs and among the imprisoned and executed. Mária Palasik analyzed the number of women in the photo collection of the 1956 Institute and in the archives of the State Security Services.²³ She pointed out after analyzing photos of iconic events of the revolution that, for example, women were present in the demonstration in front of the Parliament on October 23rd. As night fell, the women left due to possible threats to their safety, so women are missing from the photos taken at the same spot later that day.²⁴ The proportion of women in the photos was about 10% (depending on the time when the photo was taken), and they made up about 4% of those who were persecuted after the revolution.²⁵ The distribution of charges and indictments handed down against women has raised methodological questions because women were not only indicted for multiple charges, but also often arrested for political reasons or charged with criminal or economic offenses and not with political offenses, so that they are missing from the statistics. Palasik claims that 14.8% of women who were arrested were charged with participation in armed clashes, 14.8% with making provocative statements, 18.3% with spying and putting up posters, 9.5% with giving medical aid to fighters, 8.3% with editing and distributing flyers, 7.1% with denunciations, 4.1% with participating in women's demonstrations, 3% with hiding weapons, and 0.6% with membership in the revolutionary national guard. Only 8.3% were charged with participating in workers' and revolutionary committees or parties.²⁶ This distribution, compared with the percentage of women in the post-1945 people's tribunal cases, shows that the gender distribution was very much the same and was reflective of traditional gender stereotypes.²⁷ These results also show that gender inequality in women's participation in public life had not really changed during the forced emancipation process of communism.

Three other directions have been taken in researching women's participation in the 1956 Revolution. The first was the book by Kőrösi and Molnár, which used the testimonies of children to introduce the concepts of silences and silencing in intergenerational memory. The book features testimonies of children about their mothers and how they coped while their fathers were in prison.²⁸ The second line of inquiry was pursued by Zsófia Eszter Tóth, who analyzed the absence of references to 1956 in her interviews with female workers in a textile factory in Budapest. 1956 as an event only featured in their stories because they were assigned empty flats by the state due to the massive emigration that took place after the Revolution. Tóth claimed that women workers were rarely in leadership positions and that the workers' councils were only recruiting them as secretaries.²⁹ The third was a major book by Zsuzsanna Bögre who interviewed women and reconstructed the history of 1956 through the narratives of women.³⁰ Four topics emerged from her interviews



The play by Andor Szilagyfi about Ilona Tóth in the Hungarian National Theater.

PHOTO: ANDREA PETŐ

– the first day of the Revolution, the solidarity that was fostered during the Revolution, the moral purity of the people, and the date of the Soviet invasion, November 4. The meaning-making process of using exact dates of canonical events and the pompous style of narration were due to the timing and context of the interviews as these interviews were recorded in 2003. The first Orbán government (1998–2002) had started a re-canonization of the narrative and had opened up space for women’s stories in the national feminist framework of victimhood and suffering.³¹

This absence of women as political actors in the history of 1956 was, surprisingly, replaced by their presence in the celebration of 1956 in 2016, which brought a number of events commemorating women in 1956. This increase in the visibility of

women also resulted in recycling the article by Borbála Juhász – which is available online without any reference to the original work – in political speeches, articles, blog posts, and exhibitions because there was no other relevant research available on this topic. The most visible change in the politics of memory has been the surprisingly large number of billboards in Budapest advertising the deeds and martyrdom of women in the 1956 Revolution. Twenty-three persons were portrayed on these billboards, and 20 of them were easy to identify, including 5 women. But most notably, university students, workers’s councils, military personnel, and prominent members of the revolutionary government were missing from this commemorative line-up. The absence opened up space for presence as they were

replaced by street fighters from Budapest who were only representing the social and economic deprivation during communism.³² Even the commemorative postage stamp issued for this occasion featured women in arms. The radical popular memory of 1956, which had been marginalized in 1989, had returned by 2016. The women on the billboards – Havrilla Béláné Sticker Katalin (1932–1959),³³ Sponga Julianna (1937–1990),³⁴ Szeles Erika (1941–1956), and Wittner Mária (1937–) – were all from poor and troubled families and worked in precarious jobs when the Revolution opened space for them to believe that they were agents of their own fate.³⁵ Wittner, who survived a death sentence, became a face of the anti-communist political regime and later a FIDESZ MP.³⁶ Ilona Tóth (1932–1957), a medical student and also from a poor family, allegedly killed a young soldier whom she believed worked for the Hungarian State Security Agency. The debate over whether it was a show trial or whether she was really a murderer is ongoing among historians.³⁷

