

Re-Visioning the aftermath of Communism

Reka Komoli

CREAM, University of Westminster

Abstract

Since the fall of communism in Hungary in 1989, and the consequent withdrawal of Soviet forces, the significance of the Soviet legacy has been contested by different actors on the political stage. Part of this legacy is the social dislocation and economic decline that was precipitated by the end of socialism. Visually, this has translated into abandoned and dilapidated buildings and infrastructure on a seemingly post-apocalyptic scale. Revisionism continues today. Since 2013, the present Hungarian government has been actively engaged in it through visual means in the civic spaces—street names, statues, buildings, and cultural institutions. How do these successive and continuing revisions of historical narrative affect the semiotic reading of contemporary and archival photographs of urban Hungary? This article draws on documentary evidence as well as the author's own experience of growing up in post-communist Hungary, to contextualise both archival photographs and the author's own current photographic practice.

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Reka Komoli, Viewing the new blockhouses

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet occupation of Hungary was a geopolitical trauma that left dislocations across the country's social landscape, reflected in visible scars across its industrial hinterland—the remains of industrial, military, and civilian buildings. A generation after the Soviet empire imploded, these still raw wounds confront us. In my doctoral project I am researching how visual representations of those ruins signify the social trauma that still reverberates in Hungarian society.

The Communist Party in Hungary ruled from 1949 to 1989. After WWII, the Soviet Union abolished the monarchy, removed obstacles to communism, and installed Soviet troops, culminating in the People's Republic of Hungary in August 1949. The Soviet Union imploded forty years later, and heavy industry in north-east Hungary never recovered.

As Orwell (1948) wrote in his fictional critique of socialism, “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.” The meaning of the Soviet remnants has changed, and is changing, in the political dynamic. What Palonen (2008) calls the “city-text” has been a potent political tool before, during, and after the communist period. Urban space is a palimpsest of names, symbols, gestures, and architectural signs that form a city-text that politicians fight over, and visual artists strive to analyse. After the Soviet Union’s collapse, most East-Central European countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia) have been rewriting their history, erasing or modifying the decades of the communist regime (Belavusau & Wójcik, 2018), and Hungary is no exception.

RE-NAMING

A prominent example is the renaming of streets, a common phenomenon across former Soviet countries. Budapest experienced three waves of political street renamings: first after the fall, in 1990; second, in 2010/11 (Palonen (2015, p 63), and third in 2013 (Pók, 2017).



Figure 1: Reka Komoli, Changing of street names

In the aftermath of communism in 1990, the government renamed obviously communist-related public places: Engels Square, Lenin Boulevard, Marx Square, and suchlike. Some communist-linked place names survived this first wave and continued for over two decades, until in 2011 they were finally re-designated, such as Moscow Square.

The third, and perhaps most significant change was brought by Act No. CLXVII of 2012: “the municipalities of Hungary are obliged to forbid the use of the names of persons, institutions and concepts that are connected to the establishment and functioning of authoritarian regimes in the names of public spaces” (Pók, 2017) – a prohibition also applying to words related to communist organizations and ideas. Every offending public space and institution supposedly had to be renamed by the time the law came into force at the beginning of 2013.

Between 2013 and 2017, however, over 2200 names changed. Some names were closely related to the communist regime, but others, especially those related to abstractions, were problematic. In cases of doubt, the municipalities must consult the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA). The list is inconsistent and confusing: “Peace”, “Constitution”, “Liberation”, “Freedom”, “Republic”, and “Martyr” were considered for prohibition.



Figure 2: Reka Komoli, Lenin Avenue

Palonen (2008) sees it as a binary opposition: “The Hungarian method of rewriting the city-text at every

change of political system expunges discredited figures from the landscape. ...The winner takes all and the history-writing becomes rather one-sided and aims to provide an 'official' history." But Foote et al. (2000) see it as more nuanced: "In a departure from earlier political eras, decisions about contested places are issuing from local authorities and private citizens, rather than from the central government. The result is a sometimes subtle rearrangement of public memorials and shrines that interprets the national past by drawing symbolic and spatial parallels between some historical events while rejecting connections among others."

What purpose does renaming serve? According to Pritz (HVG 2013), "The current situation basically reflects two things. One is that politics cannot get rid of 'anti-era' thinking, and its damaging intention to the historical consciousness of society. Meaning that the current political power is trying to hide its own troubles and weaknesses by simplifying and manipulating the historical past, and painting it far more black than anything else".

