

BOOK REVIEWS

**Ed. Kata Bohus, Peter Hallama, and Stephan Stach.
*Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism: Remembering the
Holocaust in State-Socialist Eastern Europe.***

**Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022. vii, 327 pp.
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Was there space for Holocaust commemoration, for expression of Jewish victimhood in the socialist states of central and eastern Europe following World War II? Yes, there was, this book argues, and it has thus far been overlooked. The historical narrative, editors Kata Bohus, Peter Hallama and Stephan Stach argue, is dominated by the view that the socialist states of central and eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, suppressed Holocaust memory. Their authoritarian governments framed the war in rigid ideological terms as a battle between fascism and antifascism, which did not allow for discussion of Jewish victimhood. However, this view, the editors write, is mistaken. Their main argument is twofold. For one, antifascism was not a monolithic doctrine. Rather, its meaning changed over time and varied regionally, as the countries (which had very different war experiences) adapted it to their specific domestic contexts. Secondly, the editors acknowledge that more recent scholarship on the early postwar years has challenged the “myth of silence” narrative (that Holocaust memory was entirely suppressed in the European socialist states). Yet they argue that for the decades following the late 1940s (when Soviet-style communist regimes were established in central and eastern Europe), the idea that antifascist ideology suppressed Holocaust memory continues to prevail in the historiography.

The book’s aim is to show that this was not the case. The volume consists of twelve chapters. Part one, titled “Historiography,” with contributions by Katarzyna Person, Agnieszka Żółkiewska, Peter Hallama, and Benjamin Lapp examines how historians, archivists and editors in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR were able to publish documents and studies on the Holocaust. Part two, titled “Sites of Memory,” with contributions by Kata Bokus, Gintarė Malinauskaitė, and Yechiel Weizman discusses martyr memorial services within the Hungarian Jewish community, limited Holocaust representation at the Ninth Fort Museum in Kaunas, and material Jewish remnants (deserted cemeteries and ruined synagogues) in communist Poland. Part three, titled “Artistic Representations,” interrogates how the Holocaust was rendered in literature and art, with contributions by Anja Tippner on the Soviet writer Anatolii Rybakov, Daniel Véri on state-commissioned Holocaust-related art in Hungary, and Richard S. Esbenshade on representations of the Holocaust in mass-market

socialist literature in Hungary. Part four, titled “Media and Public Debate,” with contributions by Alexander Walther, Miriam Schulz, and Stephan Stach analyzes the role of journalists and media more generally in the production and reception of Holocaust memory in the GDR, the Soviet Union, and Poland. Audrey Kichelewski summarizes and discusses the volume’s findings.

This is an important book, one that complicates scholarly understandings of the ways in which the Holocaust could, and was remembered in the socialist states of central and eastern Europe. The focus is on Poland, Hungary, the GDR, the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia. The individual case studies are carefully researched, deeply empirical, and nuanced in their presentation. Particularly noteworthy is the shift in perspective that the book puts forth: instead of focusing on what was *not* possible, the individual chapters focus on what was possible under socialism. In doing so, the authors convincingly show that within the official narrative of the war as a struggle against fascism, many historical actors—writers, artists, historians, and others—were able to create (limited) knowledge about Jewish suffering, at times even broadening the boundaries of official discourse.

I am not sure, though, if the term “multidirectional memory,” coined by Michael Rothberg and applied by the editors to describe these processes, really fits that well. Writing about Holocaust memory and the legacies of colonial violence in democratic states, Rothberg has proposed to think of collective memory not as competitive but as multidirectional, as “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private” (14). Similar processes, the editors argue, took place in socialist central and eastern Europe. Instead of conceptualizing the memory of World War II here as “communist” falsification of history versus “authentic” but suppressed Holocaust memory, multidirectional connections existed between the antifascist narrative and Holocaust memory. The editors argue that Holocaust memory was neither necessarily repressed nor in competition with other memories. Rather, “politicized representations of the Holocaust” constituted a “form of adaptation to the structure of public discourse” in socialist central and eastern Europe (15).

The reason why I am not entirely convinced that multidirectional memory fits well is that it suggests a symmetry between historical actors, one in which power imbalances and hierarchies do not matter significantly. But as the individual contributions make clear, even if one focuses on what was possible under socialist authoritarianism, Jewish suffering remained marginalized, and a lot had to be omitted, rephrased, or only hinted at to be able to conform to the state-regulated war narrative. Indeed, while some of the authors use the term multidirectional memory, others do not. At least in the case of the Soviet Union, “hierarchical heroism” and “universal suffering” remained the cornerstones of the larger Soviet war narrative, as Amir Weiner has shown previously (*Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*, 2001). It therefore would have been particularly interesting to see if artistic and scholarly efforts to broaden the boundaries of official war discourse influenced how the history of the war was represented in schoolbooks—arguably one of the main means through which authoritarian governments present, teach and (try to) impose their version of history. In Czechoslovakia, for example, as Peter Hallama shows, the Holocaust continued to be marginalized in school textbooks. It is difficult to say, then, as Richard S. Esbenshade writes, whether skewed presentations of the Holocaust contributed to the repression of memory or whether they also facilitated the development of multidirectional memory. Nevertheless, it is one of the main achievements of this important edited volume that it productively opens up the question if multidirectional memory was possible in authoritarian states—through empirically rich, fresh perspectives on the development of Holocaust memory in the socialist states of central and eastern Europe.