Manipulation of photos had already started in 1956. Photos about fighting women with weapons in Budapest were mostly staged by the mostly young western freelance photojournalists who were covering the fighting. Some of the fighting and escape scenes that were widely circulated in the press were staged in peaceful Austria for the western media who did not want to venture out for a risky journey to Hungary behind the Iron Curtain. It is no surprise that in 2016 the billboards appropriated these staged photos for their own purposes.³⁸ The mediatization of the revolutionary events and personalities continued on the billboards as bodies were Photo-shopped out and rifles were added to maximize the effect.³⁹

THE SUDDEN PROMINENCE of some women whose stories of 1956 had not been featured before (except Ilona Tóth) is due to the “women’s history turn” in history writing. This new school of history writing is a way for the illiberal state to appropriate the memory politics of historical events for its own purposes. The major traveling exhibition about women in 1956 was entitled “56 Teardrops – Women’s Destinies” and summarized the contents of this shift in memory politics:

In memoirs and historical publications, very often the only focus on women’s activity in 1956 is the silent women’s demonstration of December 4th. However, women were caring for the wounded, printing flyers, helping in kitchens, and sometimes even participating in the fighting; therefore, the crushing of the revolution impacted them. As museologist Fanni Lukács, one of the curators of the exhibition, said to the Hungarian News Agency, the exhibition also highlights that women and girls lost their husbands and fathers in the fighting, and this fact influenced their lives greatly. There were

instances when one was not allowed to return to the elementary school because her father had participated in the revolution. Others were fired from their jobs or imprisoned.⁴⁰

Absence was replaced by the presence of women, but within a framework in which the history of women was written in terms of suffering, sacrifice, and victimhood, and not in terms of agency or subjectivity. During the celebrations in 2016, the women of 1956 were presented in the frame of “national feminism”, in which women’s actions were evaluated in terms of how useful they were for the national project. “National feminism” is emerging from revisiting the history of 1956, and it is reducing stories and testimonies to politically acceptable notions of patriotic femininity and setting them up as an example for present-day Hungarian women. In the case of the 1956 Revolution, female street fighters are only presented as victims of communist repression and not as women who decided to take part in an armed struggle. The sexual harassment and violence committed

against street fighters by their fellow heroic fighters have also not been discussed publicly.

Genesis of the memory politics of the illiberal state

In 2010 and in 2014, FIDESZ – in coalition with the Christian Democratic Party – won the elections in Hungary and set up a new system of governance called: the System of National Cooperation (NER).⁴¹ During the past years, FIDESZ has been under international pressure to comply with written laws and European liberal values. And despite taking over all kinds of policy agencies, state institutions, and funding opportunities – FIDESZ has not encountered nor invited the formation of any effective political opposition. This proves that FIDESZ over the past years has set up a successful form of governance, which is not setting the stage for future electoral victories, but also indicating new paths for obviously successful governance. In recent years, political scientists and political analysts have been forced to reconsider not only their analytical toolkit, but also their concepts in order to try to understand this new phenomenon – calling it “democratic authoritarianism”, an “illiberal state”, or a “mafia state”, just list few of the new terms. Along with the Polish sociologist Weronika Grzebalska, in comparing Hungary and Poland we argued in our previous work about a new form of governance stemming from the failures of globalized (neo)liberal democracy, which created states that are weak for the strong and strong for the weak.⁴² Based on its *modus operandi*, we call such a regime an “illiberal polypore state” because it feeds on the vital resources of the previous political system while contributing to that system’s decay. Hungary, indeed, is an example.