Valuch (HVG 2013) said, "All of this is just a way to satisfy a perceived political order. Then there will be another kind of company with ideological commitment that will change the names again and give new ones—which we will never learn." Typical is Moscow Square that for two decades didn't trouble anyone until in 2011 it was renamed after Kálman Széll, an unknown Hungarian politician from the Nineteenth Century. The irony, according to Sipos (2017) is that the best endeavours of the Communists to incorporate the heroes and ideology of the proletariat into Hungarian minds went almost as badly as obliging them to learn Russian at school. Nobody remembers the old names. I was in my twenties when the Square was renamed, and I still refer to its old name. Until it was renamed I hadn't really stopped to question why it was named after Moscow, but the disappearance of the familiar name, which I had grown used to since I was a child, now constantly reminds me of the very era that renaming was meant to make us forget. Like Derrida's presence of absence, the invisible trace of the Soviet name subverts the new signifier that has usurped it.

Renaming public spaces has been a political instrument in Hungary for more than a century and a half. The first episodes date to the liberation of Hungary from the Ottoman Empire, when most streets received names of German origin within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the Revolution, 1844-1849, many public places were given Hungarian names, but owing to the failure of this attempt at liberation from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, these names didn't last. The very naming of public places was seen as a revolutionary act. After 1948, streets were renamed again, this time in memory of political figures, words, and dates of communist ideology (Somogyi, 1989).

I remember being confused by my grandparents' referring to Ferenciek Square (named in 1991, after the Eighteenth Century Franciscan Church) as Felszabadulás (Liberation) Square. Not even a decade had been enough for them to get used to the new name. The square was originally two separate spaces, one of them Platea Dominorum (Lords' Street) in the Sixteenth Century, renamed after Szent Péter (Saint Peter Street), then Herrn Gasse (Lord Street) from 1690, Mönchen Gasse (Friars' Street) in the Eighteenth century, then Mönchen Platz (Friars' Square), and Franziskaner Platz (Franciscan Square). The second space was from 1700 Getraydt Marktplatz (Wheat Market Square), from 1730 Weisse Rosen Platz (White Rose Square) or Sebastienplatz (Sebastian Square), from 1788 Schlangen Platz (Snake Square), then it was translated into the Hungarian Kígyó (Snake) Square in 1874, then renamed to Apponyi Square in 1921 (after Albert Apponyi), after which it became Felszabadulás (Liberation Square) which is still lodged in elder minds, until at the end in 1992 the squares joined as Ferenciek Square (Katalin, 2013, p 230). How long will it last?

Maybe until an atheistic government declares that no public place should be named after anything religious.

How much impact does this rewriting have on the collective memory? The authorities believe it has considerable weight, as they are continually investing time and energy in it. We may assume that some people will take it to heart, while others will disregard it, either through force of habit, or through cynicism. There is only anecdotal evidence for whether or not this revisionism of names, although theoretically significant, actually has a widespread effect on the hearts and minds of the citizenry. Generations who were accustomed to a name for decades, are unlikely to learn, or use, the new one. Younger generations will, indeed, use the new names without consciously thinking about it, but after the next wave of re-naming will they do the same? Unlikely. They will probably be stuck with the name that they grew familiar with, politically appropriate or not.

RE-WRITING

Alongside the renaming of public spaces are other attempts to reshape the history of Hungary by “falsifying” historic events.

It wasn't unusual in Eastern-Central European countries to collect the Communist statues and dump them outside the city. That happened in Budapest, too: these statues were relocated in Memento Park for the entertainment of Western tourism (Stevens & Sumartojo, 2014). In 1992, forty-two major Soviet memorials were uprooted and transported to the privately run Memento Park on the edge of Budapest, where visitors pay a high entrance fee to walk among the haphazard collection of statues “separated ... physically and symbolically from their original sites and political meanings” (Foote et al., 1999).



Figure 3: Reka Komoli, A Communist statue removed to memento park

What is more curious is that other statues are being erected in the Hungarian capital, memorials, to whitewash the country's history. One of the most controversial statues is the monument of the "German Invasion of Hungary on March 19th, 1944", representing the German eagle descending on Archangel Gabriel holding the country's Globus Cruciger. The meaning of the monument drew considerable opposition from the public, art critics and historians. The statue presents Hungary as the passive victim of Nazis, which couldn't be further from the truth. As Horvat (2005) wrote, "the monument is based on a falsification of history, it cannot serve its [alleged] function. By presenting the victims of the Holocaust and the collaborators as a single victim, it insults the memory of the victims".

