Remains Of Socialism: Memory And The Futures Of The Past In Postsocialist Hungary

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With the end of communism in Hungary, many people eagerly assumed that the physical and symbolic remnants of the past era would similarly vanish from public life and everyday activity. All that remained was to sweep away the detritus of the recent past: a process wittily depicted by one of the campaign posters for the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum, MDF), the winning party of Hungary’s first postsocialist democratic elections in 1990. “National spring cleaning!” (Országos tavaszi nagytakarítást) the poster announced, with a photograph of a garbage can overflowing with a statue of Stalin, Mao’s Little Red Book, and other party memorabilia. This vivid visual argument jokingly played on Trotsky’s famous phrase by tossing the formerly venerated objects of official state culture into a literal dustbin of history.

Meanwhile, in everyday life, Hungarians celebrated the end of the regime with ironic “retro” parties and new entrepreneurial ventures that marketed the relics of official state culture as kitsch to both locals and foreign tourists. For example, just a few blocks from Moscow Square (a central transportation hub in Budapest), young entrepreneurs opened a communist-themed pizzeria under the name of “Marxim”—a play on both the famous Parisian restaurant “Maxim” and Marxism. With a red star over its door and an interior decorated with images of Lenin and other state socialist kitsch, the restaurant was the subject of local and international news articles gleefully reporting that the newly capitalist Hungary was now making a profit out of socialism’s remains. The pizzeria’s humorous but triumphant display of mastery over the recent past made it a popular
hangout in the early years of postsocialism. As the owners declared on Marxim’s menu, “The outside may be communist but we are capitalist to the very marrow of our bones.”

Such images and stories from the time of Hungary’s political transition sought to portray the disorienting transformation of everyday life into history as a process that was both natural and inevitable: a return to national authenticity by eliminating the debris of foreign occupation. Although similar examples can be found across the region, in Hungary the stakes of this transformation from Soviet satellite to member of democratic Europe were particularly high. Beginning in the early 1960s, under the leadership of General Secretary János Kádár, Hungarians had enjoyed greater liberties and a higher standard of living than many of their Soviet bloc neighbors. This experience of “goulash communism,” as well as participation in the thriving second economy of late socialism, now inspired many Hungarians to consider themselves well-poised to lead the region in joining the West as political and economic equals, ready to take their place in the new global order. Even the peaceful demise of the regime itself—a bloodless and largely bureaucratic affair—offered a welcome contrast to the violent political upheavals that had punctuated Hungary’s tumultuous twentieth century. Demonstrating mastery over socialism’s material and metaphorical remains thus appeared to be one of the final steps to transform socialist citizens into new postsocialist subjects—and to enter the democratic and prosperous future that awaited them.
Nearly twenty years later, in 2009, a different mood prevailed as I sat in Marxim with my good friend Levente, then in his early forties. Levente had mentioned that he had met some friends there a few weeks before, and when I expressed my surprise that Marxim was still in business, he suggested that I join him there for lunch. Like many others, Levente had come to regard his initial expectations of the political transformation as painfully optimistic and naive. Such disappointment has become endemic to the region (Ghodsee 2011), but thanks to the 2008 global economic crisis that hit Hungary with disproportionate force, the disenchantment in Hungary was particularly acute. That year, a Pew Research study announced that 72 percent of the Hungarians they surveyed believed that they were currently worse off economically than they had been under communism (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2009, 5). No other postsocialist country in the survey expressed such widespread dissatisfaction. Indeed, the relative lack of interest in celebrating the twentieth anniversary of 1989 suggested that the end of state socialist rule no longer represented a chronological break, but instead a failed point of origin—a lost opportunity for cultural, political, and economic transformation.

Surprisingly, this disillusionment did not fuel a nostalgic desire to return to the communist past. Rather, it reflected a frustrated orientation toward the future: the disappointment that the bright future promised by the end of communism had still not materialized. This logic—one that mourned not “what I once had,” but “what I should already have”—became clear to me as my friend and I waited for our pizza and discussed the effects of the financial crisis on his parents’ finances and his own opportunities for freelance work as an editor and translator. In the midst of our conversation, he paused to look at Marxim’s empty tables and its faded, dusty furnishings with a rueful smile. “Even this place is over its prime,” he told me, gesturing at a propaganda poster. “Making fun of this stuff feels odd now, because no one says things like that anymore.” Marxim no longer inspired laughter at the former era. Instead, Levente told me, it made him feel wistful for the optimism of the early years of postsocialism, when as a young university student entering adulthood, it seemed as if one could indeed remember the past only to laugh at it. “It’s not a place to ironically remember the communist past anymore,” he concluded. “It’s become a memory to itself, to how it used to be fifteen years ago.” Once a triumphant display of mastery over the remainders of the communist era, Marxim was now itself a relic of the failed hopes of transition.

Yet the obsolescence of Marxim’s memory work does not mean that other attempts to banish or domesticate Hungary’s remains of socialism were outdated. Instead, Hungary’s recent experiences of crisis and disappointment only inspired renewed complaints that transition had failed because the past had not been dealt with correctly. A few months after my lunch at Marxim, in the spring of 2010, the Hungarian electorate voted into power the right-wing political party Fidesz.
which pledged to repair the missed opportunities of two decades earlier by finally accomplishing a “revolution” that would leave the socialist past behind. As part of this work of completing Hungary’s transition from socialism, the local government in Budapest returned “Moscow Square” to its pre-1951 name of “Kálmán Széll Square” in 2011.

