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Monuments and Counter-Monuments: Memory Politics and the Production of Space in Budapest's Liberty Square

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Monuments and Counter-Monuments: Memory Politics and the Production of Space in Budapest's Liberty Square.



MA International Relations – Culture and Politics

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Abstract

This thesis undertakes a theoretical and empirical exploration of Liberty Square in Budapest, examining it as a key site of contested memory. By analysing the square's sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), it traces the socio-historical transformations of the city and the evolving milieu of Hungarian identity. The study combines memory studies and critical spatial thinking to investigate how monuments, memorials, and architectural interventions function as instruments of power in shaping collective memory. Drawing on the works of Henri Lefebvre, Pierre Nora, Aleida Assmann, Jas Assmann, Maurice Halbwachs, Edward Soja, and Doreen Massey, it situates Liberty Square within broader debates on the production of space, cultural memory, and memory politics. Methodologically, the research relies on archival sources, media analysis, and photographic documentation to reconstruct the historical layering of the square and to interpret its contemporary meanings. By focusing on the tension between state-sanctioned narratives and grassroots acts of counter-memory, this thesis demonstrates how Liberty Square operates as both a symbolic and lived space where power is exercised and contested.

1.Introduction

On a June morning in 2014, a bronze eagle was lifted into place in Budapest's Liberty Square. The bird with its wings outstretched was shown descending upon the fragile form of Archangel Gabriel. The monument, named the Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation, was announced by Viktor Orbán as a tribute to the nation that suffered under Nazi occupation. However, as soon as the scaffolding was removed and the monument was unveiled, the space transformed. Activists protested and created a counter-memorial, the *Eleven Emlékmű* (Living memorial), which remains an evolving grassroots installation of photographs, personal objects, and testimonies. The outrage surrounding the memorial ultimately prevented its official inauguration. The Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation is not the only one on the emblematic Liberty Square that has caused mass dissatisfaction.

These tensions stem from a centralised system of cultural-political control, where the state shapes the symbolic landscape. Liberty Square in particular, has become the centre for this procedure. At the same time, Liberty Square also reveals the limits of state-imposed memory. What emerges repeatedly is a tension between top-down narratives imposed by the government and bottom-up acts of remembrance by activists. These tensions directly inform the main research question:

What spatial or architectural techniques have grassroots activists used to contest the state monopoly over public memorial spaces in Budapest?

From this main question follows a sub-question:

Does this struggle over the terrain of memory stand in for wider struggles over civil and social terrains in Hungary?

This thesis advances two core claims. First, successive Hungarian governments have repeatedly reshaped Liberty Square through spatial and aesthetic strategies that normalise preferred narratives of victimhood, heroism, and liberation. Second, civic actors have countered these strategies through various methods that reopened the square's memory regime to public debate.

Liberty Square is ideal for this study, as it contains one of Hungary's densest memorial landscapes. Revisiting contested memory sites such as the Liberty Square is crucial in the current political climate, as these spaces shed light on public debates that might otherwise fade from collective memory. The government's approach often encourages forgetting, leaving these monuments undisturbed, discouraging critical engagement, and promoting an official narrative that asks citizens to accept the past as it is presented rather than to question or challenge it. The research for this thesis proceeds from the assumption that public statues and memorials function as instruments of power.

This framework of space, memory, and their contested overlap is the basis for the methodology and the analysis of Liberty Square. As scholars in memory studies have shown, monuments are never neutral cultural artefacts but state-sanctioned interpretations of history. In Nora's terms, monuments are sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), material sites that organise collective memory by making selected pasts visible (Nora 1989). They organise public space, define what is to be remembered or forgotten, and materialise political authority in highly visible and enduring forms.

Methodologically, the thesis applies Critical Spatial Thinking and semiotic analysis to interpret Liberty Square as both a symbolic and lived environment. The analysis relies on archival sources, media material, and photographic documentation to trace how successive political regimes produced the memorial landscape. This framework allows the study to analyse how spatial practices both express and challenge state power.

This thesis is focusing on the contestation of public space, specifically whether debates about what may appear in public space remain open and inclusive (Sinton 2017; Vatansever 2023). Additionally, while the illiberal characteristics of the Fidesz government have been extensively analysed in the existing literature from multiple perspectives, a spatial approach offers an additional dimension to fill this gap: it reveals how the process of organising public space, from its initial planning stages through the roles of initiators, artists, and contractors, helps to define the boundaries of democracy (Polyák 2019; Bank and Weyland 2020).

First, the methodological section introduces Critical Spatial Thinking and how it is used in the context of a square. Furthermore, semiotics and sociocultural analysis justify the need for a multidisciplinary approach. This is then followed by a review of the relevant literature, introducing the conceptual foundations of the thesis with a focus on spatiality and sites of

memory. Lastly, the analysis is organised into subsections that directly address the central question.

Given its focus on the evolving landscape of a single urban square as a reflection of democratic and political change, this study contributes to broader debates about how contested commemorative interventions in cities can be analysed and understood.

Focusing on four key transformations of Liberty Square's memorial landscape, namely the irredentist statues, the post-1945 Soviet Heroic Memorial, the post-1989 additions of U.S. presidential statues, and the 2014 German Occupation Memorial together with the grassroots Living Memorial, these examples show how sites of memory on Liberty Square have been reshaped and contested over time.

2. Methodology

The primary methodological framework is Critical Spatial Thinking, applied to the case of Liberty Square and its contested memorials to analyse how these monuments, counter-monuments, and the spatial organisation of Liberty Square inscribe state narratives through the themes of martyrdom, victimhood and heroism (Sinton 2017). To trace the historical development of the Square, the analysis is based on primary archival sources from digital photo archives, media documents, as well as contemporary photographic documentation of the square. By cataloguing these materials and situating them within the wider discourse on memory politics, the methodology allows for a layered reading of Liberty Square as both a symbolic and lived space. At the same time, this approach acknowledges its own limitations: interpretations of spatial meaning are shaped by the positionality of the researcher and cannot fully capture the diversity of individual experiences.

The research concerns four key historical eras, each represented by two monuments that capture the memory practices of their time. The selection is guided by the research question, which focuses on how spatial and architectural techniques are used by state and grassroots actors to assert or challenge control over public memory. From the irredentist period, the analysis includes the 1921 four-figure irredentist composition and the *Statue of Hungarian Grief*. Then the socialist period is represented by the *Gratitude of the Hungarian People* composition and the *Soviet Heroic Obelisk* after 1945. The post-1989 liberal era is examined through the two U.S. presidential statues. Finally, post-2014 is analysed through the *Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation* and the *Living Memorial* counter-installation, offering a direct confrontation between state-produced and grassroots memory. By selecting two monuments per era, the thesis establishes a comparative structure allowing the monuments to be placed in dialogue with each other, revealing shifts in narrative and contestation across regimes.

The use of geographically referenced information is an ongoing project in the social sciences (Goodchild and Janelle 2010, 3). At Stanford, the Spatial History Project (2007-2022) demonstrated its use for the humanities bringing together scholars from different fields who used maps, images, and text to create digital visualisations of change over space and time (Goodchild and Janelle 2010, 5; Spatial History Project, 2022). Critical Spatial Thinking means “incorporating spatial concepts and geographic principles to guide and inform reasoning” (Sinton 2017, 1).

More technically, in the case of Liberty Square, semiotics reveals how monuments encode values through their symbols, such as innocence or heroism and placement. Critical spatial thinking then traces how these inscriptions change over time, identifying who reshapes the square and for what political purposes (Demaria and Violi 2023, 12).

This research is not only intended to trace the transformation of the square over time but it also aims to analyse what these monuments represented to society and how the public discourse developed around them. Visually, each monument and memorial can be imagined as a bead embroidered into a fabric, collectively representing Liberty Square. Hungarian history is like a dense layer of fabric, and this analysis will guide the reader through it, focusing on the monuments, examining how they were removed or relocated and surveying the meanings and justifications that were assigned to their continued presence.

The research relies heavily on primary sources, archives, media analysis, and photographic documentation to reconstruct spatial transformations of Liberty Square. Additionally, this study especially benefitted from the existence of *Köztérkép* (Public Art Map of Hungary), which is an independent, volunteer-based web community and database dedicated to the presentation of artistic creations in public and community spaces (Köztérkép.hu).

3. Literature Review

Drawing on the theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre, Pierre Nora, Aleida Assmann, Jas Assmann, Maurice Halbwachs, Edward Soja and Doreen Massey, this thesis situates the Hungarian case within the broader debates on the production of space, sites of memory, cultural memory and collective memory to analyse how monuments and memorials both embody state power and create space for civic resistance (Lefebvre 1991; Nora 1989; Assmann 1995; Massey 2012). These frameworks explain how practices of remembering that appear organic, become exposed as contingent and constructed, and how, at moments of rupture, official narratives consolidate themselves by marginalising alternative recollections and mobilising nostalgia for political ends. This section also discusses how Hungarian memorials, including those on Liberty Square, have historically been used to legitimise nationalist narratives and function as tools of governance. A brief overview of memorialisation practices in post-World War II Europe then situates the Hungarian case within a broader international relations context.

From time to time, public statues or monuments provoke widespread controversy, and Hungary is far from alone. Across the globe, there are numerous instances where memory sites have become the focus of public protests. Examples include the uproar over the Scaffold sculpture in Minneapolis; or the Rhodes Must Fall campaigns in Cape Town and in the United Kingdom. These protests challenged sites perceived as ‘unworthy’ of commemoration. While the reasons for such protests vary, they share a common thread: the creation or commissioning of these sites frequently occurred without meaningful involvement from the affected communities, or worst, the monuments commemorated the very perpetrators of violence. Such tensions raise fundamental questions about whose memory is being represented and who has the legitimacy to articulate it.

It is precisely this broader global pattern of contested memory that makes Liberty Square in Hungary such a compelling case study. The square’s monumental landscape is continuously reshaped by shifting political regimes throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries offered a concentrated view of how power concentrate itself onto urban space. Tracing its historical transformations provided my first indication that these monuments have repeatedly served as instruments of political authority, shaping Budapest’s collective memory through symbolic occupation and a specific narrative control.

“Memory is a transdisciplinary problem” (Erll 2011, 2). To understand how memory operates in society, one must also consider its embeddedness in institutions. Jabareen and Eizenberg (2021) theory follows a pillar system that analyses the interrelations between public space and memory (pp. 212-213). Inspired by this approach, my study therefore outlines three interconnected dimensions: the production of space, the production of memory, and the contested relations between memory and space in their international manifestations. What links these dimensions is the understanding that space and memory are mutually constitutive.

The first part of this theoretical framework outlines key debates on memorialisation and the processes of remembering and forgetting, examining why monuments function as sites of remembrance and how they are situated within the spatial dynamics of power relations between public space and human agency. The discussion then turns to the broader discourse on memorialisation in Europe, with particular attention to how historical narratives are negotiated through monuments and public interventions, and how these practices reveal the constructed nature of collective remembrance. The final section considers the role of community participation in the creation, appropriation, and contestation of sites of memory, analysing how local actors, counter-memories, and transnational influences complicate official narratives and demonstrate the transformability of public commemorative space.

3.1 Sites of Memory and the Theory of the Production of Space

Nora argues that sites of memory represent the core of the national and cultural identity, and they are defined by their material, symbolic, functional meanings, all of which are ‘endlessly recycled and reinterpreted’ (Mitroiu 2014, 4). In the Hungarian context, successive regimes: short-lived Bolshevik government, the contested Horthy era, the Szálasi and Arrow Cross dictatorship, the decades of Soviet-backed authoritarian rule, the 1956 Revolution, and finally the post-1989 democratic transition, each produced their own memory frameworks. These regimes repeatedly redefined the symbolic landscape by erecting new memorials, repurposing existing ones, or demolishing the material legacies of their predecessors. Through these cycles of inscription and erasure, Liberty Square exemplifies how sites of memory are continually reshaped to legitimise changing political orders.