“DIFFERENT STATES ARE SILENCING STORIES ABOUT THEIR OWN TECHNIQUES OF DISCRIMINATION THAT ARE INHERENT PARTS OF THEIR HISTORY IN ORDER TO PROVE TO BE A VICTIM.”

THE POLYPORE STATE works with what is referred to as “mnemonic security”, and with the control of hegemonic forms of remembrance.⁴³ The translation of history and its application, and thus its identity-shaping effects, have become a geopolitical factor. After 1989, fueled by anti-communist sentiment within the former Eastern Bloc countries and by the memories of retributions that took place during the Soviet occupation, anti-communism became the foundation along with the revision of the progressive political tradition at both the national and international level. Memory politics plays a key role in this process. Different states are silencing stories about their own acts of discrimination that are integral parts of their history in order to show themselves to be a victim. The memory politics of the “polypore state” is to duplicate, depoliticize, and empty the narrative about women’s presence and agency during the 1956 Revolution in order to appropriate the Revolution’s meanings and to attribute meanings of victimhood and anti-communism.

These developments are not unique to Hungary, as it is demonstrated in this special issue. The recent turn of “herstory” writing in Central European countries has left feminist historians and secular human rights activists puzzled. However, the illiberal memory politics is not coming from nowhere.

Gábor Gyáni, the renowned Hungarian historian, mentioned two reasons for this when analyzing developments in the historiography of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in 2006. The first is the post-structuralist turn in history writing after 1989 that undermined the professional standing of historians in public life.⁴⁴ If everything is a narrative or a discourse, anybody can be a historian. This democratization has opened up spaces and opportunities outside the profession for constructing new narratives. From the 1970s, as a part of this “new history”, feminist history aimed to make women visible in order to transform the writing of history. Those who were engaged in what at first glimpse might be considered a hopeless activity believed in the impact of their work – to make the world a better place by writing a different history that would help to “right the injustice”. This was particularly evident in the fact that those who were interviewed for the first collections of testimonies on the events of 1956 by members of the democratic opposition were also those were missing from the official history of the events. Collecting women’s oral history collects information about the event and the meaning-making process.⁴⁵ By telling our own story, we gain power over our lives, and therefore women’s testimonies also give importance to women’s actions.

Representatives of “new history” argued that writing political history was the center of national history writing,⁴⁶ as it was in the case of writing the history of 1956. National history and political thinking are processes of inclusion and exclusion. In the

center of this narrative is the male citizen, who is fighting for the nation. Everybody else, including women and ethnic minorities, is on the margins. As Gianna Pomata has argued, gender history is analyzing national and universal history in terms of the roles that gendered characteristics and symbols have played in historical events and processes.⁴⁷

The novelty of “new history” is the inclusion of class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis. But this “new history” is not merely a genre of “writing of history”, but rather is constructed as an alternative “culture of history”, marking systems and points of connections to the past by constructing pluralities of interpretations instead of a single canonized narrative. This narrative strategy offers a new path for gendering history, but it is still supposed to fit in and refer to the “old canon”, and thus be but one of several narratives about nation and democracy. This plurality of discussion also influences the definition of what sources count as legitimate because the question is no longer “what happened”, but rather how to redefine the relationship to the past based on visual sources, statues, testimonies, and rituals.

THE CANON OF women’s history writing its place in the national historiographies of Central Europe after 1989. As Liakos points out, “Writing history means to internalize the canon, and to be ascribed in a mental geography prescribed by the canon.”⁴⁸ At the same time women’s history was necessarily pushed towards a particular history, pointing out a void in prior historiography. This negative approach is aptly characterized by Liakos: “The idea of not belonging to the canon creates a consciousness

of absences and failures which could be described as a ‘negative consciousness’: negative in the sense that the consciousness is not defined by what the subject is, but by what the subject is not, that is, the adoption of a perspective of self-exclusion.”⁴⁹ Therefore, writing women’s history defined itself as separate with the hope of filling in the void.

