

Christina Brauner

Christina Brauner, born in 1989, lives in Gladbeck, Deutschland. She is a pupil of the 13th grade at the Heisenberg-Gymnasium Gladbeck, at the same time a junior student at the University of Münster (Contemporary History, East European History und Philosophy; 5th semester).

48, 56, 2006

Remembrance and symbolical practices in the Hungarian Uprising

Memento memoriae memoriae

The following essay outlines an interpretation of the Hungarian Uprising focusing on the role and significance of memory and symbolical practices. The initiating idea for this essay was developed from the analysis of the Uprising's visual representation: Among the most prominent and wide spread documents a certain series of photos



Im. 1: Demolition of the Stalin Statue, Budapest

struck me, which show the destruction of memorials. The photos depict the process of destruction or the destroyed memorials themselves. These motives are not only set in Budapest as one might assume at first glance but throughout Hungary. Objects of the aggression are mostly Soviet memorials – among those many Stalin statues, busts etc.

Destruction of memorials (even if they commemorate someone widely accepted as tyrant and dictator) is mere “vandalism”, a spontaneous and ill-organized action of the furious ‘people’. At least this is a common everyday judgment. My approach, in contrast, is



Im.2: Hungarian Flag on (partly) destroyed Soviet memorial (probably in honour of the Soviet air force), Vidagó Sq., Budapest

to show the constructive potential of memorial destruction, i.e. to take the destruction seriously as an eminently political symbolic praxis.¹ The special attention paid to the Stalin statues is founded on two (intertwined) causes: First, on the historical context, which can be interpreted as time of '(Khrushchev) Thaw'. Thus, the destruction of Stalin memorials forms a part of the De-Stalinization process. Then again one might link the issue to Kantorowicz' known theory of "The King's Two Bodies".² In this perspective, the destruction of the statues represents the 'second' death of Stalin, not in persona but as a symbolic embodiment of 'rulership', the death of his *auctoritas*. Following this line of interpretation the fundamental political meaning, particularly for the continuity of Soviet hegemony, becomes obvious.

The second line of thought which the interpretation follows is the tracing of the memory's role in the Uprising itself. The Revolution of 1848 obtained a peculiar power in the events of 1956 – in the way the uprising remembered it and referred to it as a benchmark for their self-(re)presentation and –legitimization.

The following essay, thus, tries to contribute to the interpretation of the Hungarian Uprising in terms of cultural history, a cultural history, which takes the 'actor' and his interpretations and constructions of reality seriously.

48, 56, 2006³ – that is no confusion of football and serious things (well, what could be more serious than football? – some may ask) but a most peculiar interdependence in Hungarian culture of remembrance. The link between the latter dates – 1956 and 2006 – is easy to understand having the anniversary, its international solemnization, and its national unfortunate conjunction with present protest in mind. But what about "48"? The code "1848" represents protest, too, even 'European' protest which was rewarded the title "revolution" in many countries. But what links this "Spring of Peoples" with an uprising against a Soviet regime nearly a century afar? Apart from factual evidence (e.g. both events being 'protest') it is remembrance.

Though there were surely more tangible problems on the agenda, the question how to judge the present revolt with regard to the 1848 revolution was of considerable importance to the 'revolutionaries' from 1956. They saw themselves (mostly) in its direct tradition, finally accomplishing the liberation of Hungarians by driving out (or: restricting the power of) the Soviet occupants and (re-)establishing a more pluralistic society, though not necessarily a democratic one. In the tradition of the 1848 Revolution they called their uprising "War of Freedom [Freiheitskrieg]". The Stalinist party leadership, in contrast, either denied any connections or pursued an interpretation, which presented their introduction of 'Real Socialism'

as the true and only heir to 1848's legacy. They followed the 'egalitarian' line of thought, which 1848 contains as well- another alternative to denounce 'Revolts' as 'Bourgeois' and, thus, as counter-revolutions.⁴



Im.3: Demonstrators gathering at a monument in honour of Lajos Kossuth, Szeged (nr. the Southern Hungarian border) 1956

honouring the 'heroes' of 1848 served as meeting or assembling points for demonstrations and rallies (cf. Im.3 and 4).

My first thoughts about the "Hungarian Uprising" resulted in the association of the picture of a beheaded, fallen down Stalin statue, which, again, is somehow connected to culture of remembrance.⁵ Researching further, I discovered that it was not only the Stalin Statue in Budapest which protesters demolished but different memorials all over Hungary. The pictures may give an impression of these 'symbolical practices' as one could call them: The statues were climbed, hauled off their bases, sprayed with graffiti and slogans, demolished, replaced or marked with an Hungarian flag. These actions are not exceptional in an uprising – but surely their well-aimed direction against Soviet monuments and memorials has got a meaning which exceeds its mere existence in an uprising. Especially, the installation of Hungarian flags on Soviet (and therefore not national, at least in first place) memorials seems to be a symbolic re-annexation of 'official' remembrance culture.