This thesis, however, turns to the contested dimensions of heritage. What if the direction of memorialisation is reversed, when local communities reject the state-imposed narrative of remembrance? Do they hold the right to remove it? Liberty Square provides a case in point: a ‘symbolic space of memory’ where the very sites of memory inscribed within have been contested by the residents of Budapest.

To untangle the importance of a ‘lived and symbolic space’, Lefebvre (1991) argues that state institutions, in particular, have been central to producing a seemingly self-evident spatial order that facilitates governance and regulation, thereby becoming inherently political (Brenner and Elden 2009, 358; Jabareen and Eizenberg 2021, 214).

Henri Lefebvre conceptualises everyday life not as a natural or neutral environment, but as a material and symbolic space that is produced and therefore must be subject to critique. For Lefebvre, everyday life forms the terrain through which power is reproduced, since spatial arrangements naturalise dominant social relations rather than merely reflecting them. His analysis, grounded in a Marxist understanding of social reproduction, emphasises that space is implicated in the ongoing reproduction of historically specific forms of authority, ideology, and hierarchy. Everyday spatial environments (streets, squares, and monuments) are not passive backdrops to social life, but active instruments through which political orders are stabilised and legitimised. Applying this framework to the Hungarian context reveals how Liberty Square has continuously served as a site where successive regimes have inscribed their

preferred narratives into the fabric of daily urban experience, embedding state power into the rhythms, visibility, and material presence of the square.

On a similar line, Edward Soja's (1985) critical spatial perspective, spatiality can be understood as an active arena shaping daily practices. The way Liberty Square dedicated to symbolic figures can be understood as a conflicted political arena not only an architectural site (Soja 1985, 3). The heterogeneity of Liberty Square resists the essentialist notion of space as singular or closed, instead, it foregrounds the openness and multiplicity that make space politically charged and continually contested (Massey 2012, 11-13; Anderson 2008).

The framework helps for re-examining of Hungary's identity struggles not as ideological or political narrative, but as a process embedded in and shaped by the spaces in which they unfold. "Thinking about history and temporality necessarily has implications (whether we recognise them or not) for how we imagine the spatial" (Massey 2012, 18). There is a considerable body of work on Hungary's struggle for national-identity over time, comparatively little scholarship examines its material dimensions, specifically, how spatiality shapes social life.

Critical geographers (Lefebvre, Soja, Massey, Brenner and Elden) regard space as a key instrument of exercising power, while also recognising that it offers opportunities for certain social groups to express their views in opposition to the system that governs them (Jóvér 2020, 267). Cities have always been symbolic representations of power, since it is usually large cities in which the regional and national political institutions and the symbolic representations of power and authority are physically present: parliaments, seats of government, presidential palaces, as well as national and international corporations. To this day, these represent the central (geographical and symbolic) sites where political demands "from below" are addressed to the social elites (Lebhuhn 2014, 480).

This section established the framework of the production of space. Building on the concept that space is never neutral or fixed, but a field of power relations that can simultaneously enable governance and resistance, where cultural identities, historical narratives are negotiated.

3.2 Theory on the Production of Memory

Memory has become a rather controversial topic in politics and the public sphere within the context of phrases such as ‘national tradition’, ‘Holocaust memory’, or ‘truth and reconciliation’ (Ertl 2011, 1). In the realm of international relations (IR) theories, research on mnemonic actors started booming with articles on the Second World War and the Holocaust and identity politics. Furthermore, memory in IR is represented as a tool for state and non-state actors in domestic and foreign policy as a mechanism for legitimising political actions and promoting a favourable image internationally, notably through the creation of memory alliances and the deployment of memory exports (McGlynn 2021). Cultural and collective memories of traumatic experiences have provided fertile ground for such political instrumentalization, resulting in numerous memory conflicts across Europe and beyond. However, memory can also serve as a tool for reconciliation, providing a platform for dialogue through public apologies (ENRS, 2025). Additionally, memorial days can serve to raise awareness. The officially designated ‘International Days,’ represented within the EU framework, aim to unite organisations, communities, and individuals worldwide in causes ranging from honouring human rights to promoting environmental sustainability” (International Days, 2025). The development of the European memory politics is further explained in the International Relations of Memory and Space section.

It is somewhat obvious that cultural heritage and memory are deeply interconnected. Memory is a social open-ended practice, maintained through both cultural formations (texts, monuments) and institutional communication. Like heritage, it is not only concerned with the commemoration of the past but is also deeply interconnected with contemporary identity, belonging and the relationship between people and place (Bowden et al. 2025, 3).

To understand the extent to which civil and social actors can intervene in public space, it is necessary to examine the legal and administrative framework that governs monuments in Hungary. Memory is not only produced through cultural or symbolic practices but is also shaped by institutional authority, particularly through the regulation of public space.

In Hungary, both the state and local governments exercise decision-making power over memorials. While the national government provides the overarching legal structure, the practical administration of public space (especially in Budapest) falls primarily to

municipalities. According to the Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on Local Governments of Hungary, local authorities hold the right to regulate their own public spaces and determine what may be erected, relocated, or removed. This regulatory autonomy is further specified in the Budapest Municipality Decree No. 59/1995 (X.20.) on the Use of Public Spaces, which outlines the procedures for approving or rejecting monuments within the city. As a result, municipalities act as gatekeepers of memory, filtering which historical narratives enter the urban landscape. Their decisions are not purely administrative: the political composition of the municipal leadership, whether aligned with or opposed to the national government, directly affects the types of monuments supported or blocked.

This is the outcome of the state's spatial strategies, as administration, repression, domination and centralised power (Brenner and Elden 2009, 359). However, the central point for this analysis is Lefebvre's view that abstract space entails not only political and institutional but also social transformations, including new modes conceptualising (contesting) spaces in which everyday life unfolds.

To adopt a memory studies framework rather than a purely historical approach, this analysis is grounded in the work of key scholars in the field.

Memory, meaning the construction of the past and perception of time, is dependent on social structures. Maurice Halbwachs established the term collective memory as something shaped sociologically by group context (Erl 2011, 16; Halbwachs 1992, 40; Hutton 1988, 314). Moreover, his thesis manifested in the cultural use of commemoration (Hutton 1988, 315). Commemoration is described as a mnemonic technique for localising collective memory. It keeps a community's deep traditions alive, that otherwise be modified over time. It is very important to note that the politics of memory is not a natural process of selection by the community what is being remembered, rather it is a state-imposed industry meant to represent the values and vision regarding the desired national identity (Nora 1989).

Building on Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory, Jan and Aleida Assmann introduced the concept of cultural memory, which is a memory that's formalised, ritualised, and stored in texts, monuments, and institutions (Assmann 1995). Assmann differentiated cultural memory as a *canon*, the selected official normative narrative, which is actively passed down and remembered, and the *archive*, the sort of passive repository of all memories of the social group that can be rediscovered but is not part of the public consciousness.

What kind of memory do monuments produce, and what do they leave out? Empirically, this concerns what monuments include or erase; normatively, it concerns what should and should not be commemorated. To be able to point towards a normative approach in the analysis of spatial arrangements and architectural interventions, one must establish the ethics of memory, which refers to the ethical responsibility of how we remember and commemorate (Margalit 2004). This responsibility is ethical because, rather than requiring us to remember every detail of the past, it obliges us to maintain, or when necessary, challenge the institutions, monuments, and mnemonic structures through which communities sustain their shared memory.

James E. Young argues that traditional monuments often “displace memory,” viewing visitors as passive spectators rather than fostering active memory work within society. This critique contributed to the formation of counter-monuments, antiheroic in content and conceptual in form, understood as “memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premise of the monument” (Young 2000, 93). Building on this, research distinguish between two forms of counter-monuments: those that employ anti-monumental strategies to reject traditional monumental structures altogether, and those created in direct opposition to an existing monument and the values it embodies (Stevens et al. 2012, 952).

3.3. International Relations of Memory and Space

As Hungary has been a member of the European Union since 2004, this study will situate the Hungarian case within the supranational framework of the EU. Considering the above contributions, memory and remembrance play a key role in international alliances and diplomacy.

Within the European Union framework, memory politics operates through selective institutionalisation, promoting shared narratives. While culture of memory assures the shared values and *learned lessons* from historical atrocities, culture of oblivion represents a context where historical narratives and experiences are minimised or ignored to avoid conflict between the diverse members. Selective memory shaping can lead to marginalisation of individual histories that does not fit into the broader European narrative. Memory is systematically embedded within EU policy and diplomatic frameworks; it shows that the European identity is constructed and maintained through policy-driven memory. Memory is not only a cultural tool, but a political one, it can influence international perception and diplomacy (Pepić and Špehar 2023).

Post-socialist societies have undergone contests over victimhood since 1989. This process reshaped local memory debates and challenged dominant Western European paradigms. Divergent experiences of the Second World War and its aftermath across the former Eastern Bloc and Western Europe fueled EU-level controversies, exemplified by the Prague Declaration (2008) and the 2009 EU resolution equating the victims of Nazism, fascism, and Communism as victims of totalitarianism. These developments intensified tensions between Holocaust memory, particularly its claim to singularity, and other traumatic pasts. Michael Rothberg's notion of "multidirectional memory" offers a framework for moving beyond such competitive logics, though the post-socialist region remains marginal in his analysis. Applying this concept to the Hungarian case may therefore yield valuable insights into Eastern European memory dynamics (Deim 2024, 163).

These theoretical perspectives established that placement and symbolism of monuments reproduce collective behaviour and memory. Together, they demonstrate that memory, space, and political authority are inherently interlinked.

Critical spatial theory shows that public space is produced through power relations rather than existing as a neutral backdrop. Memory studies highlight that remembrance is institutionally organised, with monuments shaping collective memory by determining which histories are foregrounded and which are underrepresented. International relations scholarship extends this logic beyond the national frame by emphasising that memory also functions as a diplomatic instrument within broader supranational contexts, including the European Union.

These approaches suggest that Hungary's memorial landscape, and Liberty Square in particular, must be analysed through the interplay of spatial production, institutional practices, and international political narratives. Monuments operate as mechanisms through which states assert authority, as sites where communities negotiate or contest-imposed narratives, and as arenas where transnational norms shape what is publicly commemorated.

4. Analysis

The case studies presented in this study not only shed light on the ongoing challenges of an illiberal political system but raise further issues that challenge the Western European discourse on memory from the East-Central European angle. The analysis is organised into subsections that directly address how public statues and memorials function as instruments of political power, and how grassroots actors contest this power through spatial and symbolic practices.

With the theoretical groundwork provided, this thesis now reflects on how Liberty Square functions as a key instrument for exercising power, while also recognising the extend of opportunities for certain social groups to express their views in opposition to the system that governs them.

Therefore, this study distinguishes and questions the meaning of the Hungarian culture's memorial *archive*, all the memorials that are not present anymore on the square, and the *canon*, the story or narrative that is still in place and preserved or retrieved and compliment it with the present-day stance of the governing body.

With the help of primary and secondary sources, I was able to analyse how the Hungarian sites of memory functioned over time, who participated in the monument-building process, how the narrative was formed and whether these practices were contested. Each chapter is meant to engage with the past incorporating the above-mentioned theories on collective memory and spatiality and derive its implications for contemporary politics.