Unlike a generation earlier, however, Fidesz did not remove such remains of socialism simply to break from the socialist era. Instead, by declaring it urgent to eradicate the name “Moscow” from the cityscape two decades after the departure of Soviet troops, Fidesz revived the past as an ongoing danger that was necessary to fight. Over its first term in power (2010–2014), Fidesz would use the claim that it was finally eliminating Hungary’s remains of socialism as one of its justifications for enacting sweeping legal and constitutional changes that threatened much of the past decades’ democratic progress. Remains of socialism now enabled these political actors not to bury the socialist era, but to keep it alive as a problem that only they could solve.

This book is about the shifting fates of the memory of the socialist past in post-socialist Hungary. Beginning in the early 1990s, it spans more than two decades...
of political and social transformation to examine attempts at “spring cleaning” the remains of the past era from both private life and public culture—and to analyze the obstacles that would emerge to frustrate this fantasy of historical mastery. To do so, I introduce the concept of “remains”—both physical objects and cultural remainders—to symbolize all that Hungarians sought to leave behind as they struggled to remake themselves as new postsocialist subjects. Their heated attempts to master the obstinate remainders of an ambivalent past also became struggles to determine the future, as well as to mourn the futures that were never realized.

Like every postsocialist country, Hungary’s physical and cultural landscapes are permeated by residues and legacies of four decades of state socialist rule. Indeed, the condition of subsisting among remnants of discredited pasts and failed historical trajectories may not be the exception but the norm in this age of “post”s. But in my formulation, “remains” are far more than simply the obvious material leftovers and legacies of Soviet occupation (what would be called maradvány in Hungarian). Instead, I argue for conceptualizing remains as produced by a modern historical optics that anxiously scans the present for threatening signs of an unwanted past and thus undesired future. Particular remains only intrude and demand attention at certain moments, by certain people, and to certain ends—as the impermanence of Marxism’s memory work in the early years of postsocialism demonstrates. The battles to define what constitutes a remain of socialism, and how best to banish or master it, thus represent an active, contested, and shifting process through which people in Hungary—from politicians and activists to artists and entrepreneurs—struggled both to distance the recent past and to express fantasies and fears about the future yet to come.

In the chapters that follow, I track the changing fortunes of socialism’s remains in order to perform an archaeology of postsocialism’s future hopes and present-day frustrations, beginning with the optimism of the early years of transition and ending with the political and economic crises that inspired Hungary’s recent turn toward illiberal democracy and what critics view as right-wing authoritarianism. The heterogeneity of the cultural objects, sites, and sentiments that emerged in Hungary’s public culture as remains of state socialism—as well as the communities of memory that produced and were produced by these relics—demands a methodology that follows a similarly varied and restless path. My analysis thus moves in roughly chronological order to travel among museums and monuments, public protests and celebrations, and private stories, jokes, and conversations. Each chapter investigates a cultural object that exemplifies the logic of remains: from exiled statues of Lenin and commodified relics of state socialist mass culture to discredited official histories and the scandalous secrets of the communist regime’s informers. My examination of the different tensions and contradictions embodied by each set of remains enables me to illuminate some of the key moments in
Hungary’s postsocialist political and social transformations and to demonstrate that the debates and controversies these remains inspired did not merely reflect but actively produced far-ranging shifts in Hungary’s politics of memory.

Over time, as the joyful optimism of “spring cleaning” gave way to the unexpected challenges of democratic politics and participation in the market economy, each attempt to dispose of the remnants of an unwanted past would fail to produce the desired present, thus leaving the search for remains to begin anew. Ultimately, the battle over remains would symbolize not the promise of mastering the past, but rather the perceived impossibility of doing so. The problem of remains would come to represent the frustrated ambitions of transition itself, by offering a way to explain the disappointments of the present as the failure to leave the past behind.

**Why Remains?**

The stories told about memory at the margins of the West tend to be narratives of loss and ruination, macabre relics and spectral hauntings. These studies offer important insights into how the traumas and injustices of the past continue to affect present-day politics and society. Their focus on unwelcome legacies of troubled pasts has also provided a crucial corrective to presentist models of memory that, as Richard Werbner argues, “reduce memory to an artefact of the here and now, as if it were merely a backwards construction after the fact” (1998, 2). Instead, he maintains, “intractable traces of the past are felt on people’s bodies, known in their landscapes, landmarks and souvenirs, and perceived as the tough moral fabric of their social relations” (2–3).

Although the conceptual vocabulary of ghosts, ruins, and similar metaphors of an unmastered past is valuable, it nevertheless risks limiting our attention to only the negative experiences of the past’s remainders. This tendency is common in the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, due to the centrality of the Holocaust and psychoanalytic theories of trauma in some of its initial formulations. Scholars have recently called for expanding the range of the affects we study: to move beyond the dysphoria of trauma, mourning, and melancholia to also consider pleasure and laughter, and to ask how such varied responses interact with nonmemorial affects to produce “affective ecologies” that ground dispositions toward past history as well as contemporary politics (Vermeulen 2012, 232; Hamilton 2010). This approach is particularly crucial in the postsocialist context where, as Alexei Yurchak reminds us, we cannot understand the socialist past without appreciating “the creative and positive meanings with which [citizens] endowed their socialist lives—sometimes in line with the announced goals of the
state, sometimes in spite of them, and sometimes relating to them in ways that
did not fit either-or dichotomies” (2005, 9).

