

REMEMBERING WARTIME VIOLENCE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY TRANSYLVANIA: A FEW THOUGHTS ON COMPARATIVE HISTORY

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This article is a comparative examination of processes through which collective memory is shaped. Taking as its focus the collective memory surrounding specific sites of remembrance, that of a massacre that took place in 1940 in the Transylvanian village of Treznea and that of the early period of communist takeover in the same village, it offers a discussion of the comparative value of contrasting narratives of the past and suggests insights into the processes through which these narratives take shape separately. It also examines these narratives across generations, situating them not as part of the past but as part of an ongoing dialogue of identity and, in some instance, conflict.

Keywords: Transylvania, Treznea, Shoa, collective memory, groupism, ethnicity, ethnic conflict, comparative history, transnational

This essay represents an exercise in comparative historiography, having as much to do with methods as with content. I want to explore the opportunities opened up by comparative history in looking at the memory of war in the twentieth century. In this case, the comparison is three-fold. To begin with, I want to examine the value of comparing ethnic groups (mostly Romanians and Hungarians, but with an eye to the Jewish population as well). At the same time I want to look at two sites of collective memory work – World War II and the early period of communist takeover. Finally, I also identify two generations, the wartime and postwar, as important units for comparative analysis. My discussion about these three types of comparisons is exploratory, but my considerations can be valuable even as such, since I am asking questions that are partly empirical, but more centrally methodological and theoretical. What I want to examine is: to what extent does comparative analysis enhance our ability to understand the processes of collective remembrance? And, conversely, how is collective memory comparatively shaped? This is not a pedantic question; it is a consideration that has bearing both on political contests but also on foundational assumptions of historians working on the twentieth century.

A few words about the usefulness of comparative history are in order at the outset. There is a growing interest in transnational history, which has had important bearings on how historians of modern politics and societies are currently framing, or reframing their work.¹ Instead of taking the national context as a given, this relatively new wave of historiography has been relativizing the assumptions embedded in this national context – regarding political legitimacy, stability of institutions, social relations, etc.² This wave has seen few inroads in Romanian historiography, however. One important exception has been the recent work by Rogers Brubaker on Transylvania as a site of multi-ethnic contestation.³

Comparativism has grown as a corrective measure, especially for those working on ethnic nationalist questions, whose single-group/community focus has suggested a reifying view of nationalism. One tends to reinforce uniqueness and privilege the perspective of the group studied, even as one might critique the notion that the group is unique or privileged. I have been guilty of this shortcoming myself. However, even comparing ethnic groups might become “ethnicism”, a term introduced by historian Jeremy King, who, like Brubaker, recommends moving away from such categories as fixed to regarding the processes by which ethnic identities are constantly in flux.⁴ I accept both King’s and Brubaker’s own critiques of both constructivism and also “groupism”, but I also regard such categories as useful in so far as they in fact are being utilized by the subjects of my own research. What comparative analysis enables a historian to do is to relativize the claims of one’s own empirical subjects and place them in a culturally coherent context (enabling the reader to understand how members of a community in fact situated themselves inside that community and also against others, especially with regard to ethnic considerations), while offering the possibility of critical distance. In the case of Transylvania, for instance, looking at the multiple ethnic groups living in Cluj is not only a “politically correct” goal, but more importantly, it is the proper way to contextualize the complex local social, cultural, and political life of a town that for a long time has had a multi-cultural existence.⁵

But, as Jay Winter remarked at a roundtable on cultural history at Indiana University a few years back, the intellectual task of doing comparative history well, especially as a cultural historian, is often insurmountable. The notion that one person could become truly bi-cultural in her or his ability to situate herself within the communities and contests is a wonderful goal, but one that can be more easily spoken about than accomplished. There is also the issue of who, in a situation such as the still somewhat tense one in Transylvania, could be both bi-lingual and bi-cultural, and equally invested in understanding the different ethnic groups that co-exist in this territory. Brubaker is exceptional in this regard, not only because of his personal scholarly and intellectual skills and circumstances, but also because, in the case of the book on Cluj, he has actually done what Winter suggests for comparative studies: he has worked with a team.⁶ Most historians, however, most of-

ten “fly solo”, both because of the way in which we are trained in our discipline (unlike sociologists, who most often work in teams, at least in terms of research), and also because of our proclivity to privilege the responsibilities and authority of the single voice when producing analyses. Yet even for a single author working closely on one case study, a certain type of comparative analysis is possible. A scholar can place herself or himself inside a single case study with an expressed awareness of other relevant contexts and cases.

