

# Hungarian government exploits Holocaust Memorial Year to revise history

Markus Salzmann  
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This year has been dedicated Holocaust Memorial Year in Hungary. The right-wing government of Victor Orban (Fidesz party) decided on this course in the spring of 2013 to counter international criticism that it supports and promotes widespread anti-Semitism in the country.

As has now been revealed, the main aim of the official ceremonies is not to commemorate the approximately 600,000 Jews, deported from Hungary from March 1944 to January 1945 and murdered in German concentration camps, but rather to rewrite history. By seeking to rehabilitate the authoritarian regime of Miklos Horthy, which was jointly responsible for the murder of the Jews, the government is exposing its affiliation with extreme right-wing forces.

The National Association of Jewish Communities in Hungary has recently cancelled its participation in the commemorative events. "We are extremely bitter," association chairman András Heisler told the *Spiegel* news magazine.

The planned memorial to the victims of the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944 is to be a "stumbling stone" (plaque embedded in the ground). It will be laid on Freedom Square in central Budapest and feature a German imperial eagle, swooping down on the archangel Gabriel, the symbol of Hungary. This corresponds to the government's perspective on the country's involvement with Nazi fascism, which has also been enshrined in the preamble to the Hungarian constitution since 2012. According to this, Hungary was deprived of its sovereignty from March 1944 to May 1990, and the Hungarian state thus bears no responsibility for the Holocaust suffered by the Hungarian Jews.

In the spring of 1944, Reich administrator and Hitler

ally Miklós Horthy headed the Hungarian government that deported more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, almost all of whom were murdered in the gas chambers. Hungarian historian Krisztián Ungváry also points out that although Hungary was formally occupied, it was actually one of Germany's most important allies. Ungváry concludes that "The [present government's] commemoration of the occupation is therefore a crude and tendentious falsification of history".

Ungváry along with two dozen other Hungarian historians signed an open letter to the Orbán government, asking it to refrain from laying the commemorative plaque. A spokesman for the ruling Fidesz party then referred to the debate about the memorial and objections from historians as "hysteria mongering." In a letter to the Jewish community association, Mazsihisz, Orbán himself condemned the "political exploitation" of the monument.

The planned Holocaust Memorial and Educational Centre near the Josefstädterstraße railway station has also become a controversial issue. Many Jewish communities and historians accuse the project manager, Mária Schmidt, of wanting to downplay the Holocaust. Jewish victims of the Holocaust were said to have been placed in the same "class of victims" as the Hungarian Germans, while whitewashing the Horthy era.

In recent weeks, it was repeatedly demonstrated that the current downplaying of fascism in Hungary is not simply a political gaffe.

Personally selected by Orban as head of the government's "Veritas" history institute, Sándor Szakály said in an interview with the MTI news agency that Jews in Hungary suffered "significant losses" only after the German occupation of the country on March 19, 1944. He described previous deportations by the

Hungarian state as “police operations involving foreigners,” since the Jews concerned were not holders of Hungarian citizenship. He also said there had “indeed [been] a Jewish question” in Hungary during the interwar period.

The large number of memorial services for Hungarian soldiers, fallen in the Soviet Union, is also symptomatic of the aims of the government campaign. At the main event in Budapest on January 11, Defence Secretary Tamás Vargha interpreted the German Wehrmacht’s attack on the Soviet Union, which also involved Hungarian soldiers, with the words: “Hungarian soldiers defended their homeland on the distant battlefields of Russia.”

Right-wing forces are being systematically rehabilitated. Statues and busts of Horthy are erected nationwide. Members and sympathisers of the fascist Jobbik party are protected by the police, as they march through the streets commemorating Horthy and simultaneously calling for the expulsion of the Roma population. Openly extreme right-wing authors are honoured with official prizes, while their critics are silenced.

The mounting social polarisation in Hungary is revealing itself to be less and less compatible with democratic forms of rule. According to a survey by the TARKI Social Research Institute from the end of last year, poverty in Hungary has greatly increased. The survey showed that almost half the Hungarian population—exactly 46.6 percent—now live below the poverty line of €260 (US\$355) a month. The figure for the Roma minority is as high as 92 percent.

The report exposes the fact that 4 out of 5 households have no material reserves and are unable to afford, for example, a household repair or any other additional expenditure of more than 100,000 forints (approximately €330). The income gap between the highest and the lowest 10 percent has grown by 25 percent since 2009. The share of the poorest 10 percent in the total national income has fallen from 3.1 to 2.6 percent.

According to reliable estimations, more than 250,000 children in Hungary are not adequately nourished. About 50,000 of them regularly suffer starvation. Another clear indication of the social misery is the birth rate. Some 5.5 percent fewer children were born in the first half of 2013, compared to the same period in the

previous year.

After taking office in 2010, the Orban government immediately began to dismantle democratic rights, set up authoritarian structures, and integrate extreme right-wing forces into its political ranks.

A study by the Bertelsmann Foundation reached the conclusion that 59 of the 75 democratic countries examined over the last 8 years evidenced considerable backsliding regarding democratic standards, such as fair elections, press freedom, just legal institutions and governmental separation of powers. The report states, “With respect to Europe, these include Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary.” Setbacks in some of the European countries were so severe that they could no longer be said to comply with fundamental democratic standards.



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