I thus use the more flexible language of remains, which we can consider most
simply as “matter out of time” (to borrow from Mary Douglas’s famous formul-
ation of dirt as “matter out of place” [2002, 36]), to emphasize the ambiguities
of the recent past and the ambivalent emotions it continues to evoke: whether
anger, sadness, humor, boredom, veneration, disgust—or affection. Even pain-
ful remembrances of guilt or persecution can inspire creative acts of cultural
imagination.4 Whether socialist remains arouse embittered laments, nostal-
gic longing, or mocking laughter, they nonetheless offer ways to articulate new forms
of value, identity, and aspiration vis-à-vis both the problematic past and an uncer-
tain future.

Moreover, many of the established tropes of an unpalatable past also embed
temporal assumptions about the fate of that past, whether the ghost’s threatened
return or the ruin’s failure to materialize the anticipated future.5 In contrast, my
conceptual framework of “remains” avoids assuming in advance the trajectories
that the past’s afterlives may take. By tracing the evolution of postsocialist mem-
ory practices over more than two decades, my analysis emphasizes the imperma-
nence and contingency of each attempt at historical mastery, and how once-settled
questions and battles would repeatedly reemerge in public life.6 This longitudi-
nal approach thus focuses attention on the ways in which different remains at
different moments enter or fade out of cultural focus. It demonstrates that the
process of identifying and grappling with socialist remains is contested and
dynamic, formulated and reformulated in response to a changing present.

In other words, although my study shares the critique of approaches whose
“tendency toward voluntarism” (Olick 2003, 7) reduces the burden of the past to
merely a projection of the present, I do not view these historical traces as entirely
predetermined or intractable. Instead, I insist on the agency of the various social
and political actors who battled to define the future by eliminating signs of the
past’s unwanted presence. Although they each viewed the past as a problem to be
solved, the nature and location of this burden, the meanings assigned to it, and
who felt it most acutely varied across communities and over time. Moreover,
I build on Jeffrey Olick’s insight that “memorymakers don’t always succeed in
creating the images they want and in having them understood in the ways they
intended” (2003, 7) to show how each attempt to determine and master the past
via a specific set of remains only sparked further debate and controversy. The em-
phaeses and elisions to be found in any given form of remains would lay the
groundwork for the ways people would define and encounter future ones.

To support these arguments, I draw inspiration from several critical trajecto-
ries. The first is the anthropological critique of postsocialist transitology. Much
as Katherine Verdery anticipated in her 1996 study, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, the past decades have demonstrated the failure of early models of “transition” that predicted a unilinear transformation from the socialist era into a future predetermined by Western ideal types of the free market and liberal democracy (15–16). I extend this critique of teleological narratives of economic progress and the victory of consumer capitalism to the politics of memory, arguing against the assumption that the demise of state socialism entailed the fracturing of one historical narrative and its replacement by another: the unproblematic return of “authentic” history out of the deep freeze of state amnesia. Instead, remains are emblematic of the uneven and conflicting trajectories of historical and cultural transformation: at once out of time and yet all too present.

My second inspiration is Walter Benjamin’s unfinished work on the nineteenth-century proto-shopping malls, the Paris arcades. Faded and unfashionable by the time of his research in the 1920s and 1930s, the obsolete architecture and outdated commodities of the arcades were relics of an earlier, more optimistic era of consumer culture—and thus, in Benjamin’s view, a crucial site to excavate capitalist modernity’s past fantasies and aspirations (Benjamin 2002). His analysis of the forgotten dreams and utopian hopes that lay petrified in the now-worthless detritus of a past era guides my own investigation of Hungary’s politics of memory. My emphasis on remains as sites to imagine better tomorrows and to mourn the futures that never came to pass treats hope and aspiration as ethnographic categories, by studying not merely what is and what was, but also what my subjects imagined might be. Remains thus both fracture triumphalist narratives of historical progress and offer new possibilities of disrupting the present by reminding us of its unrealized futures—whether the fantasy of Western consumerist abundance, the hopes that democracy would bring historical justice and restitution, or the utopian impulses of the state socialist project itself (Benjamin 2002; Buck-Morss 1989, 2000). Rather than view the past and future in opposition, I thus join recent work in anthropology that emphasizes the coconstruction of past and future, in which “memory practices form an explicit part of future-making” (Shaw 2013).

This focus on the cultural productivity of an outdated and unwanted past resonates with the third and final body of literature that inspired this study: psychoanalytic theories of subject formation, which understand identity as constituted through not only positive identifications but also negative disavowals. Specifically, my use of “remains” parallels Jacques Lacan’s concept of the remainder (as objet petit a): that element of the subject that is split from itself in order to produce itself as unitary and coherent. That is, I argue that the crises of contemporaneity embodied by remains (what constitutes the present? what is rejected as merely past?) were ultimately crises of subjectivity: how to define who “we”
are and what is “ours.” Such questions are of course endemic to modernity, but they had particular inflection for the citizens of the Soviet bloc, who viewed the communist system as inhumane and unnatural and who used the regime’s suppression of “true history” as a powerful means of political mobilization. After the end of the regime, they thus battled to produce themselves as new postsocialist subjects by renarrating long-familiar elements of public and everyday life as mere Soviet anachronism, and thus a divergence from the authentic course of national history.

