Re-emerging memories: humanitarianism and sovereignty in the Târgu Jiu Camp

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Abstract

This article briefly charts the debates surrounding the afterlife of a heritage space of political violence, the Târgu Jiu camp in Western Romania, and locates the ensuing narratives in the current contestations of the liberal democratic consensus in Central and Eastern Europe. The camp was an important Holocaust site and an equally relevant space for the early communist movement. Contrary to similar sites where competing interpretations of these histories are at play, this camp has been largely absent from debates on public memory of past political violence nationally. The significance of this space for local political history has been silenced. This article concerns itself with the long dynamic of silencing difficult heritage, its causes and implications and the selective perspectives on certain histories it entails. Târgu Jiu is a microcosm of this entanglement. Emerging in Romanian media and public debate at the time of the 2014 "refugee" reception crisis, this newly retrieved collecting memory of the camp capitalized on a history of past internal European displacement, Romanian victimhood and a sense of persecuted national sovereignty. Silencing made room for newer selective histories of this heritage space. Specifically, the complex history of the camp was appropriated into a type of politics of memory that reconfigures narratives about "liberal" values in the region. This article discusses the processes through which liberal, "European" values are appropriated and instrumentalized for the very opposite principles.

Key Words

Europe, heritage, liberal democracy, victimhood

Introduction

Since 2014, the prospect of refugees seeking protection in Europe has encouraged the decade's fiercest debates about the "European way of life" (De Genova 2017; Stone 2018a). The politics of reinforcing EU borders accelerated the rise of radical conservative political actors and discourses that challenge principles of liberal norms and human rights. The same debate also produced a sharp polarization between those allegedly protecting a "common" European ethos against "others" and those showing the evident injustices embedded in this very narrative (Newman 2017). This divide has continued to increase, and has also affected notions of "European" heritage and collective memory (Delanty 2017; Chiara De Cesari et al. 2019). Europe's internal history of migration and refugees generated interest, while it also legitimized opposition to this diversification of "European" heritage (Hennig and Hidalgo 2021). Since the "reception" crisis, heritage spaces that remind us of past political violence, war, genocide, and authoritarianism and how these difficult histories were seemingly overcome in the past, have also illustrated the fragility of principles grounding the liberal European sphere. The "common" heritage that was meant to "thicken" a unique form of Europeanism by rebutting past violence, and education, about it (Müller 2010), now plays a part in the appropriations of these narratives of Europeanism into a complex defence of authoritarian thought.

It was not the first such debate putting heritage and collective memory at the core of the politics of the EU and Europe. Previously, the juxtaposition of victims of the National Socialist regime with those of state socialism triggered fierce disputes on who gets to have their past history of victimhood represented in the European space (Laarse 2013; Ghodsee 2014). However, those disagreements underpinning the "totalitarian" paradigm of remembering

PENSOFT

the victims of two past ideologies did not lead to contestations of the fact that difficult heritage can instil values of European liberal democracy, and liberal narratives of rights and citizenship (Probst 2003). Indeed, it was assumed that more "common" heritage will also strengthen a form of liberal, European conduct. Since the concerns of 2014, the opposite has become increasingly more visible and histories of Europeanism and liberal norms have often been weaponized against this very purpose.

Although Central and Eastern Europe is by no means the only political space where this happens, since the new mainstream right-wing in European politics elsewhere has dwelt on unresolved histories, the "illiberal" politics in the region has specifically operated with a sense of injustice and stoked feelings of victimization (Reynié 2016; Verovšek 2020). A new interest in past histories of violence and internal displacements (for instance, the Soviet invasion of 1956 in Hungary, 1968 across Eastern Europe) emerged primarily as a counter-narrative to the humanitarian liberal consensus defining the European space (Harms 2017; Ost 2019). These events are often of use in political narratives stressing a form of exceptionalism, superiority of purpose and of rights. Oppositional in nature, the interpretation of these histories emphasizes sufferance which has still not been fully unacknowledged within Europe, returns to the grievances of a lost sovereignty and freedom and consequently contests the European liberal consensus. The debate often focuses on certain groups, to show how some have had more rights than others and have been more often acknowledged in the cosmopolitan European ecosystem.