There had been restrictions on Jews from 1920, way before the Germans actually arrived, and their mass abduction and murder wasn't just the German Nazis' doing, the Hungarian government played a big part in it.



Figure 4: The monument of the German Invasion of Hungary on March 19th, 1944, Source: Public domain Hungary

This monument subtly but effectively offers to legitimise far right and nationalist movements. It is not just about the past, but about the present, and the future. By lending support to those who see ethnic cleansing as a valid policy, it insidiously projects a dark agenda.

The role of Horthy (regent of the Kingdom of Hungary 1920-1944) in the extermination of Hungarian Jews is an historical fact, but to 'prove' that Hungary was a 'victim' of German aggression, the government had to separate the regent's name from the Nazis. In the attempt to reshape public memory, not only have new statues of Horthy appeared in Budapest in recent years, but the children are fed the revisionist history by the very few government-approved history books that schools are obliged to choose from (Berend and Clark, 2014). The same history books that present the current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in a positive light include his anti-integration speech against migrants (Nolan, 2016).

I experienced the attempt of distancing from the country's communist past even in everyday life. During my school years, not once did I witness any of the female teachers refusing flowers from male students for women's day on the grounds that it was a "communist holiday", or male teachers refusing to wish "Happy Women's Day!" to female students, even though 8th of March is now accepted as International Women's Day. On some occasions I have encountered similar opposition towards 1st May, again which holiday has an undeniable communist origin but is now internationally accepted.

Another example that I came across during my research is that some families are very keen to deny their connection to an active communist past, and try to suppress even the thought of it. When I tried to collect old communist artefacts and archival photographs, and was directed to someone with a known active ex-Communist-Party member in the family, the connection was often denied, or just explained away as

obligatory.

REPURPOSING

In the midst of cleansing the past, and re-visioning historic events, I can't help but wonder how the abandoned industrial buildings that were so thoroughly infused with the communist ideology will fit into the "new" history of the Hungarian nation? What do we see when we look at the disintegrating remnants of the powerful communist state in countries formerly occupied by the Soviet Union?

Western media shows Socialism's death positively, as opposed to the everyday reality of the people living in the deprived areas. Fukuyama encapsulated capitalist triumphalism: in his article *The End of History?* : "the triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism" (Fukuyama, 1989). He developed this idea in his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such ... That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1992). Fukuyama's trenchant view triggered a continuing debate about the reading of post-socialism: he has been attacked by De Angelis (2007) in his antithetically entitled book *The Beginning of History*, and more recently Badiou's *The Rebirth of History* (2012) and Milne's *The Revenge of History* (2012) reframe Fukuyama's optimism in the context of recent geopolitical traumas. The four Soviet decades brought heavy industry and agricultural collectivisation, mainly in the north-eastern quadrant, which was geographically closest to the USSR, and also the source of industrial materials, resulting in a twisted economical structure. The 1956 rebellion was put down by military force; and, after severe economic decline, the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1989. Troop withdrawals from Hungary completed on 19th June 1991. After the end of the communist regime, the economy fell badly, and in some regions never recovered (Csizmadia, 2008). Decaying Soviet infrastructure now stands as witness to massive deprivation. Would a country that is keen to deny its communist past want to be an example of the socialism's failure through its eyesore industrial buildings?.

Palonen (2013) observed that establishing new cultural buildings became a political tool in Hungary to establish national identity after 1998 when the right won the Hungarian elections. She suggests the government in power (FIDESZ) built new cultural institutions with anti-modernist aesthetics to distance themselves from communists: "Just as in the socialist era or the era of nation-building in the nineteenth century, architecture provided a field to fix a new symbolic landscape or dominant discourse about nationhood and otherness, and emphasise the grip of the national government over the capital city."

In the endeavour to re-establish the national identity, will there be a place for abandoned industrial buildings? Steinmetz (1996) proposes: "six ways of dealing with rubble:

- Demolishing and removing all traces of the remaining structure
- Allowing ruins to continue along their natural course of decay
- Building metacommentaries on ruination into the ruins
- Trying to sustain ruins in their current state

- Building on top of the old structures
- Restoring dilapidated structures to their original condition”



Figure 5: Reka Komoli: Former Soviet power station, 2018

Benjamin ascribes ruinlust to a particular historical war (1618-1648, 8 million deaths) – “the loss of eschatological coherence and divine order in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War and from intense feelings of ‘grief in the face of rubble’ ” (Barndt 2010, p 286; her translation of Benjamin). Piranesi (1720-1778) developed and popularised the elegiac gaze, on which centuries of ruinlust have flowered into the modern internet-based phenomenon of ruinporn and the commodification of ruins for “dark tourism”.