Such memory work could not entirely efface the contradiction at the heart of the experience of late state socialism, which many Hungarians experienced as injustice and oppression and a relatively peaceful and materially secure existence: that is, both the violence of repression and the modest luxuries of “refrigerator socialism” and the campfire songs of the Young Pioneers. These dichotomized visions of the socialist past did not stand in simple opposition (a logic that Yurchak has critiqued as “binary socialism” [2005, 4]). Rather, they reflected the paradoxical nature of political citizenship during late socialism. After Hungary’s failed revolution against Soviet rule in 1956 and the harsh years of retaliation that followed, the regime sought to normalize relations with its citizenry by rewarding those who withdrew from political protest into a relatively comfortable and seemingly depoliticized private sphere. Over the decades, as the regime steadily increased the population’s living standards and access to consumer goods, many of its citizens became accustomed to seeking meaning and fulfillment in their domestic activity (whether family life or working in the second economy) and were encouraged to regard the public world of politics as mostly irrelevant to their personal concerns. But this perception of being able to pursue private endeavors relatively independently from politics did not represent autonomy from the regime. Rather, it was one of the very ways that the regime secured its legitimation. In fact, as Martha Lampland argues, the stark public/private divide helped to reproduce the system by convincing people that they were powerless to change it, as well as encouraging them to overlook commonalities among the values, practices, and beliefs in both realms (1995, 245–247).

In the early years after the end of state socialism, the coziness and familiarity of socialist remains, as much as the painful memories of foreign occupation they also embodied, would present a challenge for a new Hungary now defined as the very negation of the past era. In everyday conversation, many people readily discussed pleasant memories of the recent past or drew negative comparisons between then and now, whether that concerned economic hardship and the loss of social welfare measures, new scandals of greed and corruption by Hungary’s emerging political and economic elites, or the growing disappointment with a Western consumer culture that stigmatized Hungarian goods and consumers as
inferior. But most people were also aware that such positive evaluations of the past could not be widely expressed in public or political forums without seeming to endorse the oppressive politics of the previous regime and to confirm a Western hierarchy that condemned such sentiments as evidence of Hungary’s failed modernity.

In postsocialist media discourse, political rhetoric, and symbolic and actual encounters with the “West,” many Hungarians thus learned to regard the recent past with discomfort and to treat these two sets of memories as incommensurable. Lacan’s formulation of the remainder as that part of self that is outside the self—both an alien presence and uncomfortably familiar—helps to illuminate the ways that remains of socialism would unsettle the fantasy of a clean break with a foreign past. Remains seemed to offer the possibility of historical mastery, but they also troubled the fiction of a unified national subjectivity by threatening to make visible those intimate aspects of collective historical experience that people now felt compelled to reject.

Unmastering the Past

My analysis of remains as both symbolizing and frustrating the desire for a mastered past is thus not another story of the “crisis” of historical memory and national identity in Eastern Europe. This is a familiar narrative of journalists and scholars who have treated the status of memory in the former Soviet bloc as a crucial diagnostic of national health: viewing a lack of historical consensus as pathological and analyzing the literal content of memorial practices for signs of danger—whether “too much,” “not enough,” or the “wrong” kinds of memory altogether. In the first decade of postsocialism, for example, any sign of positive remembrance of the socialist past in the region—whether expressed as nostalgia for its mass culture or the success of communist successor parties in democratic elections—sparked a flurry of media and scholarly concern that the country’s democratic transformation was in danger. And observers not only pathologized the communist past: while they hailed Eastern Europe’s “return to history” in the form of revived cultural identities and the rectification of communism’s historical distortions, they also feared that the renewal of national identification would lead to violence (as in the war in Yugoslavia) or the persecution of ethnic minorities.

Such moral panics, whether originating locally or abroad, were often driven by the desire to establish democratic political norms, to pay justice to history’s victims, and to forestall the repetition of violence in the future. But the language of pathology their rhetoric deployed also embedded normative assumptions about
what proper “mourning,” “remembrance,” and “coming to terms” with the past might look like—and often presumed that memory practices in the West represent the standard to which all others should aspire. Indeed, if the end of communism in Eastern Europe represented a “return to history,” many in the West hailed the demise of its Cold War enemy as signaling the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992) that proved conclusively the triumph of liberal democracy and obviated the need for any critical examination of the West’s own mnemonic habits, distortions, and amnesias. This triumphalism has now begun to fade, as neoliberalism has fallen into crisis across the globe and the West’s monopoly of the future seems less certain. And yet the fascination with how the countries of the former Soviet bloc remember has only become more acute, as a way for the West to buttress its shaky legitimacy by continuing to “fix Eastern Europe in the past” (Boyer 2010, 23).

Anthropologists have long critiqued such temporal disjunctions between the “normal” West and its “backward” Others, burdened by inassimilable, pathological pasts they are unwilling or unable to cast aside. This logic is perhaps exemplified by the very use of the term “postsocialism” to describe a limited region of the globe—as if the United States were not also affected by the legacies and remainders of the end of the Cold War. “Post” risks positioning its subjects—whether postauthoritarian, postcolonial, or postsocialist—as inhabiting the present in a perpetual state of belatedness; what Marianne Hirsch, in her study of “postmemory,” calls “a location in an aftermath” (2012, 5).

This denial of coevalness (Fabian 1983) is familiar from developmentalism, which similarly temporalizes spatial difference and subscribes to a notion of a single modernity as an endpoint (Ferguson 2006; Gupta 1998). The violence of this subjectification enables two key political and historical elisions. First, the discourse of backwardness obscures commonalities and continuities across temporal and spatial divides: the way fantasies of being “new and modern . . . [rely] on the survival of Soviet modes of existence” (Flatley 2001, 86), and how “the socialist project, particularly its investment in heavy industry, was not restricted to the ‘other’ Europe, nor did its lifeline terminate abruptly in 1989” (Scribner 2003, 15, quoted in Petrović 2014, 100).