Comparisons of a different kind – between two sites of remembrance – offer very different advantages and challenges. To begin with, such comparisons present a challenge to the notion that any event has such a central role in shaping the collective memory and identity of a community that it precludes useful comparisons with other events. The most obvious case in point is the Shoa for the Jewish community.⁷ The historiography on the Shoa and its collective memory has developed largely outside the realm of the larger context of World War II. However, for non-Jews the Shoa has remained unjustifiably marginal in the historiography of World War II. For the non-Jewish communities in Eastern Europe who have more recently endured the extreme violence of Soviet occupation and then internal purges in the early years of communism, the Gulag has weighed more heavily on their collective memory than the violence of World War II.⁸ From a scholarly perspective, the question is to what extent is it appropriate for the historian to bring in the comparative schema when, in fact, part of our task is to understand exactly the specific value/role that particular experience plays in the shaping of a community’s collective memory? Thus, the challenge in this case is less about the ability to undertake solid comparative work, as is the case with comparing the experiences of two ethnic groups, and more about the appropriateness of questioning the central role of one experience versus others. This is especially the case for the historian, by comparison with a philosopher or ethicist, for instance, since the historian’s task is fundamentally to understand and explicate/narrate rather than evaluate the moral value of a particular emotional attachment to one memory versus another.⁹

But compare we must. For in the same way that a historian focusing only on one ethnic group can reify the uniqueness of that group, so can a scholar of collective memory take for granted what is in fact the constructed discourse about an experience in the past, rather than some “natural” – if there is such a thing – collective remembrance.¹⁰ In fact, physiologically speaking, even at the individual level remembrance is a continuous process of re-cataloguing of information, of specific impressions that might be directly personal (having witnessed the Holocaust, for instance), or only discursively appropriated (the meaning of the Shoa after returning from Auschwitz as a survivor, for instance).¹¹ Events that happened more recently might become more forcefully imprinted on the memory of one person/group (the Gulag versus World War II), and thus might displace the older

memory from a central place of pain and identification with victimization. Yet that is both an experience-based process (the actual lived experience of the violence done to a person or her/his family) and a learned process. The ways in which silences and discussions about World War II took shape in the late 1940s and early 1950s certainly shaped how different communities in Transylvania saw some forms of victimization as safe, appropriate, comforting, or less troubling than others in their construction of meaningful collective memories.

The point I am trying to make is that the subjectivity of different communities in this process of collective remembrance is important and must therefore be taken as an important force. But, by the same token, looking at these processes with some distance affords the scholar the ability to point out the relationship between politics and local cultural practices as a dialogue that is important for both the local level and also the central policy makers and knowledge brokers.

In the realm of collective memory, the comparative perspective also takes some particular features that are worth outlining on their own. The production of historical narratives is something that happens first and foremost in the scholarly realm, often with political endorsement, whether academically institutionalized or simply financially sponsored. There are individual attempts that fall outside such endorsements, and there are also important differences between academic and popular historical writing. The goals of such work are, however, to provide interpretations of the past that have the authority of some sort of either objective, or, most likely, balanced view of the contradictory traces of the past (especially in contested past events, such as wartime violence). The “balanced view”, however, is a claim that might be central to professional scholars but offers little satisfaction to communities still struggling to come to terms with their emotional, antagonistic view of the past.

Thus, when I look at the versions presented by different communities in terms of their collective remembrance of the past, rather than their different versions of the historical narrative of the past, my interest as a historian is not so much to balance such views, for I don't think there is inherent value in this. In studying collective memory I try to understand the process by which individuals and groups become attached emotionally to narratives about their or their communities' past experiences and the ways in which they are invested in these narratives. To what extent do people in the present identify with these narratives? To what extent do they question them? How does this process of association and disassociation come into being?