The process of reaching a consensus around liberal norms and ideas about a common sense of Europeanism had been grounded in politics of memory, and specifically in histories of political violence. Yet, museums and other sites have more recently led to a new affirmation of the "us" versus "them" perspective. From spaces of cultivating, even if only performatively, some of the guilt, regret and awareness of the past, engagements with history have transformed (perhaps again, but in a different key) into spaces professing sovereignty (Radonić 2020). Zooming in closer on local debates in Central and Eastern Europe showcases the long life of this dynamic, how the seeds of these narratives have been there since the early 1990s and how "European" heritage and collective memory have always been instrumental in their consolidation.

Illiberalism has posed a challenge to the debates about political narratives and norms of liberal democracy, and so have other movements of the radical-right (Mudde 2019). Scholars have nuanced the view that such iterations represent sudden reactionary bursts of authoritarianism in recent European politics and have shown that these are rooted in processes of liberal democracy of the 1990s (Krastev and Holmes 2020). Older roots of interpretations of democracy in the interwar period also played a part, for instance as civic society and ideas about solidarity were often intertwined with those of the far-right (Riley 2018). Also, authoritarian discourses were closely entwined with those of liberalism, in the economic and cultural spheres. (Wilkinson 2019). There is something to be said about the narratives that have

driven this process. These are no longer about a sovereignty destroyed by others ("occupation") but affirm a type of different path to liberalism, and consequently finding an alternative to the global liberal democratic narratives (Brubaker 2017). Historical narratives are being revised, in a way that professes liberal values, humanitarianism and community.

Retrieving a lost memory

At the time of the crisis of the "reception" of refugees in Europe, Romanian public debates somewhat unexpectedly recovered the history of Târgu Jiu, a former camp situated in an isolated mining area in the Carpathians. The facility had been built in 1939 as a refuge for 6,000 Polish officers, as the regime of King Carol II granted temporary residence rights to approximately 100,000 Polish citizens fleeing deportations and murder in Poland (Michelbacher 2020). The Polish officers were effectively handed over to the Wehrmacht in 1941 as the subsequent regime of Marshal Ion Antonescu pursued its own territorial and racial politics in the region (Solonari 2019). An "internment camp for political opponents", including persecuted Jews, began operating at the site (Poliec 2019). It was also the internment space where the regime sent the communist opposition after 1941, during the Second World War, when the country was an ally of the Axis powers (Ionescu 2015). Since many of the camp's prisoners later became prominent members of the Communist Party, including both leaders of the country, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu, the site enjoyed a privileged status as state propaganda heritage. It illustrated the origins of the Left in the pre-war and the wartime political opposition. The nearby museum, built in the late 1960s, saw generations of schoolchildren learning about the "illegal" political phase of those who had passed through the camp.

Its memorial presence today does not do justice to its complex history. Remains of the camp were destroyed in the late 1960s, with some relevant artefacts moved to the nearby local museum. Only the monumental clock built by departing Polish officers in 1941 testifies today to the existence of the camp. Such absence is symptomatic of the specificity of the Romanian landscape, where as a space of heritage, the camp had elicited no real interest in a fierce and polarized climate of memory after the 1990s. In general, the fact that it has been attributed to "communism" made this camp, and the majority of other such spaces, into "non-sites" of memory, and also led them to being neglected and undeserving of any codification (Sendyka 2016). The intention was to erase anything that had to do with the previous regime. After 1989, silencing the political heritage of state socialism has been part of a legal-moralizing discourse that engaged with leftist authoritarianism only insofar as to show the "success" of breaking with it (Iacob 2019; Neumayer 2019). It was a symbol of the complete change of the political sphere that liberal democracy had permitted, but also in a spirit of fear of the past and an attention to freedom still indebted to Cold War liberalism (Muller 2006). Such a perspective lumped many histories

together. This "criminalizing" memory perspective provided a trope for a nationalist viewpoint praising the newly acquired sovereignty from a foreign political system (Kopeček 2012). It also blurred lines between left and right which led to a general de-politicization of the debate on authoritarianism and a wary relation to political history. All these provided a fertile terrain of misinterpretations.