Second, this unilinear narrative of progress assumes that knowledge and value flow only from West to East (or Global North to Global South), and developmental time itself moves only in one direction. Yet, as scholars of both postsocialism and postcolonialism have argued, the fantasy of European modernity is not always a fantasy of futurity. For factory workers in the former Yugoslavia, their loss of prestige and declining production standards after the end of state socialism only distanced them farther from Europe; in the words of one worker, “We were much more a part of Europe in socialism than we are now” (Petrović 2010, 141). And
even the temporality of progress itself has become increasingly anachronistic. James Ferguson argues that Western discourse about Africa has become increasingly de-developmentalized and detemporalized. That is, this logic no longer considers the continent’s poorest countries to be temporally behind the West, but permanently beneath it (2006, 189–190). For the Zambian mineworkers Ferguson interviewed, modernity thus “was not an anticipated future but a dream to be remembered from the past” (186).

My analysis extends these scholars’ line of critique into the realm of memory, examining how the conditions for “entering Europe” and becoming fully “modern” included the demand that Eastern Europe sacrifice previous historical narratives (whether communist or nationalist) and disavow the meaningfulness of earlier lifeways. This imperative to transform both what and how the East remembers also included the expectation that these nation-states conform to Western European memory regimes, through which claims to national suffering or cultural value are legible only insofar as they support preexisting conceptual frameworks, such as the transcendent value of European liberalism, the centrality of the Holocaust for European memory, and the battle against totalitarianism as the cornerstone of modern European identity (Kraenzle and Mayr 2017, Pakier and Wawrzyniak 2015). Many of the remains that I examine in this book thus emerge in tension with, or in response or resistance to, such transnational memory practices. For example, consumers of socialist nostalgia ironically refer to global discourses of cultural heritage to justify their enjoyment, and the local commemoration of victims of communism borrows from (and competes with) forms and practices of Holocaust commemoration established in Western Europe and North America.

Like other countries of the former Soviet bloc, Hungary is famously concerned with questions of its past. The contemporary desire to identify usable national pasts and eliminate “inauthentic” ones is deeply rooted, particularly given the political disruptions and historical discontinuities of Hungary’s twentieth century. But the production of remains—signs of an unwanted past that impedes entering the future—reflects not only these local processes of memory. Instead, remains also exemplify the condition of being “post” in a temporalized global hierarchy. Remains represent local responses to the global production of both futurity and obsolescence, advancement and backwardness; they are symptoms of a global politics of the present that is always in danger of excluding certain peoples, landscapes, histories, and practices from flows of capital, information, and value.

Rather than interpret remains as a sign of national pathology, this book thus asks how, why, by whom, and in what ways the past becomes pathologized as a problem in the first place, and how this self-reflexive perception of a challenging past can be the source of present-day cultural productivity. I show how the worry
of not dealing with the past properly would provide new opportunities in both public and everyday life for Hungarians to narrate not only the recent experience of state socialism but also the bright hopes, persistent anxieties, and increasingly sharp critiques that emerged from ongoing encounters and negotiations with global modernity.

Although my scope is limited to the Hungarian context, my analysis of socialism’s remains is ultimately a study of modern historical subjectivity and the overlapping, incommensurable, and conflicting narrative horizons that compose it. Symbolizing that which was excluded in the formation of Hungary as a new postsocialist subject, remains became sites to articulate new positionalities vis-à-vis both an unwelcome past and a long-anticipated present whose fantasies of democratic transparency and consumer plenitude would soon be disenchanted. The challenge of remains would provide a crucial way for Hungarians to voice growing concerns about the place of the nation in the new global order—as well as the fear that Hungary itself might be left aside and discarded as a mere remain of globalizing neoliberalism.

**The Structure of This Book**

During my fieldwork in the 1990s and 2000s, there was hardly a sphere of political or public culture that was not saturated with attempts to discredit or enshrine almost every important historical figure from Hungary’s turbulent twentieth century. Their stories were often embedded in broader national narratives of mourning, martyrdom, victimhood, and defeat: during the twentieth century, Hungary lost two world wars, was invaded by two major foreign powers (Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union), and lost two-thirds of its territory in the 1920 Trianon peace treaty imposed after its defeat in World War I. As István Rév observes, Hungary’s narrative of national selfhood has thus been one of “battles lost, and consequently a continuous history of executions, exiles, and political suicides. The normal public rituals of Hungarian history are, accordingly, not victory parades but funerals and reburials” (Rév 2005, 41–42). Moreover, these political upheavals also brought about profound social and economic transformations. Hungary went from being a multinational empire dominated by Hungarian elites to an almost monoethnic state with significant parts of the ethnic Hungarian community becoming minorities in neighboring countries. The country also underwent two significant economic reorganizations: the communist nationalization of the economy and collectivization of agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s, and then the shift of that wealth back into a new set of private hands in the 1990s.
Although I cannot do full justice to chronicling the events that define the history of modern Hungary, a brief chronological summary is necessary to ground the discussion in the chapters that follow. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Hungary was a European middle power that ruled with Austria over a vast multinational empire that stretched over much of today’s Central and Eastern Europe. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy collapsed in the final days of World War I, and Hungary became a democratic republic in 1918; a Bolshevik Soviet republic for several months in 1919; and then a constitutional monarchy led by Regent Miklós Horthy, a former naval admiral, who would remain in power until after the Nazi occupation in the final days of World War II. Horthy’s interwar government was politically conservative, and its policies were driven and justified by the demand for a return to pre-Trianon borders. This goal of territorial revisionism would lead Hungary to ally itself with Nazi Germany during World War II (although Horthy’s government would later unsuccessfully try to reach out to Allied powers late in the war). In 1944–1945, Hungary was occupied first by Nazi Germany and then by Soviet troops. The country emerged defeated in 1945 with its capital city severely damaged, its territory returned to its post-Trianon borders, and with casualties of nearly 900,000, including almost 500,000 of Hungary’s Jewish citizens killed in the Holocaust.