The spatial analysis used in this study is intended to capture both the material and symbolic dimensions of commemorative sites. To maintain clarity across multiple case studies, each monument is analysed following the same structure:

First, the context of creation is meant to engage with the monuments' production circumstances and location. Then the external characteristics analyse the physical features (material and durability, inscriptions, motives and symbols). Lastly the external influences are factors in how outside actors shaped the meaning and reception. This includes understanding whether resistance emerged and, if so, when it occurred and what type of resistance it was, who participated, and what implications can be drawn from these dynamics.

The thesis proceeds chronologically: Section 1 reconstructs the interwar canon, section 2 examines the Soviet reinscription, section 3 analyses post-1989 reconfigurations and

resistance, section 4 investigates the spatial repertoires of grassroots actors. Together these sections address national identity formation, narratives of victimhood and heroism, transnational memory shifts around EU accession, and contemporary debates on public space. Following the individual case studies, this thesis then engages in a comparative discussion placing the findings into direct dialogue. While each monument on Liberty Square emerged from a distinct historical moment and political context, comparing them reveals recurring patterns of how certain narratives were used by the different actors presented in this study. This comparative dimension is essential for the thesis to move beyond isolated episodes and instead articulate a broader understanding these spatial positions in Hungarian memory politics. The final normative chapter concludes these findings and evaluates them from a perspective of democratic public life in Hungary and beyond.

As a Hungarian lived in the environment under study, my linguistic and cultural proximity provides access, therefore maintaining transparency regarding my positionality is important.

4.1 Origins and Early Memorial Landscape (1898-1945)

Before the establishment of the Liberty Square in Budapest, the space was once a symbol of repression. Újépület (the New Building, see Fig. 2.) served as a prison and military base for the Austrian military until the end of the 18th century. The demolition of the Újépület building in 1898 eliminated the traces of the Habsburg regime and erased the memory of being defeated in the Hungarian Revolution of 1848-49 (Thorstensen 2012, 5; Bugár-Mészáros 2025).



Figure 2: Újépület (New Building) in 1895 (Lepeltier-Kutasi 2018)

The new name, *Liberty Square*, was meant to signal a “new and freer era” for Hungary, while the buildings erected along its perimeter were designed to represent the nation’s prosperity at the time (Thorstensen 2012, 3). The Stock Exchange Building (later repurposed as the Hungarian Television by Communist regime in 1948) and the Hungarian National Bank. Another important building for this study is the United States Embassy. Originally it functioned as the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce, but the Embassy has taken over in 1935 (Erőss 2016, 237).

However, public squares such as Liberty Square were not merely aesthetic symbols of power. As historian János Pótó explains, with the gradual extension of suffrage, politics became increasingly popularised, and new forms of mass influence began to emerge. While the press played the most prominent role in shaping public opinion, monuments and statues also became essential instruments of political expression. They not only served to present national heroes but also provided dignified venues for public speeches and political gatherings (Pótó, 2013).

Following the 1867 Compromise, new monuments were erected to commemorate the 1848 revolution. After the First World War, public spaces became sites through which society attempted to process the trauma of the Treaty of Trianon, while during the Horthy era these same spaces were used for self-celebration (Tóta 2015). Additionally, Budapest's large public statues commemorating World War I, were monuments to the entire country, props for a collective national memory, and messengers of a politically inspired cult of heroism. However, they went beyond this and served the immediate goal of spreading the idea of a revisionist state. They were all part of the canonised memory (XII. kerület Hegyvidék Önkormányzata 2018).

The first memorial was the irredentist Trianon Memorial, officially named the National Martyrs Memorial in 1921 (Fig. 3). It marks as the governments first use of monopolise national memory for political gain on the square. This study shows that the interwar irredentist monuments did not provoke public dissatisfaction, indicating that the public accepted them as legitimate representations. Additionally, the large crowd present at their official inaugurations further demonstrate this acceptance.



Figure 3: Liberty Square in 1938 with the four irredentist statues on each corner (Fortepan)

In Hungarian history the years 1918-19 were tumultuous period. After the proclamation of a liberal republic by Count Mihály Károlyi, power fell into the hands of communists, a Soviet-type dictatorship led by Béla Kun, which ruled Hungary from March to August 1919. The regime, the Hungarian Republic of Councils was defeated by the Romanians, who occupied Budapest. Famously, rear admiral Miklós Horthy gave a speech on a white horse stating that Budapest will get rid of the 'sin city narrative', namely its multicultural and communist essence (Vari 2012, 710).

On January 16, 1921, around 50,000 people crowded into Liberty Square for a holy mass, where the irredentist statues were unveiled. The Association of Defence Leagues decided, at

the suggestion of Róbert Kertész, then ministerial advisor and head of the art department of the Ministry of Culture, to commission and erect a group of statues symbolising the parts of the country that had been condemned to separation, reinforcing the idea of unity. Commissioned by the association, the statue of *Felvidék* (North) was created by Zsigmond Kisfaludi Strobl, the statue of *Alpokalja* (West) by Ferenc Sidló, the statue of *Délvidék* (South) by István Szentgyörgyi, and the statue of *Erdély* (East) by János Pásztor (PestBuda.hu 2021).

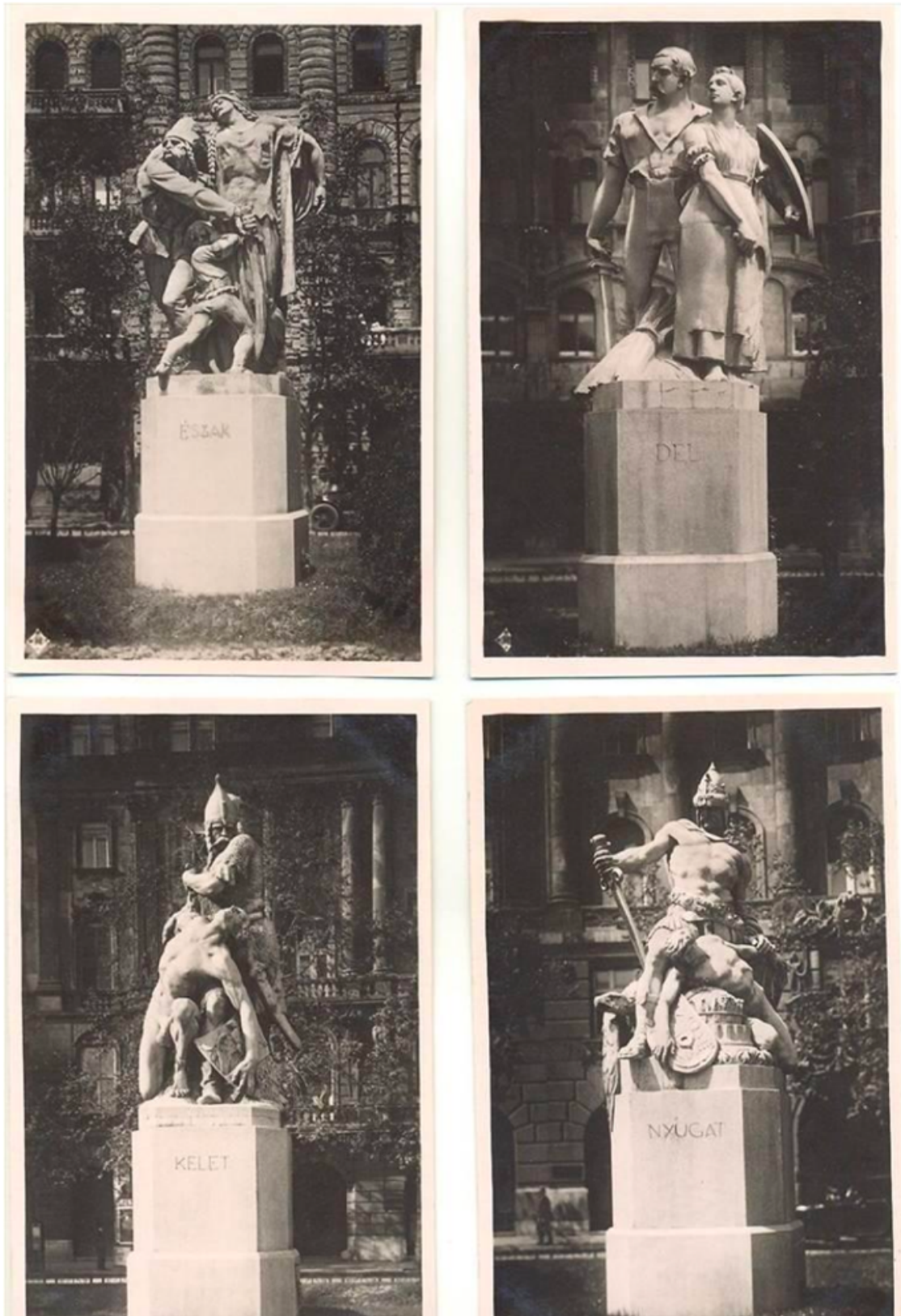


Figure 4: Észak (North), Dél (South), Kelet (East), Nyugat (West) inscriptions are visible on the marble pedestal (Pótó, 2003)

The four statues situated near one another (Fig. 4) were not only intended to inscribe the trauma of the Treaty of Trianon into the collective memory of Hungarians but also to transmit this sense of loss beyond the country's borders. Numerous postcards were circulated as a visual message to disseminate this notion of trauma (Fig. 5; Maltby 2020). Furthermore, these postcards sought to draw a parallel line between France's loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871 and Hungary's losses after Trianon, suggesting that if France considered Alsace-Lorraine intolerable, it should likewise sympathise with Hungary's much larger dismemberment, framed as four Alsace-Lorraines (Fig. 5). The powerful visual composition featuring the monuments side by side, the Trianon memorial flagstaff flying the national colours at half-mast, and the *Csonka Magyarország* (Mutilated Hungary) on the opposite side symbolised the nation as a living entity that lost its body and now was condemned to a mutilated existence, while still emotionally bound to its people and lands outside its borders.

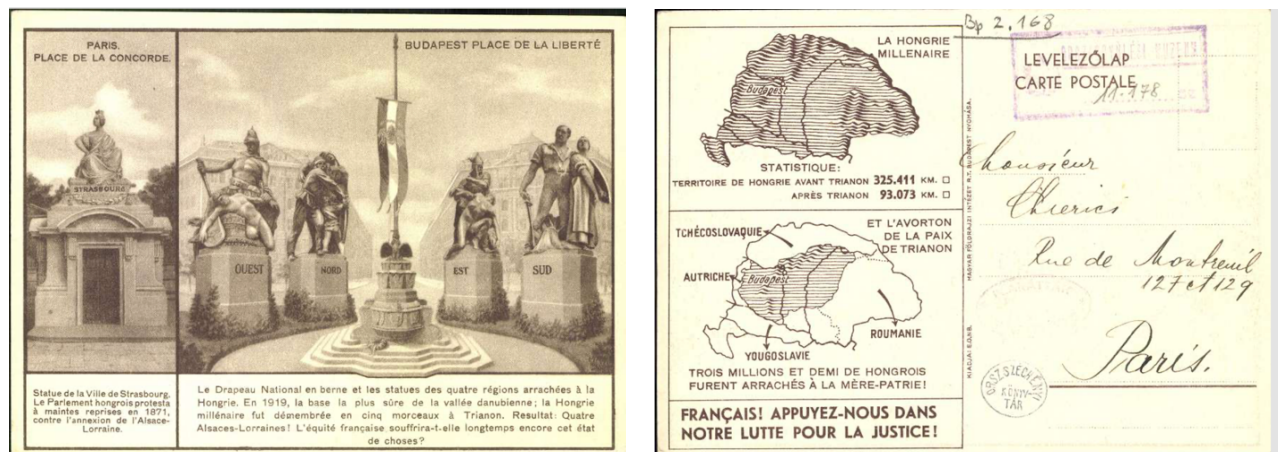


Figure 5: Postcard comparing French and Hungarian territorial losses (Országos Széchenyi Library)

In the 1921 *Nemzeti Újság* (National Newspaper) this national grief was ingrained into the canon of memory through the memorials that were meant to serve a larger purpose. First, it is important to understand the strong visual representation of the Trianon trauma through these human and animal figures and symbolic motifs. The obvious romantic imaginary of the mythic *turul*, a crucified country, ancient fighters and the heroic character who protects the maid, do not point a specific period, but towards a collective spirit, a feudal society in which a natural order of things is said to have existed (Thorstensen 2012, 8). The newspaper conveys the message in a particularly compelling way. The phrase “the hard stone cannot be evaded without struggle” suggests that these monuments were inescapable presences, firmly embedded in physical space and collective memory. Furthermore, the statement “it will speak, it will cry”

metaphorically evokes the nation's pain, implying that this suffering cannot be silenced: the stones themselves become witnesses that give voice to the struggle.