After this long period of neglect which relegated all socialist heritage to a painful but primarily uncomfortable legacy, in 2014, newspapers and other public outlets retrieved the history of Târgu Jiu. Generally, commentators lamented its invisibility and argued such heritage should be retrieved and repurposed. But, as the government (and much of public opinion) was orienting against accepting refugees on Romanian territory, it was a lost history of Central and Eastern European solidarity and displacement that triggered interest in this silence heritage space. An article in the *Adevărul* daily suggested that this space should be reclaimed as an essential history of past solidarity during the internal European displacement before the Second World War (Ion 2016). The history of Polish refugees on Romanian territory during the war showed an alternate history of solidarity at the time of the (former) East-West rivalry concerning refugee quotas, at a time of fierce debates on the roots of intolerance in the area (Stone 2018b) and a general revival of "whiteness" relation to European identity (Ammaturo 2019). Retrieving the history that this camp stood for presented a positive and more palatable alternative about "humanitarianism" and international solidarity amidst the international outcry against the reluctant and sometimes violent politics of border control in Central and Eastern Europe (Krastev 2017).

This revisitation of Târgu Jiu as a symbol of past "humanitarianism" poses interesting questions about the complicated canvas of silences, polarization and repoliticization in memory politics of past political violence that have shaped the prospects of liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. The rediscovered roots and the heritage of humanitarianism became instrumental in locating and nostalgically emphasizing a long tradition of a liberal-oriented mindset during the interwar period. The refugee narrative was folded into a transnational dynamic of histories of past authoritarianism that encourages a linear framing of collective memory around ideals of human rights (Moses 2012; Moyn 2012). Arguably, these selective interpretations were only bolstered by a lack of a substantial debate about the meaning and legacy of the dominance of anti-communist opposition as a memorial focus, and an absence of reflection on past right-wing authoritarianism and the Holocaust in Romanian debates (Cârstocea 2021). Those pursuing the debate were now retrieving the camp as a usable heritage site in efforts to construct a past liberal democracy, by investigating this refugee history as an opportunity to expand on the government's rightful actions during the Second World War.

Sovereignty

It was not the war, but the post-war usage of the camp, synonymous with the political beginnings of the state socialist regime, which had triggered its erasure from public narratives. Around 2014, however, this long silencing of the Târgu Jiu camp was replaced by a more "useful" approach to the past in the regional recalibration of the politics of memory around the topic. An exhibition organized by the Polish government in early 2018 in the nearby museum stoked the memory of past state tragedies to an equal degree for both sides: for the Polish government, the camp signified the exodus caused by the Soviet invasion, while for Romanian authorities, it emphasized commendable past responses to other refugee situations. It mainly referred to the so-called Polish-Romanian Alliance of 1921, a defence pact between the two countries, that permitted the evacuation of the Polish Army through the port of Constanța and military support in case of invasion (Steiner 2005: 931). This anti-communist perspective emphasized state sovereignty and autonomy, two instrumental narratives in the current illiberal turn (Walker 2021). "Sovereignty" has been de-politicized and linked to a "rebirth" of democracy, into which was inserted the cultural and political narratives about the triumph of the political transformation to liberal democracy in the early 1990s. However, the sovereignty of national territory has long been one of the most valuable tropes in defending past right-wing authoritarianism in Romania (Endresen 2011; Cârstocea 2019; Zavatti 2021).

Târgu Jiu was built at the height of a political conflict triggered by the affinity of the Romanian Kingdom for Nazi Germany. Society was generally divided in relation to the prospect of war, but the Antonescu government played on nationalist sentiments by arguing that war was unavoidable due to the necessity of retrieving the territories of Bessarabia and Bukovina, lost to the advancing Soviet Army (Solonari 2009, 2019). Officials defended the potential for war in distinctly territorial terms, especially after the dismembering of Czechoslovakia in 1938; war was inevitable and even necessary in order to preserve state sovereignty. Poland, whose alliance with Romania against the USSR dating from 1921 had formed part of both interwar governments' nationalist discourse, shared the same basis of foreign policy at the time, namely that its independence and territorial integrity were "threatened" (Steiner 2005). Territorial integrity was an argument that proved as significant for the xenophobic discourse of the Iron Guard as it was for successive nationalist governments since the end of the 1920s (Clark 2015). The silencing of the memory of the camp, combined with the depoliticization of the debate about its politics led to situations like those of 2014, when these past usages of sovereignty could be forcefully ignored.