Writing women’s history in Central Europe has a specific intellectual history.⁵⁰ In this paradigm, women’s history found a place

for itself, joining the stream demanding the revision of history based on oral history testimonies, while beginning through conferences and conference volumes to build up its own canon, or a canon of their own, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf. During this process in the early 1990s, women’s history partly functioned as a revisionist history because it undermined and/or revised the previous canon by bringing in a new group, namely women, as a legitimate focus of historical analysis.

Writing women’s history emerged in that region as a part of the European neoliberal modernity in the transition of 1989 from communism to democracy. But the normative power of

“ORAL HISTORY BECAME A POPULAR METHOD OF COLLECTING STORIES OF ‘HOW THE 20TH CENTURY HAS REALLY HAPPENED’ WITH THE AIM OF CREATING A COUNTER CANON TO COMMUNIST HISTORY WRITING.”



Women's demonstration on December 4, 1956, in Budapest.

PHOTO: FORTEPAN COLLECTION NO. 85716, DONATED BY GYULA NAGY

Europe (the EU) and the international framework has been weakening in recent years. The triple crises – the financial crisis of 2008 and the refugee crisis together with security problems – contributed to the previously consensual neoliberal concept of Europe becoming multilayered and to the emergence of new actors. Alternative concepts of Europe have gained momentum, and different forms of illiberal governance have influenced, among other important institutions, the infrastructure of writing history.⁵¹ These characteristics of writing women's history as a revisionist history were connected to “negative consciousness”, which made it extremely vulnerable to reconceptualization during the second transition of the build-up of the polypore illiberal states and the associated populist turn.

THE REASON WHY women suddenly came to the center of the celebration of the 1956 Revolution in 2016 was the revisionist character of women's history. History writing and teaching history still treats women's history as separate, or, as Virginia Woolf wrote nearly a hundred years ago, as an appendix. Paradoxically, the practitioners of women's history mostly consider this separation and particularism as a fruitful and promising path for developing women's history.

According to Tucker's typology, historical revisionism uses three strategies: *significance-driven* revisionism, that is, when there is a change in what historians find significant in history, *evidence-driven* revisions, when new evidence is discovered, and *value-driven* revisionism, when historical events and processes are re-evaluated because a new system of values becomes hegemonic.⁵² These three kinds of revisions cannot be divided so strictly, but women's history writing can mostly be considered as belonging to value-driven revisionism, which makes women's history vulnerable to populist redefinitions. Women's history writing has never reached the status of significance-driven revisionism, especially because it is a part of “new history”.⁵³ Demanding that women's stories should be included based on ethics is not enough, because this process of revision is a political

power struggle, and the actors should understand how politics works and how people are mobilized for different struggles.

GÁBOR GYÁNI also argued that the second cause is the fact that the post-modern turn was combined with the emerging importance of personal recollections about events (ego documents, oral histories, testimonies, diaries, etc.) as sources.⁵⁴ Only personal sources about the history of 1956 were considered as authentic and true, in opposition to the history of falsifications during the Kádár regime of 1956–1989. While the “age of witness”⁵⁵ in Holocaust historiography addressed experiences of new victim groups and came up with unprecedented and innovative methods of historical research, the case of writing the history of the 1956 Revolution in Hungary has resulted in the opposite – including a marginalization of professional historians and an overwhelming description of personal experiences instead of theorizing, as well as marginalizing the experiences of certain groups while prioritizing those of others, such as women.

The history of 1956 is mostly based on oral tradition. Because the Revolution lasted only 13 days and was followed by bloody repression and heavy censorship, documents were either produced by the repressive state or remained in the oral tradition. As connected to the demand of “recovering the truth”, this means that testimonies were labeled as true, not just authentic. The positivistic credo of Langlois and Seignobos, written in 1898 in *Introduction aux études historiques* “L'histoire se fait avec des documents. Pas de documents, pas d'histoire?” still pursues historians today. “New post-structuralist history” has not stopped following the “source driven” nature of history and rational idealism, saying that all of history can be truthfully understood if there are enough sources available. These sources, however, were mostly oral sources presenting a claim to authenticity and truth in a historical culture in which multiple stories were competing for hegemonic status.