This conscious way to represent the trauma of the lost land (Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and 64 percent of its population) was used to reflect a collective dissatisfaction with the new borderlines integrating the irredentist narrative (De Groot 2022).



Figure 6: Irredentist monument Crowd celebrating in front of the East statue on Liberty Square 1921 (Szabó Ervin Library Archive)

By the 1930s, the national drive to reverse the consequences of Trianon had become inseparably entwined with the increasingly popular fascist orientation of the Regent, Miklós Horthy, who had risen to power amid the chaos of 1920 (Maltby, 2020; Urbas 1922).

During his reign have the *Numerus Clausus* (Jewish Laws) been introduced, restricting the number of Jewish students in universities and other educational institutions, and this period is often associated with the rise of antisemitism in Hungary (Don 1986).

The irredentist statues were arguably popular within the public and openly celebrated (Fig. 6), though not widely accepted. According to the *Budapest főváros törvényhatósági bizottsága* (Municipal Assembly of the Capital) meeting from 1921, several representatives voiced concerns that the establishment of politically motivated statues risked overloading the city's public spaces, arguing that Budapest's urban landscape could not bear such imprinting. These

remarks were coming from a rather aesthetic than political concern, revealing that even within the early Horthy-era municipal elite, the irredentist memorial programme was not universally accepted (Budapest Főváros Közgyűlési Jegyzőkönyvei 1873-1949, 2025).

The statues were removed in two days in 1945 after the communist takeover (Fig. 7). Then transported to the basement of the Basilica, their location after that is unknown. Although this was an official organised action, the method was very similar to the spontaneous popular judgments of the time. The photo reportage of the event shows that the statues were knocked off their pedestals with a winch mounted on a beam scaffold (Pótó 2003, 63).

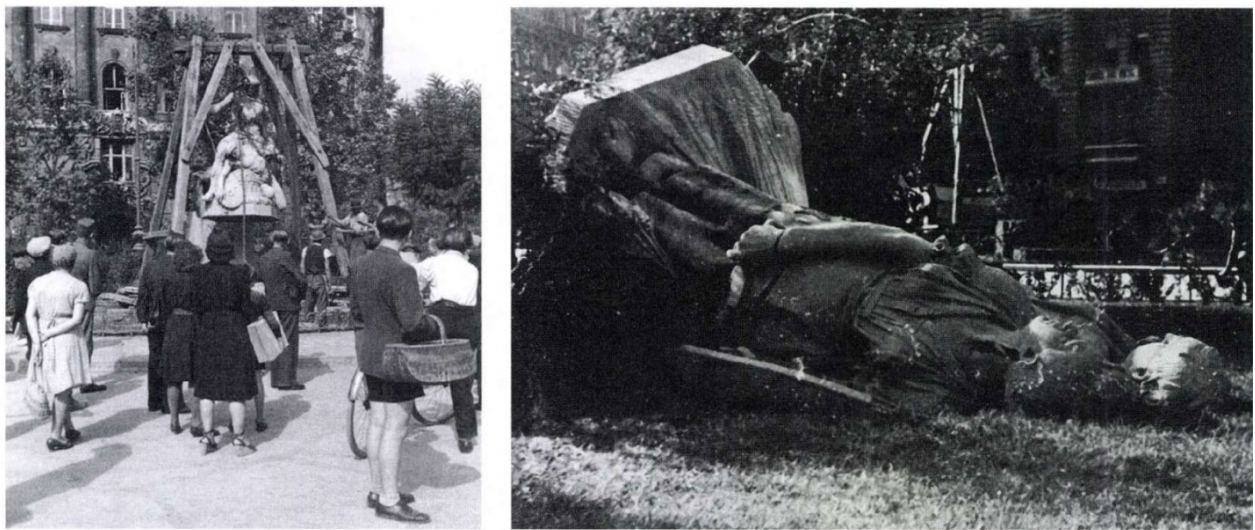


Figure 7: Left: An official removal: by passers watch the demolition of the Nyugat (West) statue. On the right: Dél (South) is on the ground, shattered (Pótó, 2003)

However, the removal of the irredentist statues did not resolve the symbolic charge of Liberty Square, instead, other monuments emerged that rearticulated national trauma in new aesthetic and geopolitical terms.



Figure 8: The Statue of Hungarian Grief (köztérkép.hu)

The Statue of Hungarian Grief was unveiled depicting a bronze nude woman with a troubled expression (Fig. 8). The work of French sculptor Emile Guillaume was brought to Budapest as a gift from Lord Rothermere and unveiled in front of the National Bank building 1932. The following inscription was written in Hungarian on the pedestal of the statue:

“This statue symbolises Hungary's grief over the fate of its children, who were taken away by the Treaty of Trianon.

This memorial was dedicated to the suffering Hungarian nation by Hungary's English friend, Viscount Rothermere.” (MaNDA 2025).

The figure of the French sculptor and the English contributor inspired Ferenc Herczeg, the novelist giving the inauguration speech. For him, the statue was the symbol of *Suffering Truth*. The message was clear, his interpretation of the ‘English idea taking shape in a French form’ allegorically referred to the Hungarian people, suggesting that two of the powers responsible for the Trianon decision stand on their side in supporting its revision (Pótó 2003, 77-78). Other parallel optimistic speeches from the city’s mayor were heard stating that the statue is no longer a symbol of Hungarian orphanhood, but rather of Hungarian hope of the determination of the Hungarian national consciousness. This was clearly a symbolic speech of revision.

The bronze woman figure had a rather interesting journey, starting in 1947, when it was relocated. There is no information about the fate of its pedestal, but the bronze female nude was erected again in 1948 on Margaret Island at the entrance of Palatinus Baths under the title

Sunbathing Woman. In 1967, it was placed in storage, then in 1973 it was erected in the park of the Balfi health resort (köztérkép.hu; Pótó 2003, 78). With the disappearance of the inscription, and the process of relocation the statue as a symbol of Hungarian pain faded and once it was removed from the space of irredentist memories, the faith in Hungarian justice also vanished. Additionally, the irredentist statue was transformed into a simple female nude basking in sunlight, reinterpreted as an innocuous work of art.

Interwar monuments forged trauma into a narrative of longing, whereas the postwar regime recast the same space as a stage for liberation after 1945. Although symbols moved from mourning to moral instruction, the underlying use of scale and ritual to normalise a state narrative persisted. The following section shows how the Soviet obelisk consolidated this new pedagogy in material form.

To summarise the techniques used to monopolise public space in this section, the irredentist monuments introduced symbolic patterns, disseminating the narrative of mourning, depicting on grandiose statues, a technique that successive regimes and activists later inverted or contested in their own interventions at Liberty Square.

4.2 Socialist Reinscriptions (1945-1989)

After the defeat of the Axis forces, the Soviet army “liberated” Hungary from the fascist rule, an event that marked both the end of occupation and beginning of another. As Ungváry (2005) and Romsics (1999) note, for many Hungarians 1945 represented a paradox. While the Red Army’s arrival ended the terror of the Arrow Cross, it also has taken new forms of violence and dependency. Historians estimate that approximately 100,000 women were raped and over 10,000 civilians were deported for *málenkij* robot (forced labour) in Soviet camps (Pető 2003; Schumann and Bessel 2003). Nevertheless, the Soviet authorities shortly after their arrival framed their presence as liberation, investing in monumental propaganda. Within only a few months, newly erected memorials already glorified the Soviet army as heroes of liberation.

In the post-1945 period, liberation memorials, as well as statues of Lenin, Stalin, and socialist everyday life, came to dominate the urban landscape. During the Communist rule everything that commemorated the Greater Hungary had to be removed from Liberty Square, including the irredentist statue composition (Thorstensen 2012, 15).

In 1945 on Liberty Square the Red Army commissioned an obelisk symbolising the Soviet Union’s liberation of Budapest (Fig. 9).



Figure 9: The Monument for the Known Soldier/ Soviet Heroic Memorial on Liberty Square (Fortepan / Military Museum of Southern New England, 1945)

In the 1945 *Népszava* article the narrative of the Known Soldier Monument functions not only as a news report but also as a statement that contrasts destruction with reconstruction. The devastation brought by the Arrow Cross regime, which “had grown accustomed not to building, but rather to demolishing what already existed”, harshly opposes the restorative efforts of the Soviet liberators. Through this narrative, the article transforms construction into a metaphor for moral and political renewal. Additionally, the article describes the monument in meticulous architectural detail, with the square concrete column topped with the Soviet five-pointed star and wing-shaped walls and solid concrete blocks, symbolising permanence and order amid the ruins of war. The inscription in the middle of the column stated: "Glory to the Soviet heroes of liberation" in Hungarian and Russian Cyrillic letters (Nagy Tamás 2021).

The emphasis on materials such as concrete, marble, and granite conveys a deliberate message of durability and solidity, suggesting the establishment of a long-lasting regime rooted in this ideological stability.

In *Népszava* the distinction between the *known soldier* and the French *unknown soldier* is making the argument for universalisation of the Soviet sacrifice. This soldier *shed his blood for humanity*, thereby his individual death is elevated to a collective, moral cause. Moreover, it mentions the monuments industrial origins, the *stars and plaques* produced in Hungarian factories, showing a new socialist collaboration between Soviet and local labour. Framed as both a commemoration and a preview of socialist reconstruction, this text reads as a form of propagandistic advertisement (*Népszava*, 1945).

This type of advertisement was quite popular, the press at the time deliberately drew attention to the rebuilding process of the Soviet Union (Semsey Enikő 2019).



Figure 10: May 1st ceremony at the Soviet Memorial in 1945 (Fortepan)

The monument was part of many public memorial days and parades. Located in a very central position and is allowed for a bigger crowd to pass in front and on the pedestal the higher ranked officers could salute them (see Fig. 10 and 11).