In the process of answering such questions, it becomes imperative to address contradictions, silences, and forgetting. Placing the spotlight on these aspects of the process of collective memory offers the chance to understand what shapes collective memory at the grassroots level. It also enables the scholar to move beyond empathy or moralistic judgments to consider the relationship between such local

processes and the politics of memory at the more institutional levels of discourse, privileging neither as more central than the other. My overall point is that comparisons are indeed valuable, though they might not necessarily move us in a more “objective” or unambiguously “better” direction.

Let me step into one small, but greatly contested, case study to illustrate the usefulness of comparative analysis when trying to understand the shaping of collective memory. In 1999 and 2000 I traveled through Transylvania to observe commemorative practices linked to the two world wars, to visit the sites of memory linked to the wars, and to talk with the local communities who are involved in these activities.¹² One of my stops was in Treznea, the village of some sad fame because of a massacre that took place at the beginning of World War II. For those unfamiliar with the case, the events took place on September 9th, 1940, while the Romanian troops were making their way out of Northern Transylvania and Hungarian troops were advancing into the area, according to the stipulations of the Second Vienna Award. Though the retrocession of Transylvania to Hungary was overall peaceful, in this instance as in others (on both sides of the World War II border), during that brief period of movement of troops the local population took advantage of the chaotic situation to settle accounts or express their ethnic nationalism in violent ways. In Treznea, what appears to have happened was that some local Hungarians, with the financial backing of a noble who had lost land to the Romanian local population during the land reform of the 1920s, came after those who had gained in that reform, and in the process killed 87 ethnic Romanians and 6 ethnic Jews. The details, total numbers, and especially the motivation for these killings have all been disputed, making it impossible to offer a clear historical narrative of the account. But the death of these local people is indisputable, and thus poses a question about the meaning of these events first and foremost for the witnesses of the various incidents of that day, next for the local community further down the road, during and since World War II, and ultimately about the meaning of World War II as a total war in these local contexts. The most central question for my study was whether the massacre of Treznea is in fact part of the collective memory of World War II beyond the local community of those directly affected by it. In other words, how does a small, albeit violent and tragic, local event become part of the web of emotional connections that shape collective memory (rather than historical narratives)?

When I arrived in Treznea I knew there was no objective way to narrate the events of September 9th, and my goal was not to come up with a reconciled, balanced version of the story. What I wanted to understand was how the local population had become attached to specific recollections of September 9th and to what extent wider political contexts, especially the ethno-nationalism of the Romanian and Hungarian political elites, had played an important role in these local recollections.¹³ I no more believed that the survivors and the larger ethnic-Romanian

community of Treznea could be “objective” in their position vis-à-vis the massacre than that the Hungarians who had witnessed these events and had since left the village could have had an objective position on the matter.

In the process of trying to understand the crafting of these collective memories I came to several conclusions. To begin with, it became absolutely clear that in this case (and I think by extension in many other rural settings in Transylvania, especially with regard to World War II), different communities might have inhabited the same spaces, but they lived side by side, rather than together. Thus, the memory of one group can be completely separate from (and maybe antithetical to) the memory of another. This was the case not only for Hungarian and Romanian groups, but also for the Germans, Jews, and other ethnic groups who lived in Transylvania. In Treznea, for instance, while asking about the “accidental” 6 Jews who were victims of the massacre, I came upon the realization that the village had had a significant Jewish population (something not noted in the village’s monograph done by the local teacher), large enough to have its own Jewish cemetery and large enough to have personal stories about the Shoa and the return of survivors from Auschwitz. The collective memories of the wartime experiences of the local community are currently represented only by Romanians, as the Hungarian and Jewish communities have disappeared. Therefore, in this case, while one is aware of great gaps, it is impossible to reconstruct them in any meaningful way. Silences and questions, rather than specific stories, loom over this broader comparative contextualization.

