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Resurgent Antisemitism:  
The Threat of Viktor Orban and His Political Arsenal

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis will analyze the role and prevalence of antisemitism in Hungary across various time periods to better understand the populist foundation of the modern crisis. Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his Fidesz government rely on antisemitic tropes to maintain political power and realize their authoritarian vision for the nation. By investigating Hungarian history from World War I through the communist era, this thesis will develop a historical framework to better understand recent events and why they are so troubling. Next, the modern context will be examined to uncover Orban's tactical use of antisemitism and historical revisionism. Orban's tactics leave minority communities in Hungary, especially the nation's large Jewish community, vulnerable to nationalist outbursts and undermine democracy.

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## Introduction

In March of 2018, Prime Minister Viktor Orban rose to the podium and addressed a roaring crowd on the anniversary of one of the nation's founding moments, the Revolution of 1848. Hungarian flags were flying proudly in the hands of the thousands who had gathered to celebrate their national heritage. But this event sparked outrage from international observers. Instead of celebrating the tolerant vision of the revolution's leader, Lajos Kossuth, for a multi-ethnic Hungarian alliance, Orban lashed out at Jewish influence in the nation and decried the invasion of migrants into Europe. When thousands of Hungarian Jews took up arms in the Revolution of 1848 along Christian Hungarians, they fought for Jewish inclusion in the Kingdom of Hungary and full citizenship. This future was realized on the battlefield and endured over decades of coexistence and Jewish assimilation into mainstream Hungarian culture. This dream-like state was shattered in the aftermath of the First World War, when Jews encountered repression and eventually, in the early 1940s, genocide.

This change occurred quite quickly from a historical perspective. In less than 25 years a society accepting Jewish life and culture transformed into a frenzy of violence. Decades later the Orban government continues to deny crimes committed by Hungarians against their Jewish neighbors. Hungarian nationalists remain obsessed with revoking the Treaty of Trianon and restoring territories Hungary had to cede after the Great War. This ultra-nationalist sentiment still fuels Hungarian political rhetoric today. One man in particular, Prime Minister Viktor Orban, understands perfectly how to exploit these nationalist emotions for his own political gain, which can only be seen as detrimental to one of Europe's largest Jewish populations.

The rise of extreme nationalism as a political force in Hungary mirrors similar trends emerging across Europe and even in the United States. Antisemitic incidents are increasing. Violent antisemitism remains rare in Hungary, but the frequency of these acts across the continent and around the world should betrays a crisis of democracy.

This thesis will explore the themes of authoritarianism, antisemitism, and historical revisionism, as these dangerous phenomena represent the basis for dehumanization campaigns that have deadly consequences. More importantly, there is an increasing need to highlight and identify antisemitic statements, as time passes and the horrors committed during the Holocaust fade into memory. Revisionist historians and nationalist governments challenge and shape Holocaust memory. While the resurgent tide of antisemitism and authoritarianism reveals what may be a bleak future for the Jews and other minority groups in Hungary, it is not too late to counter the narrative and prevent another tragedy. Viktor Orbán represents a threat to every aspect of an open society in Hungary. With democratic institutions and human rights under attack, it is essential to monitor this situation and prevent any further damage. While awareness is an important step, it is also essential to stop Orbán and his vision for an authoritarian Hungary and instead promote the creation of a society with guaranteed protections and liberty for those who are most vulnerable.



## Chapter 1

### The Historical Framework

#### 1.1: The Assimilated Jews of the Austro-Hungarian Empire

The historical situation of Jews in Hungary varied greatly before full emancipation was granted in 1867. Common in the history of Jewish communities, some rulers were kind to their Jewish subjects, but coexistence rarely seemed to last for long before the Jews were cast out, murdered, or abused by their gentile neighbors.<sup>1</sup> The story of Hungary's Jews follows a similar path. This overview will begin on the eve of the First World War because it brought an end to an era of mutual acceptance in Hungary. The most striking aspect before the war was how assimilated Hungarian Jews were. These Jews committed themselves fully to the Magyar nation, supplying some 20,000 soldiers during the revolution of 1848. The ruling elite of Hungarian society repaid the Jewish sacrifice with their full-fledged support for Jewish emancipation and equality by 1867.<sup>2</sup> By 1895, "the Seim passed a law recognizing Judaism as equal to the other religious denominations."<sup>3</sup> The legalization of not only political, but religious equality is crucial, as elsewhere in Europe most Jews were being offered political emancipation under the stipulation that they abandon their Jewish identity to become citizens of the nation-state. In Hungary, where the ruling elites had no reason to fear their Jewish subject's loyalty, this step was tossed aside. In his book, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, historian Ezra Mendelsohn notes that the Jews of Hungary resembled the Jews of Germany in their level of assimilation and