Writing the history of 1956 started off in the positivist and rationalist idealist frame. Several books were published of collec-



The Hungarian National Opera announcing 56 themed performances.

PHOTO: ANDREA PETŐ

tions of interviews that were to be analyzed as written memory documents. The spoken words of testimonies became written documents. Collections of interviews are hosted at the Institute of Political History (the former Institute of Party History and Oral History Collection of the 1956 Institute). The 20th Century Institute and the House of Terror started collecting their own testimonies from survivors whom they had selected to create their own collection. Testimonies serve in this paradigm as authentic and true memories. Families and the private sphere were sites where, it was hoped, the state could not penetrate, and they were the main sites of identity formation defining “us” and “them”. Family was also the site that was the most resistant to statist feminist emancipation and where expectations regarding femininity and masculinity had not changed much, thus leading to the emergence of “familialism” after 1989 in gender equality politics.⁵⁶

THE THIRD FACTOR contributing to the change of illiberal memory politics is that after 1989 there was a shift in memory studies towards a truth paradigm that sought to counteract the previous manipulative historiography of communism. The category of memory has been placed in the center of scholarly investigations, and in this process a memory boom of alternative personal stories and new methods of oral history has resurfaced. “Truth” has become a personalized matter, making the individual subject the subject of history writing. In this paradigm, women’s history writing was introduced seemingly on a winning ticket as life stories became an acknowledged subject after 1989. At the same

time, the quickly emerging new historical canon integrated both the previously dominant truth framework and new truths, including women as the subjects of history writing.⁵⁷

The truth paradigm as a framework for history writing was necessarily strengthened in Central Europe after 1989. The idea was that political freedom made it possible to access the veracity of history because political manipulation was no longer imposed on readers. Previously inaccessible archives were opened up for researchers, and this was the period of “archive fever” described by Jacques Derrida.⁵⁸ The belief is that the truth and its explanations are there in the archives and you just have to find it because, and here is the chance for conspiracy theories, the archives were closed and hidden from you by unidentified powers, although these powers are mostly understood to be “the communists”. Oral history became a popular method of collecting stories of “how the 20th century really happened” with the aim of creating a counter canon to the communist history writing.⁵⁹

Towards a new paradigm of gendered memory politics

The illiberal memory politics’ use of the women’s history turn is informed by the populist turn. Duncan Light pointed out, while analyzing the transition of 1989, that the various nations of Central Europe were moved “by the desire to construct new post-communist identities, characterized by a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely westward-looking orientation”.⁶⁰ Now a deepening reversal is present – these identities are not democratic, not pluralist, not capitalist, and certainly not westward looking. Instead, as I pointed out in my article on far right memorialization practices in Hungary, the community of jointly experienced suffering defines national identity. And community itself is seen as anti-pluralist. The newly emerging and victorious anti-modernism, which from a social and spiritual point of view questions neoliberalism, also turned history into an ideological weapon in order to reach its political aims and to offer a livable, real, and acceptable alternative future. This anti-modernism goes hand in hand with revisionist history writing (and “history politics”), which defines the nation as a community of victims (always referring to those who caused the suffering) and offers redemption in the near future. As a result of this revisionist history writing, large meta-narratives are being constructed, new methods are being used, and new sources are being discovered, all of which refer to the position of the narrator of the story. This narrative position, as Eric Hobsbawm wrote in *The Guardian*, comes down to “my truth is as valid as your truth”.⁶¹ This stance entails a general opposition to universalism in non-traditional history writing. This anti-universalism and the relative statute of truth connect revisionist history writing to women’s history writing. This connection is transformed into a socializational fight, to use the words of Gramsci, and both streams define new historical sources as legitimate historical sources.⁶² The revisionist history writing is fighting against communist history writing, while women’s history writing opposes the sanctification of social hierarchies.