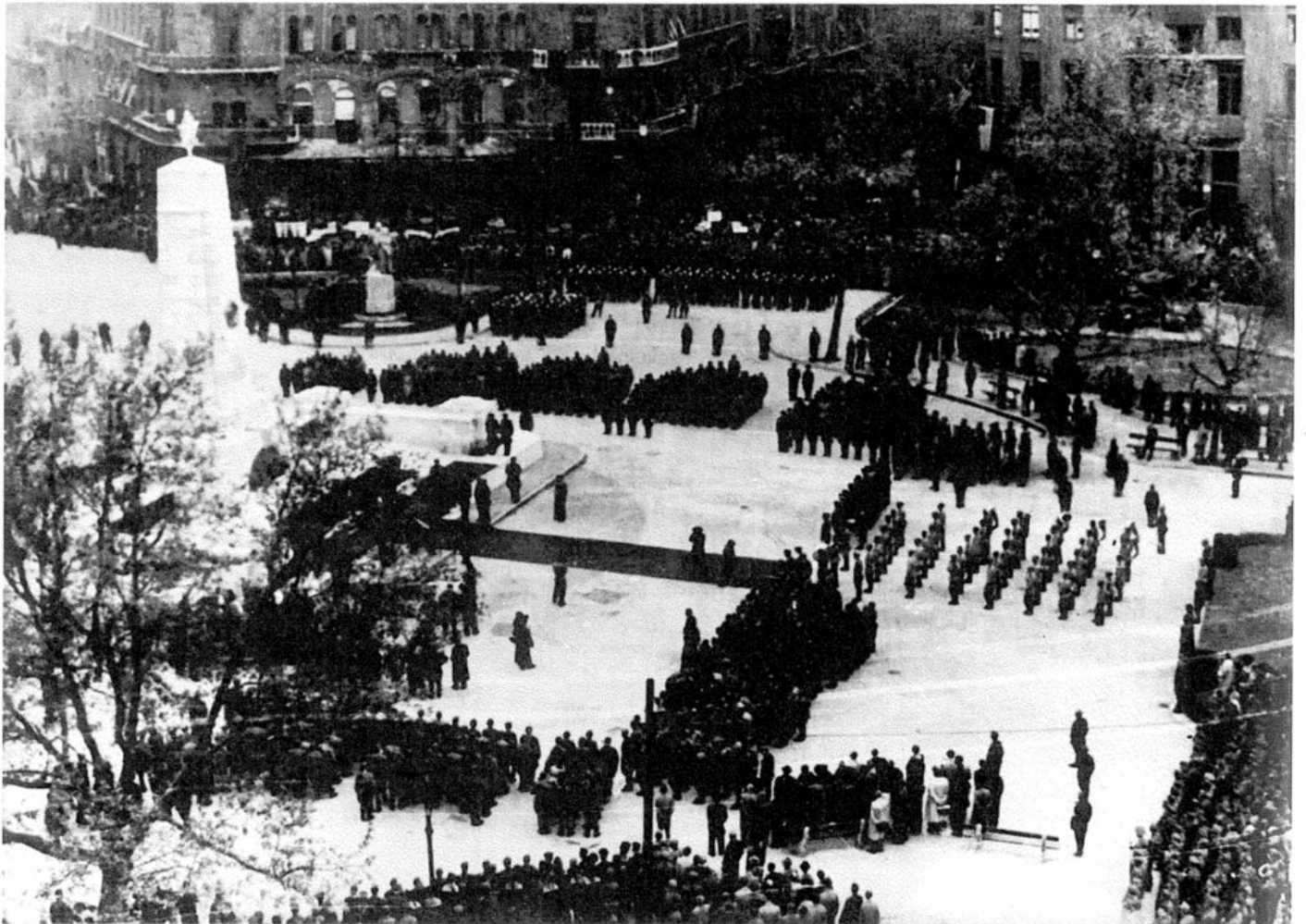


Figure 11: The unveiling of the Soviet monument in Liberty Square in 1945. In the background the irredenta Dél statue is still standing (Fortepan)

The 1956 revolution was the first major uprising against Soviet-imposed policies following the communist takeover of the late 1940s (Deim 2024, 151). From a memory politics perspective, this event has been one of the most contested events of Hungarian history, constantly appropriated by various regimes.



*Figure 12: Removing the Soviet emblems in 1956
(Fortepan)*

During the revolution of 1956, a wave of iconoclasm swept Soviet symbols. The monument was also mutilated, the revolutionaries dislocated the five-pointed star and replaced it with the Hungarian flag, and the inscription was also partially destroyed (hellomagyar.hu, 2021). They used ladders, and a big crowd was watching the process (Fig. 12.).

Understanding the removal of these symbols one should understand the affective power, or emotional weight these symbols carry. In the context of iconoclasm, when a revolutionary movement destroys or alters a statue, the act is not only political but

profoundly emotional. It is somewhat obvious during periods of political upheaval or a revolution, these objects become focal points, since they are symbols of the political ideas of the regime (Assmann and Assmann 2011).



Figure 13: Crowd reacting to the removal of the Soviet Heroic Monument's symbols during the Hungarian Revolution (Fortepan / Gyula Nagy, 1956)

In the case of the destruction of Soviet symbols during the Hungarian Revolution, the act was especially profound, since the

regime had heavily used these symbols in public space forcefully inscribing the idea of the 'great victory'. After the revolution failed, the Soviet symbols were reinstalled, including the Cyril inscription. During the Kádár era (1956-1988) this systematic oppression of memory persisted (Deim 2024, 150).



Figure 14: The Soviet obelisk without the coat of arms, inscription, and five-pointed star (Fortepan / Bauer Sándor, 1956)

After the regime change, debates over Soviet symbols persisted. A 1994 *Népszava* article questioned whether using totalitarian imagery in a themed restaurant was unlawful, noting that if so, the Soviet monument on Liberty Square would likewise require demolition and even films like *A Tanú* would have to be banned. Ultimately, the monument remained in place, and charges against the restaurant's owner were dismissed (*Népszava* 1994, March 5th and 18th edition).

Where interwar monuments domesticated loss into a program of national cohesion, the 1945 obelisk recast the same square as a stage for liberation. After 1989, this inherited choreography

did not vanish; it was renegotiated. The next section traces how liberalisation, EU accession, and culture-war politics reactivated Liberty Square in which old symbols had new alignments.

This Soviet Heroic Monument is still part of the Hungarian *canon* as it is still present on the Square. When visited in June 2025, the monument was largely hidden behind the tall, expansive trees encircling it. It is now visible only from one direction: within the square itself. (see Fig. 15).



Figure 15: The Soviet Heroic Monument in 2025 (by the author)

However, it has constantly been in centre of acts of protest and removal, throughout the years even after 1956. In a somewhat obvious sense, nationalist parties were in favour of removing the memorial.

In 2006 the Soviet memorial was severely vandalised during the night. The bronze reliefs on both sides of the obelisk were torn off and thrown several meters away. Several square meters of stone covering were also stripped from the base of the monument. The protesters attacked the Soviet War Memorial at Liberty Square with chisels. By early Tuesday morning, they had removed the Soviet emblem and inscription from its southern side and knocked down the relief depicting soldiers. The obelisk was splashed with white paint, sprayed with red, and covered with various inscriptions. A Hungarian national flag and an Árpád-striped flag were placed on the monument (Múlt-kor/MTI 2006). The slogans and the Árpád-striped flag made it clear that this was a far-right demonstration (Népszava 2006 September 19th).

As a response a statement was issued by those affiliated with the revolution (internees, widows) stating that the participants of the vandalism against the Soviet Memorial by far-right activists is a desecration of the memory of the 1956 Revolution (Népszava 2006 September 25).

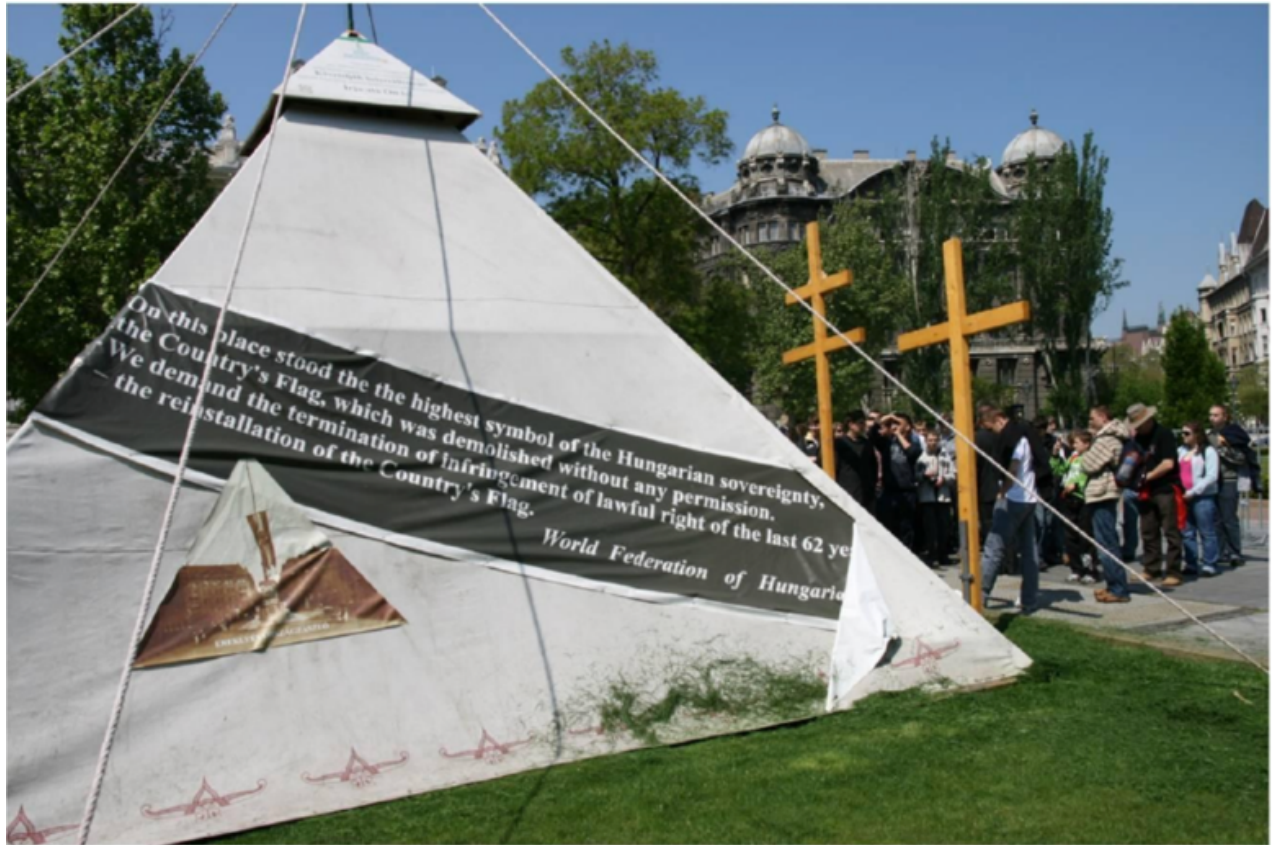


Figure 16: The irredentist tent with the sign and crosses revoking the Treaty of Trianon in 2008 (Thorstensen 2012)

In 2008 on Liberty Square the neo-fascist Magyar Garda together with Jobbik erected a temporary tent and 3 crosses monument in front of the Soviet monument. Their main aim was to revoke the Treaty of Trianon and re-erect the irredentist monuments (Thorstensen 2012, 23). On the tent it could be read their aim to reinstall the Country's flag that stood in front of the irredentist statues. When it was demolished part of the flags pedestal was built into the Soviet Monument (Pótó 2003, 56).

In 2015 when Novák Előd (then Jobbik) attempted, with a hammer and chisel, to remove the Soviet emblem from the monument. In 2021 the Hungarian supreme court ruled that the fact of removing the Soviet hammer-and-sickle emblem from the monument on Liberty Square in Budapest does not qualify as an expression of opinion. However, the Kúria did not impose a criminal penalty since, the damage was minimal and there was no intent to destroy the entire monument.