Wrapped together with this sovereignty narrative were pragmatic mechanisms of exclusion, and the history of Târgu Jiu speaks about this tension. "Refugees" were useful to fulfil humanitarian obligations as a neutral state but also a means of prolonging the formal collaboration with France and the United Kingdom, who had pledged to guarantee the independence of the Kingdom of Romania (Hehn 2002: 327–330). Furthermore, records of the Romanian Gendarmerie and the police, in fact, suggest that Antonescu feared the general opposition that the arrival

of refugees might instigate in the country. ("Information note", Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 372, 23.04.1940, NAR). The presence of Polish refugees in Romania was perceived as a liability for Antonescu's pragmatic political narrative that sovereignty was frail and that anything might prompt actions from Nazi Germany. Hosting Polish refugees could have incited retaliation from the Iron Guard who opposed helping a group already seen as political competitors. There were, for instance, attempts to curtail potential dissent in the camp, evident in the decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers in 1941 ("Decision of Marshal Ion Antonescu", 23.o3.1940, NAR) to appoint a "praetor" whose role was to respond to the potential complaints of the local population, including those related to the camp (22-66/1942, National Archives of Romania).

Given the anti-royalist dissatisfaction expressed by workers in the area, there were also explicit attempts to discourage contact with the world outside the camp. The actions taken by the police show that they closely observed those living in the villages around the camp ("Information Note", IGJ, 9501983/1940, NAR). This politics also applied to momentary spats regarding economic exchanges between officers in the camp and locals or the Polish officers' "clandestine" political activities in 1939. The local police monitored the officers closely, while the Gendarmerie kept political organizations emerging in the camp under surveillance. For instance, the disappearance of Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły (Commander in Chief of the Polish Forces) made authorities wary of the emigration of Polish officers from the camp, with transit visas to the Black Sea issued in the camp ("Information note from Târgu Jiu", IGJ, 18/1940). The camp therefore speaks less of a history of "humanitarianism", and more of a pragmatic politics of compromise.

Authoritarianism and opposition

The first prisoners in Târgu Jiu were those opposing the corporatist royal regime and then the Antonescu regime. Târgu Jiu had been an important space of repression during the Antonescu regime: the Jewish community, communists and socialists, anti-war proponents and anti-fascists were detained next to members of the far-right Iron Guard movement after the organization fell out with the Antonescu regime in January 1941. But this working-class dynamic had been an aspect generally overlooked in 2014, in articles discussing the relevance of Târgu Jiu. The debate left little room to present the interior opposition against war-time politics (notably coming from the communist circles), despite the fact that records from the camp show the intense anti-fascist political activity of inmates, as well as the outreach of manifestos leaving the camp ("Manifest pacifist", Acțiunile deținuților politici comuniști și antifasciști din închisori și lagăre, 1115 /1943, NAR). Those in the camp were an important voice for the opposition operating at national level and the network of opponents active in large cities. This dynamic erased the opposition and the polarizing climate against the corpo-

rate authoritarianism of the interwar period, which overlapped with the massive class disenchantment against the political establishment and the early roots of socialism. The authoritarian streak of the regime was, in fact, minimized and explained as a general consequence of the conditions of war, as the recovered heritage debate on Târgu Jiu avoided addressing the strong opposition against the growing authoritarianism of the monarchy at that time.

It was evidently the selective silences of the 1990s framed by the legacies of Cold War "totalitarianism" and the continuous reluctance in collective memory debate to engage with the heritage of the left that had contributed to these overlaps. This type of discourse perpetuated, in reality, the minimal interest in the origins of the ideology of the interwar national working-class movement and the opposition to authoritarianism (Totok 2010). This is all the more paradoxical since the entire region of Târgu Jiu was known as the site of the first widespread protests against the communist regime in 1979. But given the focus on the "state" as a liberal, renewed construction after 1989, both such histories seemed to lessen the triumphal narrative of the (neo) liberal transformation. The situation was further complicated by the fact that in the early 1990s, thousands of workers from this mining area participated in street protests orchestrated to support the newly appointed provisional Romanian government. The violent street clashes in Bucharest in June 1990 discredited any working-class political resistance angle. The area, in itself, otherwise a potent space of heritage of the workers' movement, was effectively limited to a debate about the "winners" and the "losers" of 1989.