The revisionism of “new history” together with the truth

paradigm informed by anti-communism made the previous narrative about 1956 vulnerable when the populist turn brought in the “my truth is as valid as your truth” framework. As a result of the populist turn, the memory politics of the illiberal state is focusing on people, not on leaders – “the people” have spoken – and it is no longer individuals who are the agents of history. The commemoration of 1956 labeled the events as the revolution of the masses, as was emphasized on the official website:

We can say it out loud now, that this revolution did not have leaders, in this revolution and freedom, people raised their arms because their real leaders had been executed, forced to emigrate, or imprisoned, and those who replaced them were servants of foreign, soviet occupying forces who betrayed them.⁶³

The familial turn as a major component of the polypore state emphasizes women’s roles as caregivers, wives, and daughters. The roots of familialism go back to the 1956 Revolution and can be found in the historiography written by émigrés and members of the democratic opposition, together with the missing paradigm shift in 1989. The evidence for this is in what has happened with the visual representations of those women who were selected to be on the billboards. The women on the billboards are represented as innocent and caring women with light makeup – while tough street fighters are presented as victims – and heavily Photoshopped. This type of history writing is based on the fetishization of complementary gender differences, just as we saw prior to 1989. And if it is not accompanied by a critical scrutiny of its production, it can be fraught with the same dire consequences as ignoring the very same differences.

The emerging anti-gender discourses have had a major impact as far as the future of writing women’s history is concerned. The turn in women’s history writing is a hegemonic fight, in the Gramscian sense, for control of the process of writing history. Revisionist history writing is successfully applying the same methods and theories used in women’s history writing, and by doing so it is creating another counter canon. As far as the politics of presence is concerned, there are women in history, but in a fundamentally different frame. The triple crises of 2008 also determined the challenges which women’s history writing faces as a form of revisionist history writing, while at the same time anti-gender movements are challenging the definition of gender.⁶⁴

The professional response to the institutionalized memory politics of the illiberal state remained in the frame of “negative consciousness”. At the major scientific conference in Eger titled “1956 and Socialism” held on September, 8-10, 2016, only six out of nearly 100 conference papers focused on the history of women in 1956. In all six papers, all published in a women’s studies journal, women were discussed as prostitutes, workers, wives, and as symbolic representations.

THE GOVERNMENT OFFENSIVE to use public spaces for the memorialization of its version of history also mobilized civil resistance.

The group “Living Memorial”, which was founded to protest against the Monument of German Occupation on Liberty Square also participated in this resistance with a guerilla exhibition.⁶⁵ They set up a series of four panels entitled “Living ‘56: The Non-amended Memory of the Revolution” in front of the controversial and highly popular House of Terror museum to show what was missing from the remembrance. All of the panels included a small inset with the text: “Did you know that this was also part of the 1956 Revolution? Do you agree that no one should appropriate history? These are a couple of things that are being left out of the official narrative.” The signs were then dedicated to the intellectuals and politicians, to the journalists and writers, to the Imre Nagy group, and to students and workers detailing the roles they played in the revolution. Needless to say that all were men. The illusion of 1989 – that un-politicized memory spaces are possible because there is a consensus on what the good fight is – is still present among historians. The illusion that the present backlash will be over at some point is still haunting the profession, which does not seem to recognize that this is not an innocent omission but a socialization fight to hijack the memory of 1956. Unlike the case of Holocaust memorialization, the turn towards witnesses’ testimonies was not based on a consensus, but rather on conflicting hegemonic claims. The “new history” writing opened up space for an even “newer history” that is using the same revisionist methods. Only a rethinking of relationships to politics and to the political can change power relations in this hegemonic fight. The belief that the memory of 1956 is a living memory, and that it is possible to reintegrate the previously omitted social groups and personalities into the revised history of 1956, is a fight that was lost from the beginning. ✖

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