What also became apparent in the process of speaking with local ethnic Romanians, especially members of the post-war generations, was that little of the broader comparative context had been passed down. Thus, while speaking to me about relations among Romanians, Hungarians, and Jews in the village during the war, the wartime generation didn’t mark the stories to their children in the same way. Whether out of convenience or some other ethno-centric reasons, these omissions and silences in fact misrepresented the 1940s generation’s collective memory to their children. And the result was rather obvious. These generations have both a sense of entitlement and also of victimization vis-à-vis the massacre. They have seen their parents unable to forget those events or stop suffering from the fear of the “return of the Hungarians,” but they also have little understanding of the history of ethnic relations in the village before 1940 or even during the war.

Another important issue has been the relationship between remembering the events of September 9th, the whole of World War II, the Shoa, and the communist takeover. Overall, the remembrances of the wartime generation are framed by two events: September 9th and the communist takeover. Few had much to say about World War II. Some went out of their way to emphasize how *normal* things were during the war, how their neighbors (meaning the ethnic Hungarians) did not behave in the same way as what they had witnessed on September 9th 1940. In fact,

in listening to their stories about World War II, the massacre appeared to me more as an extraordinary disturbance rather than the result of some long-festering nationalist antagonism. This is *not* how ethno-nationalist Romanian historians and politicians have interpreted the meaning of the massacre; they have tended to see it as illustrative of larger inter-ethnic tensions, an expression of a longer trend, rather than an isolated incident, no matter how painful.

And the Shoa only came into discussion marginally. Almost no survivors of September 9th who were in the village in the spring of 1944 (when deportations to the death camps started to take place) made any empathetic (or contrasting) connections between the massacre at the beginning of the war and the violence done to the Jewish community at the end of the war, even though some aspects of the process could have been seen as similar. I initially considered this silence as a sign of local anti-Semitic attitudes, but the comments I heard from those who did mention the Jewish community in any fashion were not so much hateful as simply unengaged with that community. Again, it may simply be that the ethnic Romanians and Jews in the village didn't live together so much as side by side, never heartily engaged in common pursuits. It is possible, in fact, that the interment in the Orthodox cemetery of the 6 Jews killed on September 9th might be the closest these two communities ever came together.

What was also remarkable in the stories I heard from the wartime generation was the great contrast between their memories of the war versus the early years of communism. For virtually all, the arrival of communism was a more traumatic event than their wartime experiences. In effect, this means that, despite spikes in violence of which political elites have made a lot of waves, at the local level communities experienced the war quite differently than one might have expected, if focusing solely on the larger military and political narratives. Treznea, like many other villages and towns of Romania and Hungary, was not part of the fighting front until the very end of the war, in the summer of 1944 and spring of 1945. For the people living in these locales, the wartime experience was more ethnically contingent if they were Jewish than any other ethnicity – Romanian or Hungarian. Otherwise, class, age, and gender all mattered in how they experienced the war, but the consistency with which my respondents spoke more negatively about the Soviet troops and the communist takeover than the Hungarian administration, despite their different personal contexts during the war, was quite remarkable. Thus, comparison between two different traumatic events is a useful corrective, as it confronts the historian with her or his own assumptions about what is broadly significant rather than locally contingent.

This comparison is also important when regarding the relationship between this community's collective memories of September 9th versus the politicization of that event. Though they have participated in the initial efforts to raise a monument to the victims and they continue to participate in the commemorations every

year, the local ethnic Romanians do so not necessarily out of some great loyalty toward the representatives of the state or some abstract notion of patriotism. The inhabitants of Treznea welcome the attention of the higher authorities only in so far as it is respectful of the memory of those who are honored at the commemorations. Many see through the annual politicians' pilgrimages, and qualify them as political struggles for votes and media attention. Such attention doesn't comfort the older generation in their sadness.

For the younger generation, the combination of political discourses and utilization of September 9th for political purposes has created a different, tense context. Being from a small village in the middle of nowhere is not something to brag about, especially when moving to a large city, as many of the younger inhabitants of Treznea have done. Having the massacre at the center of attention for the rest of the country (or at least the region) once a year creates an uncomfortable emotional link: Treznea has become recognizable, but only because of this massacre and the trauma associated with it. Thus, younger Romanians from Treznea have the option of downplaying this and accepting the notion that they're from a small unknown village, something that would in fact not be entirely in keeping with the collective memories of their families. Or they can embrace the media's annual focus on Treznea and draw attention to this event to identify themselves as representing some exceptional identity (of the "martyr" village) within the communities in which they currently live – Oradea, Bucharest, or elsewhere. If the former, they are betraying some of the collective memories valued by their families and community. If the latter, they mark themselves in antagonism with ethnic Hungarians, and thus re-inscribe the ethnic tensions that have existed in this area for too long.

