



Editorial

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Museums that Matter. Editorial Introduction

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If you used to think of museums as just timeless spaces where objects of the past are preserved forever and at the same time, they are dull spaces where you must read texts while standing, you were fundamentally wrong. The fact that Russian invading troops with skilled professionals are looting museums in Ukraine proves how important these places are. It also proves that the illusion that visitors learn and become better people after viewing the exhibition is not accurate. It is difficult to find a direct link between visiting the exhibition and changing one's viewpoints. The Russian soldiers who probably also were museum visitors at some point in their lives and who are now under orders or they themselves are destroying and looting museums in Ukraine demonstrates that a new era has begun for museums in Europe.

The critical role of museums and the evolving landscape of Holocaust museums prompted Eastern European Holocaust Studies to dedicate this entire issue to this topic. Museum studies is a fascinating and evolving field, which is why this themed issue includes four interviews: one with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the founding director of POLIN, two others with academics Roni Mikel Arieli and Katrin Antweiler, and finally, a fourth one with artists Gabriela Bulišová and Mark Isaac, who critically engage with the memorialization process. These personal insights into decision-making regarding inclusion and narrative offer a snapshot of the field.

This issue explores the role of museums and commemorative practices in Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Japan, Italy, and Russia. The historiographical essay on the post-1945 trials in the Soviet Union, along with the new Jewish Museum of Kaliningrad, examine the Soviet-Russian aspects of this history. The geographical scope is significant because Holocaust museums can no longer be studied solely within a national or Cold War East–West framework anymore. The research papers show that various national actors are skilfully using Holocaust museums to advance their own national mythologies. Museums have always been sites where memory wars are waged. What is new is that this war now literally involves the conflict in Ukraine, as well as the emergence of illiberal Holocaust museums.

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The illiberal turn in Holocaust studies is also leading to the establishment of parallel illiberal Holocaust museums alongside existing ones. A striking example of this is Borbála Klacsmann's analysis of a local Jewish Museum in Balatonfüred, which has been heavily criticized in professional circles. To understand the logic of illiberal politics, we must recognize that the more something is criticized – whether on professional or political grounds – the more the critique is ignored by its proponents.

For instance, the exhibit script from the 'House of Jewish Excellence,' which features Wikipedia-based biographies of various Jewish intellectuals from Einstein to Dustin Hoffman displayed on computer screens, was replicated in another exhibition space in a synagogue in Győr. However, as in Balatonfüred, the exhibit in Győr also features only a few local Jewish figures – nine in total – whose life stories are difficult to celebrate from a Hungarian perspective: those who succeeded had left the country, while those who stayed were killed. This narrative conveniently omits Hungary's collaboration with the Nazis.

Moreover, a museum without real visitors lacks impact and frankly legitimacy. Therefore, the creator of this exhibition had an unorthodox idea. He personally convinced László Palkovics, government appointed chairman of the board of trustees of the Széchenyi István University Foundation in Győr, to change the curriculum of the whole university. Palkovics, who played a key role in driving the CEU from Budapest to Vienna, is not usually bothered by the democratic process so it was not a problem for him to change the different educational programs without quality assurance or professional consultation. This illustrates the *modus operandi* of illiberal science policy, where a single individual can change the curriculum of an entire university and make visiting a museum which silences the history of Hungarian responsibility in the Holocaust mandatory for 14,000 university students in Győr.

In conclusion, the evolving landscape of Holocaust studies and museum practices reflects the broader geopolitical and ideological shifts occurring across Eastern Europe and beyond. Museums, once seen primarily as sites of remembrance and education, are increasingly becoming arenas where national narratives and memory wars are contested. The rise of illiberal Holocaust museums exemplifies how these spaces are being co-opted to serve political agendas, often at the expense of historical accuracy and critical reflection. This trend not only distorts the memory of the Holocaust but also underscores the ongoing struggle over how history is interpreted and taught. As exemplified by the controversial developments in Hungary, where state influence reshapes both museum exhibits and academic curricula, it is evident that these changes have far-reaching implications. The case studies from various

countries highlight the urgent need to critically examine how Holocaust memory is being shaped and manipulated in today's fraught political climate. This themed issue plans to contribute to this timely task.