Hungary has seen little memorialisation of the communist era, one exception being the House of Terror, the museum of the former secret police. Instead, the old structures are raided for metal to salvage, or used as a dumping ground for old clothes; or just locked up out of bureaucratic inertia. It remains to be seen whether these shells will disappear and their freight of memories with them, or whether they will preserve the “memory traces of an abandoned set of futures” (Smithson 1967).



Figure 6: Reka Komoli: Former Soviet power station with dumped clothes, 2018

In Eastern Hungary, as in other places with systemic economic collapse, such as Detroit, we see an interruption of the natural cycle of urban decline and renewal, an end to Schumpeter's (1942) creative deconstruction: a "process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one."

Ruins are palimpsests with layered temporality resulting from what Koselleck called "levels of time of differing durations and differentiable origin, which are nonetheless present and effectual at the same time" (Barndt, 2010).

A photograph of a ruined industrial installation is indexical through several layers: the physical shell at a specific time, the episode of its abandonment, the tedious daily existence of workers, and ultimately the politically charged opening. Soviet buildings are deep palimpsests that both bear signs left by engagement with people from multiple generations, and also receive interpretations projected onto them.

MACHINES FOR LIVING IN

While military buildings fell into delapidation as troops withdrew, and industrial buildings disintegrated when the economy receded, homes that might otherwise have been likewise lost are still occupied as people need somewhere to live. Photographic images of blockhouses have stronger emotional resonance than those of industrial and military edifices, as they carry memories of the intimate facts of home life, despite

their deliberately cold, modernist design.

Modernists desired to forget as well as to remember, forget the old city, the monuments, and traditions. For Le Corbusier, forgetting meant literal and figural erasure of the city itself in favour of modern life and its functional monuments.

Soviet buildings were imagined as bringing a better future. Le Corbusier (1887-1965) was known to Soviet architecture from at least 1922, and inspired Moisei Ginzburg (1892-1946), founder of the Constructivist movement. Le Corbusier's ideas fed through into the blockhouses of Hungary, pre-fabricated in Russia and shipped for assembly in Hungary. According to Le Corbusier: "if we eliminate from our hearts and minds all dead concepts of the house, ... we shall arrive at the 'House-machine', the mass-production house, hygienic and beautiful in the same way that the working tools and instruments are beautiful."



Figure 7: Reka Komoli, Viewing the new blockhouses

The 'blockhouse' ('panelház' in Hungarian) is a concrete block of flats, built in the People's Republic of Hungary and other Eastern Bloc countries. This style was cheap, and expressed Le Corbusier's notion that a house is a machine for living in. It was the main urban housing type in the Socialist era (Preisich, 1998), and still dominates Hungarian cityscapes. According to the 2011 census, there were more than 800,000 panel apartments in Hungary (19% of the dwellings) housing almost two million people (18% of the total population) (Hungarian National Statistical Office, 2011).

A post-war housing crisis developed in Hungary owing to rapid population growth and urbanization. The exodus of the rural population after the collectivization in the 1940s/50s from rural areas made Budapest and other cities overcrowded, and the Communist government eventually responded. In the early 1960s Hungary bought the large-panel system from the Soviet Union and Denmark. Soon, Hungarian engineers developed the country's own large-panel system, adapted to the Hungarian situation. The large-panel system permitted rapid construction unhampered by Hungary's cold winters.

The first, experimental panel house was built in the new industrial city of Dunaújváros in 1961, followed by other blocks in Pécs and Debrecen in 1963 (Dénes, 2000). The first precast concrete panel work was finished in 1962 in Dunaújváros, while the first factory for large-panel systems was built in 1965 in Óbuda, Budapest.

Hungarian cities had comprised an historic core surrounded by mostly single-storey buildings and workers' houses, predominantly on unpaved streets. The public housing program of the 1960s changed this. The Communist government demolished the single-storey buildings, replacing them with panel blocks. It also created new neighbourhoods on farmland around the cities (Perényi, 1967).

Panel apartments improved their inhabitants living conditions. Two and three-bedroom sunny apartments with district heating, piped hot water, and flushing toilets replaced what had been predominantly one-bedroom dwellings without modern conveniences (Heim, 1966). According to the 1960 census, one-bedroom flats made up 60% of the dwellings in Budapest; this had decreased to 25% in 1990. During this period, the share of dwellings with three or more bedrooms rose from 9% to 35% (Hungarian National Statistical Office, 1993, 2011). The last panel building was finished three years after the end of communism in Hungary.