In 2023 after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, a referendum was launched initiative proposing that the Soviet military memorial on Liberty Square be covered with a black shroud in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The municipal referendum initiative was not approved (Szily László 2023; Magyar Ádám 2023).

The actors opposing the Soviet memorial have changed over time. Whereas earlier dissent reflected democratic and anti-authoritarian initiatives, recent contestations were driven by nationalist and far-right forces. Additionally, the revolutionary symbolism once associated with liberation has been reinterpreted through the lens of ethnic nationalism. In this reframing, the struggle for democratic freedom becomes a rejection of leftist and communist legacies and serves the vision of groups such as the Hungarian Guard and Jobbik.



Figure 17: "A Nagy Sztálinnak A Hálás Magyar Nép" statue composition by Kisfaludy (köztérkép.hu)

Liberty Square, as a symbolic space of power, could not escape the communist regime's penchant for public representation. Kisfaludy's original statue (Fig. 17) was made in 1949 for Stalin's 70th birthday and was sent as an expression of the *gratitude of the Hungarian people*. The original statue ended up in the Pushkin Museum. He made the replica of the statue out of limestone, unveiled on April 2, 1950, in Liberty Square (köztérkép.hu 2010).

The 3-meter-high, four-figure composition depicts a working-class family, with the children, a boy and a girl, carrying a garland of flowers in gratitude. On the pedestal, under the Rákosi coat of arms (the official symbol of the Hungarian People's Republic), was the inscription:

"To the great Stalin, from the grateful Hungarian people, 1949."

This statue was made in a social realist style, different compared to his usual work in neobaroque. Kisfaludy's works were usually characterised by dynamism, skilful character

portrayal, and elegant modelling that bears witness to Rodin's influence, the Thinker's sculptor (Vénusz Születésétől a Megvalósulatlan Horthy-Szoborig, 2024). In comparison, the static and rigid composition depicting a worker-peasant family is understandable, as the artist was required to adapt his work to the commissioner's preferences.

The statue represents the idea of a worker-peasant alliance, a prominent ideological element in the monumental statue-building, central to Lenin's *monumental propaganda* strategy (köztérkép, 2010).

The image of the female peasant was carrying multiple meanings at once and functioning as a complex symbol. When considered in the context of women's resistance to the kolkhoz, this iconography of peasant women operated similarly to Stalin's own declarations, presenting how a woman should act in the collective farm (Bonnell 1993, 67).

In terms of location, it stood in front of the old *Tőzsdepalota* (Stock Exchange Palace). The stock exchange operated in this building on Liberty Square until its closure in 1948, after that the Lenin Institute was established here (100 Éves a Tőzsdepalota, 2005).

"This excessively kitschy, hair-raising work is clearly the low point of Zsigmond Kisfaludi Stróbl's artistic career," writes László Prohászka in his book *Szoborsorsok* (The Fate of Statues; közterkep.hu, 2010).

The end for the statue came in 1956, when it was demolished during the Hungarian Revolution. Being one of the few statues destroyed that was not restored or replaced with something 'of



Figure 18: Kisfaludi's "gratitude of the Hungarian people" demolished in 1956 (Pótó, 2003)

equal quality' during the Kádár era (Tóta, 2010). However, this event was not as well-known or well-documented as the Stalin monuments destruction on Stalin square¹. The boots of Stalin were one of the most well-known symbols of the revolution (Destruction of the Stalin Statue, Budapest, 1956, n.d.).

These strategies of scale, the symbol of *gratefulness* with the ceremonial routing, and the inscription reappeared as the symbols that revolutionary forces later resisted.

¹ After 1956 it was renamed as Felvonulási-tér (Parade Square)

4.3 Post-1989 Liberalisation and US-Hungarian Symbolism

Moving from the Soviet Heroic Memorial across Liberty Square, the visitor encounters two American presidential statues, Ronald Reagan (2011) and George H. W. Bush (2020).

With only a few meters separating them, and more than six decades, two statues of American presidents appeared in front of the United States Embassy in forms that closely resemble *zsáner* (genre) sculpture. Genre sculpture in Hungary has roots in socialist era “everyday life” statuary, which accustomed the public to approachable, realist figures of workers and peasants. After 1989 it emerged as an independent stylistic trend with Márton László’s *Kiskirálylány*, which introduced an aesthetic of simply charming, apolitical and emotionally soothing figures, contradictory to the monumentalism of the socialist realist past (Tóta, 2015).

Over the following decades, such works appeared without any significant artistic restraint. Mélyi used the term *elszabadult hajóágyú* (loose cannon) describing this phenomenon that once statues began to step down from their pedestals, the gesture quickly became a visual cliché



Figure 19: Second-hand goods dealer signaling the old marketplace on Teleki-tér by Attila Mészáros in 2014 (Köztérkép.hu)

that spread across the country. The core function of these genre figures has been to depoliticise public space: they provide digestible niceness and dissolve ideological tension, inviting casual, unreflective engagement² (mostly for tourist attraction) rather than critical memory work. The second-hand goods dealer on Teleki-tér serves as a good example (Fig. 19).

At first glance, the statues of President Reagan and Bush are difficult to distinguish from ordinary genre figures, and they seem approachable and informal. It is only upon moving closer when the viewer reads the names and the historical framing that the political intent becomes unmistakable. In this sense, these works operate in a hybrid mode: they

² This usually involves handshakes and pictures taken with it.

borrow the visual language of genre sculpture to soften their presence, yet they ultimately function as instruments of political messaging about Cold War and communist memory.

The 7-foot bronze Reagan statue was erected for the president's 100 years anniversary in front of the US Embassy in 2011 by István Máté (Thorstensen 2012, 26). As the figure is walking toward the Soviet memorial, this spatial gesture symbolically reaffirms Reagan's role in ending the Cold War, a narrative widely embraced in post-socialist states (Balogh 2017, 435).

Reagan's anti-communist legacy remains culturally resonant for the government and its foreign allies, a strategic affirmation of Hungary's Cold War gratitude toward the United States.

The bronze statues and monuments historically inaccurate became quite popular after in 2012 Fidesz put an end to the autonomy of the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts, which had been responsible for licensing and financing new public artworks maintaining professional standards. Experts in the field warned at the time that this change would expose public art to ideological influence and lower its overall quality. In the years since, these concerns have indeed been becoming reality (Benedek 2025).



Figure 20: Ronald Reagan statue walking towards the Soviet Monument (köztérkép.hu)

The Bush statue, unveiled personally by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2022 and initiated by



Figure 21: Bronze statue of George H. W. Bush
(køztérkép.hu)

Maria Schmidt celebrates Bush's 1989 visit to Budapest. It was created by István Máté and unveiled by Viktor Orbán and David Cornstein. Quoting former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Viktor Orbán said of President Bush: "George Bush was a great blessing" who "spoke to us about freedom in Kossuth Square." In his

speech, he called America the land of freedom, which welcomed Lajos Kossuth with open arms, and then, "for the benefit of those who are slow on the uptake," he pointed out that on one side of Freedom Square stands a monument to the German occupation, and on the other, a monument to the Soviet occupation. The message is clear: if you are Hungarian, you have only two choices: either you side with the occupiers or you side with freedom, said the head of government. (168 Óra/MTI 2020).

This unveiling reflects a broader political strategy: the message presented a deliberate ideological alignment between Orbán and the U.S. Republican right, reinforcing a conservative geopolitical bloc. Since the Bush family and the traditional neoconservative GOP have been sidelined, Orbán keeps close relationship to President Donald Trump, which is presented through the emergence of *Dictators Approved* statue in 2025 June, Washington, ironically quoting Orbán on the side plaque (Heim 2025).

4.4 The 2014-2020 Memory Crisis and Grassroots Resistance

The next monument, officially titled the Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation must be understood within the broader trajectory of Hungary's contemporary memory politics. Since the first Orbán government (1998-2002), the state has institutionalised the ideology of 'double occupation', equating Nazi and Soviet rule and displacing Hungarian responsibility for collaboration. This narrative was decisively presented through the House of Terror Museum (2002) and later turned into constitutional status: the 2011 Fundamental Law dates the loss of Hungarian self-determination to the German occupation of 19 March 1944. By canonising this framework, the government recast Hungary as a victim of foreign powers, downplaying its role in wartime atrocities. The 2014 German Occupation Memorial therefore emerges as a state-driven reinterpretation of the past (Pető 2022, 245).

The Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation (MVGO), designed by Péter Párkányi Raab, was erected in 2014 on Liberty Square at a cost of 416,000 euros. It was intended to commemorate the victims of the Second World War during Hungary's Holocaust memorial year. However, it soon became a national scandal, as critics argued that it presents a historically inaccurate narrative and downplays the role of Hungarian collaboration with Nazi forces (Benedek 2025).

Within barely two and a half months, a government decree commissioned the monument without a public tender, and the design was approved based on a single sketch by an unknown jury. Additionally, the public only became aware of this monument, when the information was leaked on a blog (Erőss 2016, 241). This memorial was neither debated in parliament nor consulted with historians or civic organisations, undoubtedly bypassing the public sphere (Krzyżanowska 2023, 547).



Figure 22: the Archangel Gabriel (symbolising innocent Hungary) attacked by the imperial eagle of Nazi Germany in 2014 September (közterkép.hu)



Figure 23: “The fish stinks from the head”, says the banner in 2015 April (Horváth, 2019)

The monument’s creation shocked the Hungarian intellectual and cultural public not only because of its message but also because of the rapidity and superficiality of its manifestation. As a response, the activist group *Eleven Emlékmű* Living Memorial organised a protest-performance. Civil and academic society, art professionals consensually agreed the misrepresentation of memory (Erőss 2016, 246).

By depicting Hungary as the innocent, angelic victim attacked by a foreign aggressor, the memorial collapses the distinction between occupation and collaboration, implying that all violence was imposed from the outside. This visual allegory erases the documented role of Hungarian authorities (including the gendarmerie, civil administration, and political elites) in the deportation and murder of half a million Hungarian Jews in 1944 (Ungváry, 2014).

Such a state-sponsored narrative constitutes not only a symbolic distortion but a form of institutionalised denial. It violates the widely accepted ethical framework of memory politics,

which requires acknowledgment of one's own participation in past violence. In this sense, the MVGO is not merely a misrepresentation; it is a material instrument of political mythmaking.

It is striking that, the MVGO claims to commemorate “victims” of aggression and transforms the memorial into a traditional heroic monument rather than a reflective ‘counter-monument’. The MVGO becomes “heroic” in the sense that its angelic figure is not simply a victim but a martyr-like symbol of the nation. This allegory transforms suffering into moral heroism, casting Hungary as a noble, blameless figure rather than a participant in its own history.

This clash over memory surged from a broader political backdrop. In recent years, Hungary has deepened its illiberal structure of governance, reshaping historical discourse and tightening control over academic and press freedoms. Under Viktor Orbán's leadership, the government nationalised and restructured the research institutes of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS). Additionally, it forced the Central European University to relocate from Budapest to Vienna, removed a respected two-year MA programme in gender studies from the list of accredited degrees, and transferred the country's largest universities along with their assets into newly created private foundations (Pető 2022, 242). More recently, the Budapest Pride March was banned for the first time in its nearly three-decade history. These measures reflect an increasingly centralised cultural and intellectual environment, coupled with expanding restrictions on civil society and public expression, in which the state maintains control over the production of space.