Thus far, I have not seen many efforts to address the real tensions within individuals of these younger generations, to reconcile both expectations of their parents and also find their own comfortable place in a larger community where ethnicity might mean very different things than in small rural communities. History textbooks, museums, and other educational cultural settings have fallen short of providing a balanced view of the past while allowing room for preserving emotional links with collective memory. Would mutual awareness of atrocities committed by ethnic Romanians against Hungarians and Jews and by ethnic Hungarians against Romanians and Jews in World War II change the way in which these younger generations appropriate the burden of their grandparents' trauma and painful memories? Recent work on relations among Poles, Jews, and Germans of the postwar generations suggests that unlearning and the recasting of collective memory of victimization can in fact happen.¹⁴ Eva Hoffman's recent autobiographical book, *After Such Knowledge*, is a powerful testimony to such hopefulness.¹⁵ Political elites cannot force the hand, but they also need at least to step back in their heavy politicization of the commemoration of wartime violence and

victimhood, letting younger generations find their own vocabulary and path from revenge to empathy and from pain to reconciliation.

Notes

- ¹ One recent interesting dialogue on this issue was recorded in the pages of the *American Historical Review* by a group of six prominent historians whose work has focused on this trend. See "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History. Participants: C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed," *American Historical Review* 111(5) (December 2006): 1440–1464. Accessed at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/111.5/introduction.html> (9 July 2007).
- ² The scholarship on nationalism which has both attempted to deconstruct but also reified the national context is vast, but some of the towering figures in the field are Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, [1983], 1991), and more recently *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995); Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- ³ Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox and Liana Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2006).
- ⁴ Jeremy King, "The Nationalization of East Central Europe: Ethnicism, Ethnicity, and Beyond", in Maria Bucur and Nancy M. Wingfield, eds., *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2001), 112–152, and *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); see also Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*.
- ⁵ Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics*.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Alex Grobman, "The Uniqueness of the Holocaust," accessed at <http://www.holocaust-trc.org/uniqueness.htm> (9 July 2007).
- ⁸ In May 2007 I attended a conference entitled "The Gulag and the Holocaust in the Romanian Conscience," organized by Ruxandra Cesereanu, a scholar in literary criticism, at Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj. The papers offered at the conference concentrated heavily on the Gulag, and only a minority of participants had either expertise or a primary interest in the Holocaust. In Poland, the historiography on the Holocaust has become more thoroughly developed, though it still coexists in tension with that on the Gulag. In other post-communist countries this dialogue has not even come this far. For a brief overview of the Cluj conference, see "Gulag și Holocaust in constiința românească," *Observator Cultural*, no. 377, 21–27 June 2007, accessed at <http://www.observatorcultural.ro/> (9 July 2007).
- ⁹ On collective memory as a subject of scholarly interest in the humanities, in particular with regard to historical analysis versus ethical concerns, see W. James Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), Paul

- Ricoeur, *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), Sue Campbell, "Our Faithfulness to the Past: Reconstructing Memory Value," *Philosophical Psychology* 19(3) (June 2006): 361–380, and Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- ¹⁰ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.
- ¹¹ Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Campbell, "Our Faithfulness"; Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17(4) (Summer 1991): 773–797.
- ¹² Maria Bucur, "Treznea. Trauma, Nationalism and the Memory of World War II in Romania." *Rethinking History* 6(1) (2002): 35–55.
- ¹³ My research is based on fieldwork conducted in April 2000 and on oral history interviews (life stories) conducted with the few remaining survivors of the events and with younger members of their families.
- ¹⁴ See the papers presented at the conference "Polish–German Post/Memory: Aesthetics, Ethics, Politics," organized in April 2007 at Indiana University, Bloomington. The program and abstracts are accessible at <http://www.indiana.edu/~eucenter/pgconf/>.
- ¹⁵ Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Where Memory of the Holocaust Ends and History Begins* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).