Like many of the families I knew, I grew up in these small flats in prefabricated blockhouses. There was one living room and one bedroom, so the children would sleep in the bedroom while the parents would sleep on a fold-out sofa bed in the living room, which involved clearing away furniture every night to make way for the bed, and putting everything back in the morning. (See Tarr, 1982, for a filmic depiction.) There was no privacy, to dwell on one's thoughts. Some people developed the habit of doing their thinking in the toilet cubicle as it was the only place offering a shadow of privacy. It was an intense and despairing experience to grow up in the block houses.



Figure 8: Reka Komoli: Deserted blockhouses, 2018

There are cross-currents of signification attached to the visual form of the Hungarian cityscape. Even as the government played geo-semiotics with the civic names, the citizens themselves fell out of love with the blockhouse and into despair at the endless maze of identical concrete blocks. At first, Hungarians welcomed the Russian developments, and their panel houses, as Hungary was reeling from massive migration from rural areas into rapidly expanded industrial areas in Eastern Hungary. There was an initial optimism and gratitude for free accommodation in the newly built, modern blockhouses, but living and rearing families in them was hard, and dislike of them grew with use. Many young families were pleased with their initial situation, but over time the block houses came to represent oppression and hopelessness. Citizens who had proudly included the blocks in their family photographs yearned to escape. Now, when I photograph empty blockhouses, the uncanny layers of meaning vie to be seen.

CONCLUSION

How to stay objective? Is it even possible?

Buildings have always served as hooks on which to attach memory. The ancient Roman educator Quintillian even proposed using them in the ‘art of memory’, which requires “places, either real or imaginary, and images or simulacra which must be invented” (Quintillian, c 100; Vidler, 1996, p 178). The Soviet buildings of Hungary provided a skeleton that was fleshed out by personal memories during four decades of strict rule. The fall of Communism fractured that skeleton, and reading the ruinscape that was left behind is like

reading a crime scene.

In cross-currents of meaning that blow like winds over the cityscapes, Huyssen (1995, p 7) sees people searching for, or constructing, some kind of “temporal anchoring”, places where individual and collective memory can form a stable defence against the “information overload” and historical amnesia of the incessant babble of social media. Rose-Redwood et al. (2008) likewise emphasise the growing importance of “people’s commemorative decisions and actions as embedded within and constrained by particular sociospatial conditions”, and they write: “Establishing places of memory has also taken on great meaning and value for social actors and groups [...] as they seek to establish the legitimacy of their public identities and histories, particularly in times of political change and conflict” This contrasts with the top-down imposition of revisionism that tends to be the main focus of studies of collective memory in post-communist societies.

The empty buildings, which my photographic project focuses on, are pawns in a geopolitical game of semiotics, played by successive actors who step onto the stage of Hungary’s political life. When I started this research, I saw the buildings just as echoes of the past, portals to the daily life of obedient but resentful Excellent Workers in the Soviet era. Gradually I realised that the ball is still in play, the game is still afoot. The engines of signification—the committees who mull over whether “Liberation” is too communist for modern sensibilities, the protesters who object to Nazi-friendly statues, the newspapers that rake through the haphazard chain of history—these forces are actively playing with names and public symbols. The archival pictures I have found freeze the buildings at one point in time; my own photographs capture the buildings at another point. But the buildings are not inert. They are alive with unheard political battles. My work of historical imagination vibrates with current political movements and clashes.

How can, how should, this modern engagement inform my photographic practice? Should I aim, as Dogan did in her study of industrial ruins in Serbia, to rely on juxtaposing the present and the past? Should I avert my gaze from the complexifying contemporary political debate and concentrate narrowly on the past? The ghosts of the buildings are unlikely to lie still. As Rugoff wrote: “Something happened there that we cannot quite grasp or understand – absence of presence? – an ‘anti-space’, a space of negativity that is haunted.” The post-communist buildings and sites are haunted with a spectral presence that is continuous with modern-day political power struggles. There is no point of discontinuity, separating the past from the present.

“All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary. In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place,” Orwell (1948).

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About the author

Reka is a first-year PhD student in research-led, practice-based photography at Westminster. She previously obtained a Master's Degree in Photographic Studies at the same institution, and before that a Master's Degree in Geography from Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her photographic work has been exhibited in London, New York, Vilnius, and St Petersburg. Questions of identity and the uncanny inform her unique, understated vision. The complex and ambivalent unravelling of the established economic and social order of communist Hungary forms the backdrop of her doctoral research work.