After the war, Hungary became a democratic republic, but Hungarian communists, with support from the Soviets, worked to undermine their political competitors and the integrity of the election process. By 1948 the communists managed to gain almost total control, and in 1949 they practically eliminated opposition parties and passed a new constitution modeled after that of the Soviet Union. Over the next four decades of communist rule, both the nature of political authority and its means of legitimation would undergo several transformations. The harsh measures favored by Mátyás Rákosi, in power from 1948 to 1953, fell out of favor after Stalin’s death, and he was replaced by the more reform-minded Imre Nagy before then retaking power in 1955. The post-Stalinist thaw paved the way for Hungary’s brief popular uprising against both the returning Rákosi regime and Soviet rule in 1956, but this revolution was brutally suppressed by Soviet troops.

Over the next three decades, János Kádár would lead Hungary, and the first years of his rule were ones of violent retaliation for the 1956 revolution. Beginning in the 1960s, however, Kádár’s regime gradually liberalized and attempted to reconcile with Hungary’s citizens by offering them a higher living standard (increasingly subsidized by foreign loans) that would eventually make Hungary the “happiest barracks in the Soviet bloc.” The regime’s economic foundations were ultimately untenable, however, and after Kádár’s forced retirement in 1988, the reformers who replaced him acceded to pressure from the democratic oppo-
sition and began negotiations for multiparty elections that were held in 1990. These elections pushed the communists out of power, and Soviet troops left the country by June 1991.

This book begins in these early years of postsocialist transformation, as Hungarians sought to make remake themselves as new national subjects amid the remains of multiple discredited pasts and failed historical trajectories. Chapter 1, “Banishing Remains: The Statue Park Museum,” explores how politicians, activists, and public officials initially conceptualized the problem of socialist remains in terms of physical remainders: monuments, statues, street names, and other objects and architecture now perceived to be emblematic of the former regime. These competing groups battled to “spring clean” such remains of the communist past in order to restore Hungary to the “authentic” course of national history and to present themselves as harbingers of the nation’s triumphant future. The chapter focuses on the debates that resulted in the removal of Budapest’s socialist-era statues to a Statue Park Museum on the outskirts of the city. Supporters justified the creation of the park as a democratic solution to the outrage that communist monuments inspired. Yet the removal of these statues was not a response to a crisis of defacements and public dissatisfaction, but an attempt to cover up the fact that little such crisis existed. Instead, many people viewed the statues with fondness, amusement, or indifference. The creation of the Statue Park Museum thus ironically helped to produce the very problem it claimed to solve, by renarrating comfortable landmarks of urban life into newly disruptive remains.

Meanwhile, as new political parties and activist groups sought to put the remains of an unwanted past to rest, they simultaneously revived the remains of previous eras in order to lay claim to these histories’ renewed moral legitimacy. They recuperated statues and monuments, heroes and symbols, and historical narratives and vocabularies that state socialist authorities had officially rejected as fascist or reactionary, and they disinterred and reburied long-disparaged historical figures in order to consolidate their place within the new historical landscape of Hungary. Chapter 2, “The Hole in the Flag,” examines two significant attempts to replace the remains of communist history with new democratic content during the first decade of postsocialism: first, the political battles to claim the revolutionary inheritance of Hungary’s failed rebellion against Soviet rule in 1956, and second, the commemorative activities of the center-right Fidesz coalition in power between 1998 and 2002 (epitomized in the 2000 celebrations of the millennium of Hungary’s statehood and Christianization). In different ways, each of these efforts strove to transform a national community united by pessimism and perceptions of victimhood into a victorious, forward-looking citizenry. But, like the Statue Park Museum, these attempts to create new historical foundations for postsocialist Hungary would also struggle with the recent memory of Kádárism.
By the late 1990s, attempts to master the recent past would take a surprising turn. Chapter 3, “Nostalgia and the Remains of Everyday Life,” argues that the various attempts to distance the past described in the previous two chapters became the condition for its return in the form of nostalgia for socialist mass and popular culture. It thus shifts the discussion of remains of socialism from anachronistic monuments and devalued historical narratives to the detritus of an everyday life now on the brink of vanishing: from candy bars and soda pop to the songs of the Young Pioneers. Despite appearances, this nostalgia did not represent a wistful desire to return to the previous era, nor simply the gleeful impulse to laugh at state socialist kitsch found years earlier. Rather, these consumers used nostalgia for the detritus of an everyday life now on the brink of vanishing to both distance the past and give it new value. By detaching fond communal memories of these objects from the political system that produced them, nostalgia recuperated socialist remains as a novel form of national inheritance. This ironic invocation of the international discourse of cultural heritage to legitimate the trash of the previous era enabled Hungarians to redefine themselves as both savvy capitalist consumers and cultured democratic citizens: equal—if not indeed superior—to their Western counterparts.

By the second decade of postsocialism, widespread disenchantment with the experience of “transition” would replace such claims to victory with new laments of victimization that revived the buried past in the hopes of breaking with it anew. The final three chapters of this book examine this transformation in how remains were conceptualized in party politics, cultural debates, and everyday discourses of complaint. As both explanation and evidence of the failure of transition’s promised transformations, the persistence of remains would enable various political and social groups to give voice not only to their past victimization by state socialism, but also to their contemporary frustrations with capitalist transformation, new forms of social inequality and stratification, and the pressures of membership in the European Union, which Hungary joined in 2004.