The importance of remembrance for the 1956 Uprising was not only manifested in debates on historical interpretation but also on symbols and symbolical practices. One of the more obvious contacts is the "Petöfi Club", an oppositional debating club, which bore the name of 'the' national poet of Hungary and key

figure of 1848, Sandor Petöfi. The radio station "Kossúth", one of the major media the uprising

used, was named in honour of Lajos Kossuth, also a prominent figure of "48".



Im.4: Demonstration around the Bem-Statue, József-Bem-Place, Budapest 1956. During one of these demonstrations the poem "Szózat" (inofficial national anthem of Hungary and popular song in 1848) was recited.

In this respect, memorials are the most apparent expressions of collective memory, or more precisely of (part of) the collective memory, which enjoys official status. Overthrowing a memorial, therefore, is a sign of tensions and disruptions in the culture of remembrance. An official memory can be opposed with counter-memory (e.g. in counter-memorials, -ceremonies) or demoted to unofficial or even forbidden status. The main point is that one has to differentiate between various forms, ways and contents of remembrance in society and with regard to memorials to pay attention to the social praxis in which they are embedded.⁶



Im.5: ‘Official memory’. Parades in front of the Stalin statue, Budapest 1953

‘Stalin’ seemed and still seems to be the personification of injustices, crimes, murders, deportation, censorship, all in all, the key figure of Soviet dictatorship. In this unofficial memory (as diverse as it surely was) the 1848 Revolution got a special meaning and importance and could even form a counter-narrative against the Communist world revolution, interpreting



Im.6: The remaining boots of the Stalin Statue in Budapest, crowned with the Hungarian flag

Getting back to 56 – the Hungarian memory was obviously marked by deep splitting and even direct opposition of official and unofficial praxis.⁷ The cult of Stalin was part of party recollection, in which the different Socialist Republics were unified but which was hardly accepted by the majority of Hungarians. Quite the contrary –

Hungarian past and forecasting Hungarian future in terms of ‘course of freedom’/‘liberation’. This interpretation and forecast culminated in present politics, esp. of course the overthrow of the manifestations of the opponent narrative. Termination of Stalin cult, thus, meant also termination of shared ‘Soviet’/‘Socialist’ past for future remembrance. Symbolical practices, in here,

may not be understood as mere reflection of social processes and state-of-mind, as representing reality but in fact as building and constructing reality themselves.

The attack on the symbolical body of Stalin was not only directed against the body of a historical personage but the representation of Soviet rule's continuity it embodied. It is rather a memory consensus which is denounced than the authority and its legitimization in its whole. Im.6 shows a very concrete example of this disassembly (in the literal sense of meaning): After a major attack on the Stalin statue in Budapest the boots were left as only relic – and the place's name changed into "Boots Place". The physical disassembly, thus, was accompanied and intertwined with a 'mental' disassembly by mockery and ridicule. The quitting of over-national memory was followed by beginnings of a revocation of Hungarian national memory – most obviously shown in the erection of the Hungarian flag⁸ on destroyed memorials and the gatherings around the statues of 'national heroes'. The example of Im.4 shows the statue of the Polish general Józef Bem, who was as well a leading character in the 1848 revolution.⁹

Today, the memory of Hungarians seems to be divided again, though following a line which is different from the one in 1956. To begin with, there are the solemn recollection ceremonies, which are held in attendance of foreign politicians (etc.) and are meant to represent 'the' Hungarian memory. This very demand is denied by the protesters, who connect the present anniversary of Hungarian uprising to the present situation in Hungarian politics. Therefore, they compare themselves to the protesters of 1956. The reasons for the comparison, though, are discussed. The protesters are a rather diverse group with a certain tendency towards the right wing. In short, the (post-communist) government wants to remember the uprising as an attempt to reform and 'pluralize' communism, the protesters want to accomplish it and fight for (national) freedom themselves.



Im.7: Memorial for the Hungarian Uprising, Budapest 2006. It is situated in the very place where the Stalin Statue formerly stood.

Again, there is a quarrel about memorials: The four young architects whose memorial project was chosen in the officially held competition are criticized by conservative and right-wing groups. The critics maintain that the steles remind of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin and that the Memorial, thus, is inadequate to remember the revolution. Hence they organized their own competition and elected a (also rather 'conservative/traditional') sculpture, which

the artist Robert Csikszentmihalyi carved out of sandstone. Their attempted ‘overthrow’ of a memorial in honor of the Red Army’s war casualties, so far, became a mere “pathetic parody” of the role model of 1956.¹⁰

I hope that this short photo essay underlined the significance of memory for (surely not only for!) protest and how events separated by more than one and a half century can be deeply interlinked. Therefore, one may understand it as well as a pleading for the importance of meaning, interpretation and perception in history and historical research.