This situation and dynamic more broadly led to a normalization of the local far-right and made the history of the Iron Guard, the nationalist far-right movement, more acceptable (Zavatti 2021). This was evident during the 2014 debate when the history of the Iron Guard's role in the camp was effectively silenced. Members of the far-right Iron Guard, communist and Jewish inmates cohabitated in the camp after the Iron Guard rebellion of January 1941 (16, 14/1942, IPJ, RNA) and caused tensions for other categories of inmates. Furthermore, in August 1941, many Iron Guard members were released from the camp after the facility scrutinized authorities for preferential access and treatment. For instance, an inmate who paid to be allowed to stay in the camp (which shows it offered a better chance of survival) spoke about the free movement of certain prisoners in the camp ("Information note from Târgu Jiu", IGJ, 12, 14/1942, NAR). The interventions at the time continued to be explained by the regime as resulting from the general chaos caused by the war rather than from the politics of the era and tends to absolve the actions of the Iron Guard organization. These explanations refrain from using labels such as fascist or extreme right and depoliticize the ideological roots of the movement.

The Holocaust

Equally, and perhaps most strikingly, the history of ethnic exclusion was erased from the debate in 2014, when

advocates of retrieving this heritage focused on an alleged element of humanitarianism of the Romanian government at the beginning of the Second World War. Its later history, which testifies to the racialized politics of Romanianization, and which saw the Jewish community increasingly ousted and later deported to Transnistria, was silenced (Ionescu 2015). Indeed, in 1940, under the National Legionary State, the Iron Guard became a legal political entity led by Horia Sima and shared the leadership with Antonescu, the de-facto head of state (Cârstocea 2019). In the winter of 1941, disputes over the spoils of Jewish property resulted in open street clashes, widespread arrests and imprisonment of the Iron Guard "brotherhood", and pogroms against the Jewish community. The policy towards the Jewish community was part of the source of long-standing tensions between the leader of the Iron Guard, Horia Sima, and the Antonescu government (Solonari 2009). There were structural variations in the way Antonescu framed these persecutions: on the one hand, part of a national war effort and on the other, these persecutions and requisitions were only the result of the personal interests of Horia Sima and were consequently detrimental to the Romanian economy. It was another way in which far-right and right-wing authoritarianism are often easily absorbed into contemporary liberal narratives. Evidently, the way the remembrance of refugees in Târgu Jiu came about in public debate reproduced a perspective which has constantly "normalized" Antonescu's far-right policies (Cârstocea 2021).

The Jewish history of Târgu Jiu and its history as a station for the deportations to Transnistria has been ignored, despite the fact that in June 1941, an order issued by the Antonescu government which stated that all members of the Jewish community aged between 18 and 60 in the villages between Siret and Prut were to be "evacuated", also changed the life in the camp. Most deportees arrived at Târgu Jiu (Solonari 2009) and from there Jews and "communists" alike were further deported to the camps in Transnistria. There are also testimonies of individuals who, after they were allowed to return from Transnistria in early 1944, were again imprisoned in Târgu Jiu (Megargee and White 2018). The widespread circulation of testimonies of those deported to Transnistria during the 1946 trial of war criminals nurtured Jewish memory temporarily. Yet, as communist historiography did little to emphasize the ethnicity of the activists before the political takeover in 1948, the importance of Târgu Jiu in the persecution of the Jewish community was effaced at a time when the history of the camp was of interest (Cârstocea 2014). These broader memorial dynamics around the far-right thus enabled the humanitarian perspective expressed around 2014 to reiterate the silence of the 1990s regarding the involvement of the Romanian authorities in the Holocaust. The way this old narrative of sovereignty was pocketed into the discourse around the refugee debate in 2014 demonstrates how the history of the Shoah and that of the far-right are conditioned by the anti-communist perspective of the 1990s. Furthermore, this perspective perpetuates narratives about territorial integrity and state sovereignty which can be easily instrumentalized.