Chapter 4, “Recovering National Victimhood at the House of Terror,” explores how the center-right Fidesz-led coalition government revived remains as a looming threat in Hungary’s postsocialist culture and politics at the time of the 2002 elections. Key to this shift in the politics of memory was Fidesz’s creation of a controversial museum to commemorate Hungary’s victims of fascism and communism: the House of Terror, located on one of Budapest’s most elegant boulevards. If the Statue Park Museum, opened nearly a decade earlier, was created to lay the socialist past to rest by mastering its visible remains, the purpose of the House of Terror was to revive the remains of socialism as a hidden danger that threatened Hungary once more. And although the Statue Park Museum’s democratic preservation of socialism’s monuments ultimately attracted few visitors,
the House of Terror’s rhetoric of victimization would make it enduringly popular with a public that increasingly blamed the persistence of socialist remains for the failure to enter transition’s promised future.

Chapter 5, “Secrets, Inheritance, and a Generation’s Remains,” demonstrates how this rhetoric of communist terror and the danger of its return would soon extend past party politics to encompass intimate friendships and family relationships. The problem of the communist regime’s informers—and their moral responsibility to both the past and the present—increasingly inspired public debate in the second decade of postsocialism. One crucial way these conflicts took shape was through the charged idiom of family and generational conflict, whether that entailed betrayal by cultural elders (as in the case of the celebrated filmmaker István Szabó) or actual parent (explored in the work of novelist Péter Esterházy). By phrasing the call to accountability as a matter of generational inheritance, Hungary’s cultural “children” reconceptualized the problem of socialism’s remains as not only the challenge of banishing the past, but the fear of reproducing it in the future.

As the twentieth anniversary of 1989 approached, new political and economic crises appeared to threaten the success of Hungary’s postsocialist transformations. In 2006, on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1956 revolution, right-wing demonstrators protested the socialist-led government, which had admitted to lying to win the election. Two years later in 2008, the global financial crisis hit Hungary with disproportionate force, leading to the first-ever International Monetary Fund bailout of an EU country. Chapter 6, “A Past Returned, A Future Deferred,” examines how the experience of these crises fueled renewed complaints that remains of socialism prevented Hungarians from attaining a “normal” life of political civility and economic prosperity. As Hungary approached the twentieth anniversary of 1989, the memory of the transition now only inspired the lament that “communism never ended.”

The conclusion discusses the transformations in Hungary’s politics of memory since the 2010 return to power of Fidesz, which has now become a right-wing populist party. Fidesz hailed its electoral victory as enabling Hungary to finally achieve transition and leave the socialist past behind. Yet its critics argue that beneath the government’s anticomunist rhetoric lie authoritarian policies that have turned back the clock on many of Hungary’s postsocialist democratic transformations. This chapter examines Fidesz’s recent attempts to redefine Hungary’s political and memorial landscape and discusses the opposition to these efforts. Ironically, both Fidesz and its opponents have revived the threat of socialist remains to warn of present and impending danger: whether in the form of an EU bureaucracy that Fidesz compares to the Soviets or in the ways that those who oppose Fidesz’s policies liken contemporary social and political conditions to life under late state socialism. These strategies suggest that remains of
socialism—as sites to enact mastery of the past and to imagine desired and dreaded futures—will endure in years to come.

Background and Methods

This book draws on fieldwork and archival research conducted in Budapest and a village in northeastern Hungary over the past twenty years. Its origins, however, lie in my first trip to Hungary in 1993 as an English teacher in a small village located a ninety-minute train ride from Budapest. Like many young people who came of age with the fall of the Berlin Wall, I was eager to travel to the former Soviet bloc and dismantle the Cold War fears and fantasies that had structured my childhood. During my time in the village, as I taught classes of children and adults the rudiments of English vocabulary and grammar, I lacked both the linguistic and cultural knowledge to fully make sense of the ways the transformations of postsocialism were influencing the material and imaginative worlds of the people I met and lived with. My diary and letters from that time instead present a catalog of post–Cold War clichés that sought out the most visible signs of change, contradiction, and difference compared to what I considered to be North American norms. I noted that many villagers had satellite dishes, yet the entire village had only one telephone, and I marveled at the heterogeneity of the built environment even in the center of Budapest, where signs warned of crumbling building facades next door to glossy new business centers. I also recorded, without entirely understanding, how the economic challenges of postsocialism were dislocating its subjects, whether the Russian-language instructors at the school where I taught who were frantically trying to learn English in order to transfer their teaching skills to a more marketable language, or my own host family’s sudden purchase of a variety store on the outskirts of the village during my weeks living in their home, through which they hoped to supplement their professional salaries.

Most of all, I was struck by the way my status as a mixed-race visitor, from a country (the United States) commonly considered to lack culture or history, inspired many of the people I met to want to educate me about the defining events of Hungary’s past: from the elderly couple in the village who invited me into their home to present with great ceremony a framed map of the territory of Greater Hungary, to the acquaintances who dismissed my questions about Holocaust memorials with the argument that Hungarians had suffered longer and worse under communism, to the filmmakers I interviewed a few years later who emphasized the Hungarian origins of some of old Hollywood’s most famous directors. Others, of course, rejected these claims or minimized their significance, but I soon realized
that even the fact of passionate disagreement embedded them in the same interpretative community, anxiously concerned with the task of remembering or forgetting properly. These self-reflexive discourses signaled concerns not only about what constitutes authentic national history but also about the status of the nation engaged in such historical introspection.