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Im. 1

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Im. 2

Foto Documentary Database of www.rev.hu

The Soviet memorial at Vigadó square with Hungarian flag on it; date: 1956; country: Hungary; place: Budapest; photo: Vilmos Hámori; filename: 00003184.tif

Im.3

Foto Documentary Database of www.rev.hu

Demonstration at the Kossuth statue in city of Szeged; date: 24/10/1956; country: Hungary; place: Szeged (Csongrád megye); photo: Béla Liebmann; registration number: MNM Ltsz. 85.642; filename: 00001606.tif

Im.4

Foto Documentary Database of www.rev.hu

Students of Eötvös Lóránd University (ELTE) among demonstrators at Bem square;
date: 23/10/1956; country: Hungary; place: Budapest; photo: fotó MTI; registration number: MNM 89.435; MTI B 61023/12; filename: 00001903.tif

Im.5

Foto Documentary Database of www.rev.hu

Parade in front of the Stalin statue

Date: 04/04/1953; country: Hungary; place: Budapest; photo: Sándor Melő; registration number: MNM Ltsz 88.455; filename: 00004382.tif

Im.6

Foto Documentary Database of www.rev.hu

Destroying the statue of Stalin: the flag of the revolution at the boots of the statue

Date: 10/1956; country: Hungary; Place: Budapest; registration number: MNM neg.; filename: 00002497.tif

Im.7

Budapest Journal (<http://budapestjournal.com>)

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¹ An inspiring reading on this topic offers Winfried SPEITKAMP, *Denkmalsturz und Symbolkonflikt in der modernen Geschichte. Eine Einleitung*, in: id. (ed.), *Denkmalsturz. Zur Konfliktgeschichte politischer Symbolik*, Göttingen 1997, pp.5-21; his essay *Protest und Denkmalsturz in der Übergangsgesellschaft. Deutschland vom ausgehenden 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Revolution 1848*, in: *ibid.*, pp.49-78, allows to draw some (very limited, of course) parallels contentwise, too.

² Cp. Ernst H. KANTOROWICZ, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Mediaeval Political Theory*, Princeton 1957 and (as a compact introduction with interesting observations concerning the study's reception) Olaf B. RADER, *Art. Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz (1895-1963)*, in: Lutz Raphael (ed.), *Klassiker der Geschichtswissenschaft*, vol. 2: *Von Fernand Braudel bis Natalie Z. Davis*, Munich 2006, pp.7-26, esp. 16-23.

³ For all non-Germans and no-Football-Fans VIVA provides a hint under:
http://www.viva.tv/Stars/Player/id/632240/asset_id/34849/type/video/inter_id/419 (lastly visited on 09/12/2006).

⁴ See also for György DALOS, *Ungarn in der Nußschale. Geschichte meines Landes*, Munich 2004, pp.156-167, and (with special regard to remembrance of Sandor Petöfi) id., *Ungarn: Mythen – Lehren – Lehrbücher*, in: Monika Flacke (ed.), *Mythen der Nationen. Ein europäisches Panorama*, Berlin/Munich ²2001, pp. 528-555, esp. 548-553.

⁵ Some call this destroyed statue even the very symbol of the whole Uprising, cp. i.a.: www.demokratiezentrum.org/de/startseite/themen/demokratiedebatten/ungarn_1956/ungarn_1956.html (lastly visited on 10/02/07).

⁶ Some theoretical approaches of ‘counter-memory’ can be found with Peter BURKE, *Geschichte als soziales Gedächtnis*, in: Aleida Assmann/Dietrich Harth (eds.), *Mnemosyne. Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung*, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, pp.289-304.

⁷ A more detailed (though a bit simplifistic) analysis of the uprising in Hungarian culture of remembrance provides Heino NYSSÖNEN, *Der Volksaufstand von 1956 in der ungarischen Erinnerungspolitik*, in: *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 47 (1999), pp.914-932 (online: http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/zol/portals/_ungarn1956/documents/nyysoenen_zfg.pdf, lastly visited on 09/12/2006).

⁸ The flags used by the uprising were partly ‘official’ Hungarian flags, which bore hammer, sickle and other emblems of communism (so called “Stalin arms”) in their very middle. These symbols were cut out and the flags, thus, ‘re-nationalized’. In this point, too, the Uprising turns out to be a ‘re-volution’ which is characterized rather by recourse on ‘tradition’ than ‘innovation’. It remains to be seen to what extent this ‘tradition’ is formed by present interpretation and context or – to put it polemically – how this ‘tradition’ is invented. The latter aspect also refers to the remarks concerning the reception of 1848, see above.

⁹ The important point about the Bem Statue (on Józef-Bem-Place) as the starting-/meeting-point of demonstrations is perhaps that he fought the same opponent (the Austrians) as the Hungarians in 1848. Cf. the entry in the “Österreich Lexikon”, operated by the TU Graz (<http://aeiou.iicm.tugraz.at/aeiou.encyclp.b/b278601.htm>, lastly visited on 09/12/2006) and the article in *Meyers Konversationslexikon*, 4th edition, vol.2, p.677 (http://susi.e-technik.uni-ulm.de:8080/Meyers2/bilder/werk/meyers/band/2/seite/0677/meyers_b2_s0677.jpg).

¹⁰ As Ralf LEONHARD commented in the *taz*, 24.10.2006, cf. <http://www.taz.de/pt/2006/10/24/a0153.1/text.ges,1> (lastly visited on 09/12/2006).

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