The twentieth century became known as the era of a rival memory framework, the crimes of Communism and the memory of the Holocaust as an archetype for genocide. Memory scholars argue the Holocaust provided the foundation for a new memory that transcends ethnic and national boundaries and unites Europe with other parts of the world (Kovács 2018). The MVGO stems from this framework forming its own narrative. In practice: it reframes the Holocaust memory within a nationalised story of innocence distancing the country from the transnational, self-critical memory paradigm that the Holocaust was meant to anchor.

This top-down decision-making recalled pre-democratic practices of imposed monuments, where the states will override professional or civic consultation. The project also displayed what can be called the *just-because* arrogance of power: while the Hungarian Academy of Sciences publicly questioned the historical accuracy of the memorial's message, the Prime

Minister personally endorsed it as a historically authentic work. Many scholars condemned its creation as the authoritarian pathos of Hungarian monument culture and a signal for democratic backsliding (Pótó 2015; Erőss 2016).

The artistic compliance was equally striking, the sculptor even inscribed the monument's official government-decreed title *Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation* instead of the traditional, more neutral dedication *in memory of...* Most tellingly, no representative of the government ultimately dared to inaugurate the monument, leaving it standing without an official unveiling, under continuous police protection.

This narrative shows how the politics of provocation operates in practice: a mode of symbolic governance that asserts dominance through confrontation, imposing monuments by force rather than through consensus and subsequently refusing to take responsibility for the aftermath. Additionally, the 2014 memorial did not simply commemorate the victims of history, it re-enacted the very logic of coercion and denial that it claimed to mourn.

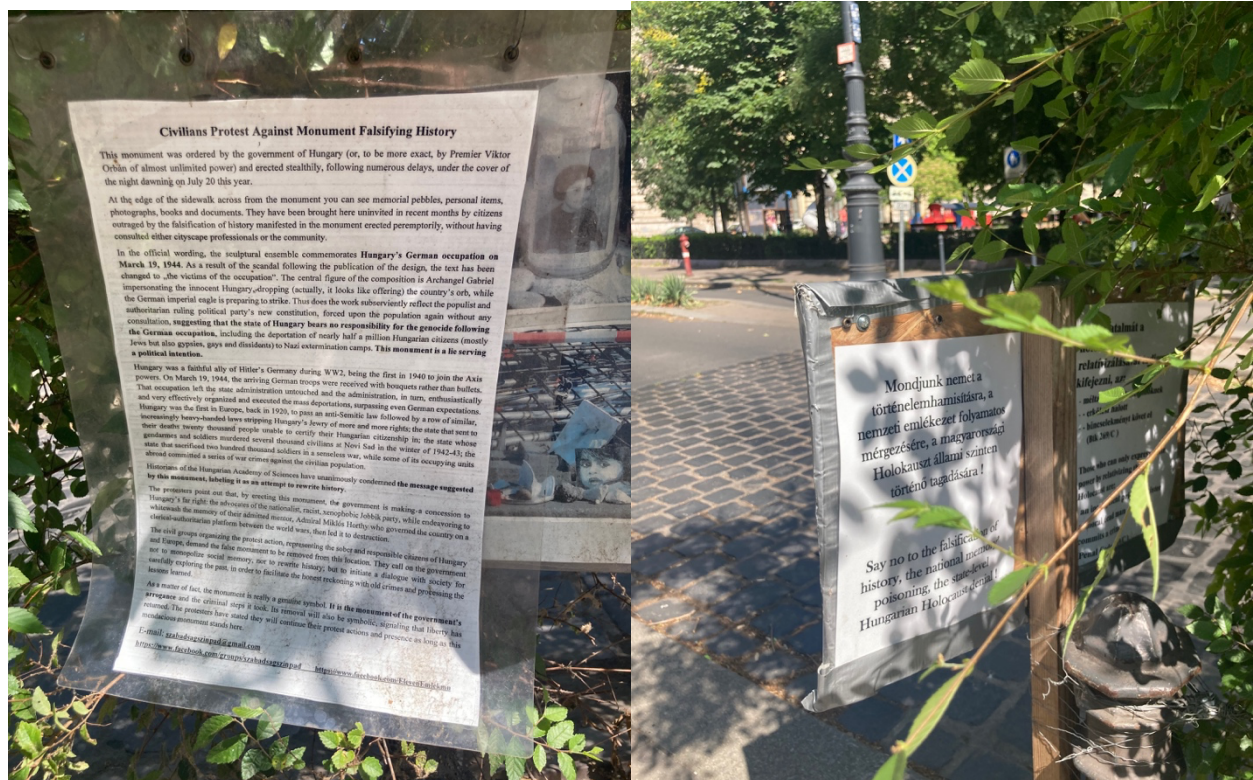


Figure 24 and 25: Laminated leaflets from the Living Memorial at Liberty Square, criticising the government's monument and stating civilian objections (by the author in 2025 June)

The demonstration started with a protest in 2014 against the building of the German Occupation Memorial, where it was clearly stated this is a civil demonstration, not tied to any political organisation (Botos, 2014).

The composition of objects at the Living Memorial was never static. Items gradually changed over time, some disappeared because of deliberate removal or vandalism, while others deteriorated under weather conditions. This ongoing process of loss and renewal further underscored the site's fragile, living, and participatory character.

It was composed primarily of personal and everyday objects, such as travel suitcases, shoes, clothing items including children's school uniforms, as well as toys, toiletries, and small pieces of furniture. These were complemented by a variety of textual and visual artefacts (laminated letters, documents, family photographs, and other images). The installation contained numerous stones, it is a Jewish commemorative practice of placing stones on graves, many of which also bore the names of sites of Jewish extermination (Krzyżanowska 2023, 549).



Figure 26: The Living Memorial contains personal objects, family photos, stones with inscription continuously changing due to acts of unwanted removal, weather conditions and reinstalment (by author, 2025 June).

A crucial aspect of the *Living Memorial*'s power lies in its accessibility. Unlike the fountain and street blocked and (once) fenced off-guarded state monument, the Living Memorial is not only physically accessible but also, meant to engage with the viewer. Anyone can walk up to

it (see Fig. 26), place an object and read what it is meant to represent in English and in Hungarian.

In the first period after the unveiling of the monuments, people gathered and organised open public discussions using a private group on Facebook called the *Eleven Emlékmű- Az én történetem* (The Living Memorial-My Story). The group is still active.³ Though they created an open account for interested participants.

This openness transforms Liberty Square from a controlled representational space into a genuinely public forum. Accessibility here is not just spatial but political and it becomes an act of participatory democracy. By removing the barriers between citizens and the symbolic pathos of remembrance, the Living Memorial reclaims public space as a shared authorship. It decentralises authority over historical interpretation (by the MVGO initiator Maria Schmidt and sculptor Peter Raab) and allows individuals to tell their own narratives of loss, revival and solidarity.

In this sense, this physical accessibility becomes the defining feature of the counter-monument. It creates a strong counterforce for the state's memory production as an inclusive model of remembrance that creates engagement over a politicised spectacle. The Living Memorial's informality stands in direct opposition to the monumental inaccessibility of the state's installation. By allowing memory to be experienced, altered and co-created by anyone, it creates a participatory space; however, due to the community's vulnerability, certain safety measures were necessary, such as the private Facebook group.

Contrary to the MVGO, the Living Memorial evokes emotions not by the grandiose wings and the pain we are familiar with from the irredentist monuments, the Living memorial tells the personal stories, much more powerful than the victimised narrative. Against this top-down nature of the imposed monuments and memorials, counter-monuments, on the other hand are characterised by alternative forms of imagery and by design they are 'non-standard design' (Krzyżanowska 2023, 543). The Living Memorial came alive for what it needed to be.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/ElevenEmlekmu/>

It entailed a repository of memories drawn from the family archive, including clothing, photographs and personal notes, forming an ever-evolving assemblage of intimate histories safeguarded and continually reinterpreted by civil society.

5. Discussion

The cases analysed above reveal a memorial landscape shaped by paradoxes, ideological layering, and unresolved historical tensions. Liberty Square contains monuments that should not logically coexist. An irredentist, Soviet, post-1989 liberal, and Orbán-era nationalist. However together they capture the political and cultural contradictions of Hungary better than any official discourse. Their continued presence signals selective remembrance: these monuments are not meaningfully embraced, but neither are they removed; instead, they are periodically reactivated for political use.

A comparison with Memento Park simplifies this dynamic. Memento Park was explicitly designed to expose the logic of propaganda through curated spatial distance. Located on the outskirts of Budapest and created in 1992 as an exhibition space for Soviet-era monuments, Liberty Square, by contrast, was never planned as a coherent commemorative environment. Its monuments are official narratives imposed through unilateral, often undemocratic procedures, including overnight erection and minimal consultation. Over time, their intended meanings have faded, replaced by community-driven reinterpretations such as the Living Memorial. These processes illustrate what Dan Hicks and Agnes Heller describe as the *falling* of monuments: narratives can be morally disowned while the physical structure persists (Tóta, 2015; Hicks, 2025).

Although the irredentist memorials are no longer present, their symbolic afterlife remains active. The Horthy bust and the Trianon kopjafa demonstrate how nostalgia for a territorially expansive Hungary continues to be present. This persistence shows the broader willingness of political actors (most notably Maria Schmidt) to mobilise irredentist imagery for contemporary ideological purposes.

A crucial comparative insight concerns the use of monuments as instruments of provocation. The German Occupation Memorial exemplifies how state-initiated symbolic politics can fracture opposition forces and divert attention from substantive political debates. The Kálmán Olga-Schiffer András exchange reveals this tension: while Kálmán⁴ framed historical responsibility as a moral imperative, Schiffer⁵ warned that symbolic conflicts absorb political

⁴ journalist at ATV (2003-2016)

⁵ co-director of the Politics Can be Different Party (2013-2016)

energy at the expense of socio-economic issues. Similar patterns appear across post-socialist Europe, where governments deploy memory politics to provoke ideological confrontation, constrain the opposition, and monopolise the agenda (Vida 2024).

The Soviet Heroic Memorial embodies a different aspect of the region's memory politics. Initially interpreted as a symbol of liberation, its meaning has been transformed by historical experience and geopolitical change. Although many Soviet monuments were destroyed or relocated after 1989, the Liberty Square obelisk survived due to diplomatic constraints, particularly the 1996 Hungarian Russian war-graves agreement. However, reducing its survival to legal compliance makes the deeper moral dilemma superficial: what does it mean for a democracy to retain a monument that celebrates its former oppressor? Russia's justification of the invasion of Ukraine through the rhetoric of "liberation" has rendered the obelisk's inscription ethically fraught, blurring the boundary between commemoration and complicity.

Across post-socialist Europe, attempts at recontextualisation have exposed the geopolitical entanglement of memory. The removal of the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn in 2007 triggered violent protests, diplomatic retaliation, and economic pressure from Russia, demonstrating that monument controversies can have concrete geopolitical consequences. Hungary's repeated but unresolved debates about relocating the Soviet memorial from Patriarch Alexy II's 1994 proposal to post-2022 demands reflect a long-standing political avoidance rather than effort at reconciliation.

More broadly, monuments function as instruments of symbolic pedagogy. Their durability, visibility, and integration into everyday perception enable them to normalise narratives. Over time, this habitual familiarity transforms complex histories into simplified assumptions about the past. As Póto notes, monuments can ultimately undermine the ideological conditions that produced them. Failing to address their legacies leaves collective memory marked by neglect, while grassroots initiatives (most notably the Living Memorial) showed participatory alternatives that challenge the state's monopoly over remembrance.