When I first began research for this book, I was eager to put these experiences into a broader context, using this question of memory as a lens through which to understand how the political transformations had demanded equally far-reaching changes to the ways Hungarians lived and narrated their lives. Specifically, I was concerned with the materiality of memory, such as new museums, memorials, and the topic that would become the first chapter of this book: Budapest’s Statue Park Museum of communist-era statues. During my initial field research, however, I soon discovered that for the most part such official sites of memory had become well-established and were no longer active topics in public discourse. This would soon change with the opening of the House of Terror in 2002 and the shifting political circumstances that would give the “problem” of official representations of the recent past renewed urgency in Hungary’s second decade of postsocialism. Nonetheless, this initial challenge forced me to reconsider the very assumptions that structured my project. Why, at that moment, did such official relics of the socialist past no longer interest the people I worked with—at least, not framed in the way I first presented it?

Initially, I continued to pursue my original research strategy on state attempts to materialize new historical narratives and visions of collective memory in Hungary’s cultural landscape: traveling to sites and events, collecting archival materials, and gathering life histories oriented around questions of personal and historical remembrance. In so doing, however, I soon realized that the apparent absence or “failure” of certain forms of memory—and the commentary such absences inspired—were themselves topics of analysis. Moreover, my desire to locate the cultural process of working through the past in the most obvious and literal remains of socialism was excluding other more ambivalent and dynamic ways through which memory and knowledge of the socialist era were taking shape.

My focus thus shifted from what was enshrined as cultural heritage to include those physical and symbolic remainders that were being excluded as trivial, valueless, and/or culturally “inauthentic.” Attentive not only to what was (and was not) being said but also to when and in what contexts, I decided to track the production of remains of socialism across a number of registers: from monumentalized histories to ephemeral media events, and from official narratives of historical martyrdom to the circulation of jokes, rumors, gossip, and complaints. I also expanded my scope to trace the trajectory of postsocialist memorial practices over a time span of more than two decades. My focus on the longitudinal aspects
of cultural memory helped me to trace the various ways specific remains shifted in and out of cultural focus, as well as how these remains responded to the provocations of other conflicting and overlapping commemorative practices: whether competing claims to victimization or attempts to demonize other memories (such as socialist nostalgia) as pathological.

As a result, my research strategy expanded to examine a more contested and heterogeneous set of cultural objects and discursive sites. I also spoke with a more varied range of interpretative communities (from representatives of political parties and activist groups to filmmakers and other artists, and from museum curators and visitors to marketers and consumers of “socialist nostalgia”). I conducted semistructured interviews that included life histories as well as interviews on more specific topics that ranged from retro pop music fandoms to the cultural heritage policies of various government regimes. My interview subjects included members of Budapest’s cultural and political elites—including well-known intellectuals, artists, film studio heads, and government officials—but I focused my efforts on selecting individuals from both Budapest and the village who would provide a sample that was as representative as possible of age, occupation, and political affiliation within Hungary’s highly polarized political spectrum (from far-right supporters to members of the Hungarian Workers’ Party). I interviewed some people only once; I met with others repeatedly over the span of many years.

In addition, I conducted research at the Budapest General Assembly and local district archives to collect minutes of parliamentary debates concerning the fate of Budapest’s statues, and I collected media reports at the Open Society Archives and the library at Hungary’s Parliament in order to chronicle the battles to determine the contours of national memory during the years preceding and directly following the political transformation. I also performed site and event analysis at locations that included the Statue Park Museum, yearly film festivals, the Magyar Millennium celebrations, all-night nostalgia parties, and musical performances.

Perhaps most importantly I participated in the textures and routines of Budapest’s everyday life—from meeting friends and attending lectures, festivals, and performances to shopping for groceries, attending exercise classes, and standing in line at the post office to pay my bills—in order to immerse myself in the social life of the city and the circulation of urban knowledge and gossip. I also balanced my involvement in the life of Hungary’s capital with regular visits to the villages where I had taught English before beginning my fieldwork. Visiting village friends and my former host families periodically not only gave me the opportunity to participate in the family life of my former hosts and to attend village events, but also provided a sense of community and continuity sometimes lacking in the more socially fragmented environment of Budapest.
Finally, my sources included contemporary books, newspapers and magazines, film, television, advertisements, museum exhibitions, and internet discussions and websites. I drew on these materials as both primary sources and cultural artifacts through which to analyze the emergence of Hungary’s democratic postsocialist public culture. In particular, I was interested in media events and scandals as “revelatory incidents” (Fernandez 1986, xi) that illuminated—however temporarily—ongoing spheres of public debate. Their very newsworthiness and atypicality provided the means to better understand the cultural norms these stories violated (or epitomized), and they also provided another idiom through which my interlocutors offered cultural commentary and reflected on their own experiences.

The first chapter begins with one such “problematic semiotic object” (Dominguez 1989, 43): Budapest’s Statue Park Museum of communist-era monuments, opened during the tumultuous yet optimistic early years of postsocialism. The outcome of heated debates among politicians, art historians, and city authorities, the creation of the park in 1993 transformed everyday landmarks into threatening remains, and thus helped to make “transition” a visible fact on the landscape of the city. And like the opening of the pizzeria Marxim, this performance of mastery over an unwanted past would provide a spectacle that appealed not only to residents of Budapest but also to a Western media eager to confirm their own post–Cold War fantasies about the triumph of democracy and market capitalism.