Interestingly, the memory of the war as a collaboration forced by compromise and dictated by necessity perpetuated a relatively benign perspective on the authoritarian far-right. It had been a long process. In the 1970s, driven by the increasingly nationalist tinge of the Ceaușescu regime, the regime of Marshal Ion Antonescu was retrieved as an icon of sovereign territoriality and an "essence" of the Romanian spirit (Shafir 2014; Cazan 2018). This did not mean, however, that exiled members of the Iron Guard, who at the time of the Cold War were strident "anticommunist" voices against the regime, were eyed any less suspiciously by the state apparatus. Given this somewhat paradoxical overlap, the "anti-fascist" narrative of the new communist ideology found legitimacy in the idea of the myth of national integrity rather than in a past common (fascist) enemy (García et al. 2016). Furthermore, members of the Iron Guard who did not flee to the West or Latin America, carefully monitored by the communist state apparatus, were rather quietly integrated into the working class (CNSAS, 562/1973).

Heritage and silence

There is something to be said about this re-adaptation of politics of heritage, through the ebbs and flows of the European narrative of two totalitarianism. As much as this perspective has been grounding much of the remembrance of political violence, the ambition to represent past difficult histories as an opposite image of contemporary liberal democracy has had its shortcomings. With the increasing disputations of inequality, injustices integral to the global liberal, more nuanced understandings of how the history of this consensus forms narratives is important. Renewed debates about sovereignty, for instance, have long relied on an anti-communist vision that equates the history of state socialism with "occupation" and tends to reinstate a sense of persecution and of victimhood (Ghodsee 2014). But, as legacies pointing to the triumph of the 1989 are being increasingly challenged in recent contestations of the liberal democracy consensus, the silencing of the histories of this type of heritage, touching on both narratives of the right and of the left, lends itself primarily to appropriations of the right. It is not incidental that anticommunism is today one of the new tropes of repoliticization of authoritarianism as alternative, rather than "opposite". The defensive type of vision of democracy it encourages, that often looks back to conservative idealizations of the past, emerged early in the 1990s, with a heritage of political violence as the main space to perform and re-enact these.

The story of Târgu Jiu emerged at a time when the crucial narrative about liberalism and triumph of liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe was being challenged, from the inside. It was, at the same time, a currency in international debates about the political right. These political storylines blend well with ideas about national character, of a civic opposition and solidarity and perpetuated by a selective, cautious and essentialist idea about authoritarianism and the far-right. Because the authoritarian and far-right narratives are masked behind more appealing themes, important

constituent political discourses like ethno-nationalism or anti-Semitism are lost. Furthermore, they come to be identified with a form of local democratic conjecture that makes it even more difficult to disentangle political sides or agents from a general conservative politics (Riley 2010).

But the manner in which the "silence" on Târgu Jiu was broken suggests that the long afterlife of the narrative about sovereignty led to a rose-tinted perspective on the roots of inter-war liberalism and an exculpatory narrative of authoritarianism, one that disregards strong authoritarian nationalism as a central element fuelling right-wing politics in the 1930s. While it perpetuates a memorial narrative about earnest attempts to maintain state sovereignty, it effectively does away with the size and scope of the crisis of democracy in the inter-war period.

Conclusion

In this sense, the 2014 debate retrieving the history of Târgu Jiu shows a different trajectory of the heritage of political violence in Europe, which is no longer about upholding European liberal values, but can be appropriated to perpetuate biased political narratives while aiming to convey a story about a successful liberal and sovereign statehood. Authoritarian histories are now being revisited to "perform" rather than simply explain a history of humanitarianism. The debate about Târgu Jiu suggests that the collective memory politics weaved around ideas of liberal democracy can be weaponized and used to adapt or depoliticize narratives of the far-right and right-wing authoritarianism. Ideas of sovereignty and autonomy against authoritarianism can lend themselves to praise for this very same politics.

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