A similar dynamic is visible at the Soviet Heroic Memorial on Liberty Square, one of Budapest's most contentious sites of memory. Initially interpreted as a token of liberation, it now functions as an artefact of forced memory, its meaning transformed by both time and geopolitical change. The waves of iconoclasm that accompanied the 1956 Revolution and the

1989-1990 regime change reflected a broader post-socialist opposition to imposed representations of power (Dunkley 2023, 228).

As István Rév (2005, 6) notes, regime changes compress space and time by redefining historical categories. In the Hungarian case, the state-socialist takeover compressed space and time by rapidly reorganising the city's symbolic landscape. Spatially, former nationalist or interwar monuments were removed, marginalised, or overwritten, while new socialist symbols (Soviet Heroic Memorial, along with worker-peasant alliance imagery) were installed to materialise the ideology of liberation and social cohesion. Temporally, the entire pre-1945 past was recategorised into a simplified narrative of oppression followed by socialist redemption and reconstruction, collapsing complex histories into a single ideological timeline.

Across Central and Eastern Europe, the destruction or relocation of Soviet monuments signalled attempts to renegotiate the moral order of public space (Bellentani and Panico 2016, 29). In contrast, the Liberty Square obelisk survived, often justified by reference to the 1996 Hungarian-Russian war-graves (Government Decree 104/1996; Joób Sándor 2012) but its persistence cannot be reduced to legal obligation alone. It raises a deeper question of collective responsibility: what does it mean for a democracy to maintain a monument celebrating its former oppressor?

The war in Ukraine has made this dilemma more visible. As Russian forces legitimise aggression through the rhetoric of “liberation” and “denazification,” the inscription “Glory to the Soviet heroes of liberation” no longer reads as an abstract historical formula but as an echo of contemporary propaganda. Similarly this process observable also in Hungarian Holocaust memory, where post-1989 narratives often reframed the nation as a passive, *mutilated* victim with limited agency (Krzyżanowska 2023, 545).

From a normative perspective, the issue is not simply whether such symbols should be removed, but how inherited monuments of domination can be recontextualised. Removing them risks erasure, retaining them without critical framing risks moral hypocrisy. Post-socialist cities have increasingly experimented with interpretive plaques and counter-monuments that expose the coercive origins of Soviet memorials while preserving their material traces. In Aleida Assmann's terms, such practices embody an *ethics of memory*: a commitment to acknowledging the past without reproducing its hierarchies.

In 2007 relocation of Tallinn's *Bronze Soldier* triggered violent protests and diplomatic retaliation from Russia. This response demonstrated how monument politics can escalate into international conflict. Hungary has repeatedly encountered similar tensions. Debates about moving the Soviet obelisk have resurfaced since the 1990s yet remained unresolved: during Patriarch Alexy II's 1994 visit, he offered to consecrate the monument if relocated to a cemetery, a gesture reported in *Népszava* (1994), but the plan was quietly abandoned. Later efforts from Mayor István Tarlós's 2011 discussions to renewed calls after 2022 were similarly halted, showing a pattern of political avoidance rather than repatriation.

As Doreen Massey (2012) argues, public spaces contain the 'simultaneity of stories-so-far' and the Soviet obelisk shows this coexistence of narratives: liberation, occupation, avoidance, and (political) constraint. More broadly, monuments operate as instruments of symbolic pedagogy. Their everyday visibility normalise narratives, embedding them into public consciousness through habitual familiarity. Over time, this silent repetition transforms complex histories into simplified assumptions; yet, as Pótó and this thesis demonstrates, such monuments can ultimately undermine the ideological orders that produced them (Pótó 1989, 15-16).

The failure to confront these layers produces mnemonic negligence, while grassroots practices (such as the Living Memorial) offer participatory counter-narratives that democratise public space.

Within this broader context, the question of democracy, memory, and public space becomes central. The findings show that the democratic quality of public space is not defined merely by legal designation, but by the practices enacted within it. Liberty Square demonstrates that even within an increasingly illiberal political environment, bottom-up memory practices can reopen spaces of debate and participation.

As Hicks argues, "the ability for the community to remove an image, because it wishes to remember different people, and to build a different future, is a basic test of freedom and democracy" (Hicks 2025, 21). In other words, the politics of monuments in Hungary became a politics of democratic agency.

A key problem raised by Liberty Square's contemporary memory politics is what I call the "notion that no one cares." This assumption often used to justify political control over commemoration practices that misreads the realities of public engagement. A new generation

is growing up politically and socially opposed to the exclusionary narratives advanced by the nationalist government, raising the question of how we wish to evaluate our difficult past. Communities do not need to remain tied to inherited narratives. Awareness, understanding how memory has been materially constructed in public space is the first step toward reclaiming interpretive agency. For future generations, integrating these into public education, including history curricula, would be essential for preventing the monopolisation of historical meaning by political actors. How, then, should we assess these monuments today?

Collective care is the precondition for reclaiming public memory. This thesis can operate as a kind of mnemonic topography, a guided walk through the lived memory of the city encouraging students and citizens to develop a sense of ownership over public space.

Questions such as “Do we need this?” and “Can we collectively decide on it?” become fundamental. Memory acquires meaning only when it is owned by the community; after all, this city and this state is shaped by its citizens.

The figurative and emotive presence of monuments do matter as shown on the repurposing of the Statue of Hungarian Grief. Relocation or repurposing can offer ways to (re)integrate difficult symbols into urban life. What once signified oppression can, over time, become evidence of a society’s willingness to confront its past. The central imperative is not to look away. Hungary’s commemorative landscape shows how the state has long dictated how citizens should see and feel; many of these narratives were installed into public space without consultation, including the most recent wave of presidential statue erected after 2020. Additionally, critics have also pointed out the erosion of artistic and material quality in new statues. The *Trash of Köztér* (Trash of Public Sphere) popular initiative on Instagram created by art-historian Kata Benedek frequently presented the new and obscure memorials of Budapest. Despite its cosmopolitan character, Budapest has accumulated an expanding set of bronze figures without sufficient public debate about their necessity or artistic merit. This situation craves for reinstating an objective academic review process for monuments in public space, alongside professional oversight once carried out by *Műértő* and the more recently Hungarian section of AICA.

Within this context, new modes of commemoration offer a compelling alternative to the monumental excess that currently shapes Hungary’s symbolic landscape. International

examples show that meaningful remembrance do not need to rely on monumental scale. The Diana Memorial Fountain in Hyde Park, London, has become a genuinely lived public environment where people interact with water and space, while Gunter Demnig's Stolpersteine embed micro-fractures of memory into the everyday surfaces of the city. Both illustrate how memory work can be participatory and integrated into daily life. However, traveling too far is not a necessity. In 2024 on Teleki Square the new Getto Memorial proves that Hungarian architectural design can satisfy the communal memory needs, be an open tender and that also can invite viewers to engage with the monument.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate how public memory in contemporary Hungary is negotiated, contested, and spatially materialised in Liberty Square. The research aimed to understand not only *what* political narratives have been imposed through monuments, but *how* these narratives have been challenged or resisted by civil society. By situating the square within a longer historical trajectory of monument installation and transformation, the study demonstrated that the politics of memory in Budapest cannot be reduced to discrete episodes; rather, they constitute a continuous process of negotiation between state power and civic agency.

In this sense, Liberty Square functions as a condensed microcosm of Hungary's broader memory struggles, where the extent to which civil agency is formed is continuously determined by political authority. State-led monument building in the square has repeatedly been used to disseminate narratives of Hungarian history narratives that emphasise victimhood, heroism and external oppression.

Across multiple periods, the state has strategically used monuments to shape public interpretation of political events. Through statues commemorating liberation by the Red Army, memorials honouring national suffering, or new installations reframing Hungary as an innocent victim of German aggression, these objects have projected an image of the nation that is selective with remembrance. The result is a memory landscape in which official monuments operate as instruments of politics.

In line with Pierre Nora's concept of sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), this thesis showed that monuments in Liberty Square are not static artefacts but dynamic memory sites whose meanings change as political regimes reinterpret their symbolic value. Several monuments have been demolished, relocated, repurposed, or subtly modified to align with new ideological requirements.

This lack of procedural clarity was a recurring pattern: the research showed that the state often bypassed professional standards, democratic processes, and urban planning considerations in pursuit of symbolically potent installations. Exceptions, such as the Klauzál Square Ghetto memorial, or the formal relocation site of Memento Park, only emphasise how unusual genuine planning and architectural responsibility can work in the Hungarian memorial context.

Yet the most significant finding of this thesis lies not in the state's use of monuments, but in the counter-reactions they provoked. The emergence of counter-monuments (especially the Living Memorial) showed that public memory does not belong exclusively to the state, even when governmental actors attempt to monopolise national narratives. Instead, memory lives through the everyday practices. The Living Memorial stands as a powerful example of this phenomenon: an informal, community-led assemblage that draws on personal archives, family photographs, clothing, handwritten notes, and other intimate objects. It calls into being a repository of memories that diverge sharply from the state's prescribed narrative.

This counter-monument proved that memory can be participatory and democratic. Unlike official monuments, which aim for fixity and authority, the Living Memorial embraces incompleteness. It invites passers-by to contribute, to question, and to join an ongoing conversation rather than to passively receive a message. Its informality stands in direct opposition to the monumental inaccessibility of the state's installation.

From a methodological perspective, the analysis confirmed that spatial practices walking, gathering, leaving objects, engaging in public discussion contribute to what Henri Lefebvre terms the *production of space*. Liberty Square thus becomes a space in the Sojaean sense: not purely physical nor purely imagined, but a site shaped by the interaction of material structures, state narratives, and civic expressions. Through these interactions, the square becomes a stage for competing visions of the past and for contestations over who possesses the authority to define national history.

The takeaway from this research is twofold.

First, the state's attempt to monopolise public memory through monumental interventions is ultimately limited by the unpredictability of public reception. Monuments may be erected in stone, but the meaning of memory remains socially constructed.

Second, civil society's capacity to reclaim public memory (however fragile) still stays despite political constraints. Counter-monuments like the Living Memorial illustrate that democratic practices can emerge at the margins of official power, providing alternative frameworks for interpreting the past and imagining collective futures.

In a broader sense, Liberty Square demonstrates that struggles over memory are, fundamentally, struggles over democracy. When governments attempt to dictate historical narratives without transparency, participation, or accountability, they limit the public's ability to critically engage with its own past. Conversely, when citizens assert their right to remember, mourn, and narrate collectively, they strengthen the foundations of democratic life. In this respect, the case of Liberty Square is emblematic of Hungary's contemporary political landscape, where the boundaries of civic participation are continuously tested but not entirely foreclosed.

The state's consistent unwillingness to engage with alternative interpretations of the past reveals how neglect functions as a political tool. By refusing to acknowledge the contested nature of Liberty Square's environment, official actors effectively attempt to close the possibility of shared reflection. This neglect is not passive; it is an active mechanism that maintains the dominance of certain narratives while rendering others unspeakable. It keeps society suspended in what might be termed a dark loop: cycles in which unexamined grievances, unaddressed injustices, and unspoken histories quietly persist from one generation to the next.

The future of public memory in Hungary depends not only on the monuments that are installed or removed, but on the willingness to have dialogue about the past. Only by confronting difficult histories, rather than neglecting them can societies break the cycles that keep them bound to unresolved legacies. In this sense, Liberty Square is more than a site of commemoration: it is a test of democratic resilience, and a reminder that the refusal to engage with historical truth carries its own form of harm. The challenge for the coming years is whether this space of memory will be shaped by neglect, or by a renewed commitment to shared, critical, and participatory remembrance.

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