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Levy, *Antisemitism in the Modern World* (Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company, 1991), 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

that they had earned the title of, “Magyars of the Mosaic persuasion.”<sup>4</sup> The average title pinned to Jews living among gentiles is rarely a badge of honor, but as ‘Magyars of the Mosaic persuasion,’ Hungarian Jews were recognized as first-class citizens who were ready to demonstrate their loyalty, with many going so far as to adopt Hungarian names in place of their traditional Jewish or German names.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that the Jews, protected by the Magyar elites who firmly controlled their part of the empire, were enthusiastically assimilating into an accepting culture. But were there factors that made Hungarian Jewry unique and therefore unlike their neighbors scattered across European nations? One unique area of Hungarian Jewish life was the reform minded Neolog movement that developed late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The movement separated itself from more conservative (Orthodox) Jewish elements that were more common across East Europe and firmly placed the Jewish community within the context of their Hungarian identity. In her article titled “Hungarian Nationalism and the Origins of Neolog Judaism,” Mari Rethelyi argues that the Neolog movement specifically branded itself as Hungarian, although it followed the Reform movements from German speaking areas.<sup>6</sup> This conscious effort to appeal to their Hungarian patriotism further highlights the efforts made by Hungarian Jews to prove their loyalty was to the Hungarian state and not a broader Jewish identity. Neolog Judaism did not represent the majority of Jews in Hungarian territories until the end of the First World War, when hundreds of thousands of formerly Hungarian Jews, mostly rural Orthodox Jews, found themselves listed as citizens of new territories. Despite the success of integration and the support that came from the

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<sup>4</sup> Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>6</sup> Mari Rethelyi, "Hungarian Nationalism and the Origins of Neolog Judaism." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 18, no. 2 (2014): 67-68.

top of the Magyar elites, World War I and its immediate aftermath would shatter the unity of Jewish-gentile relations in the new Hungarian nation state.

This fracture was envisioned by Theodore Herzl, the leader of the Zionist movement in Europe and a native of Hungary. In 1903 he prophetically proclaimed, “The hand of fate shall also seize Hungarian Jewry. And the later this occurs, and the stronger this Jewry becomes, the more cruel and hard shall be the blow, which shall be delivered with greater savagery. There is no escape.”<sup>7</sup> Herzl envisioned no safe haven for Hungary’s Jews while they remained in the nation, of course he would advocate safety existed through emigration to Palestine. Although emigration would have been Herzl’s answer for all of Europe’s Jews, in 1903, Hungarian Jews were uniquely positioned, and Herzl’s warning seemed more appropriate for the Jews of other nations. Why would a Jewish population that was known as ‘Magyars of the Mosaic persuasion’ fear those very same Magyars? As a further review of the subsequent years will show, there was much to fear boiling under the surface of society.

## **1.2: Bela Kun and the Treaty of Trianon**

Following a humiliating defeat on the battlefields of World War I, the post-1918 Hungarian state would suffer further humiliations during peace time. Hungary emerged from the war with a short-lived experiment in democratic government. Although Hungary was rich with nationalistic history, democratic government was new to the nation and it soon collapsed. Communists led by

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<sup>7</sup> Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, 94.

Bela Kun established a Soviet Republic in Budapest in late March 1919. The Soviet Republic was short-lived, succumbing to foreign intervention and internal counter-revolution in August, but the legacy it left behind would prove disastrous far beyond the end of Kun's 134-day communist rule.

Bela Kun had been mobilized during World War I and after being captured by the Russians in 1916, soon converted his allegiances to the cause of the revolution of the international proletariat. After being released back to Hungary following the war, he mobilized political supporters. He was arrested by the Hungarian government, but able to seize power with the help of his supporters.

Crucially, Kun was of Jewish origin. Although he himself refuted this charge in 1919, claiming, "My father was a Jew but I am no longer one, for I became a socialist and a Communist."<sup>8</sup> A major aspect of Jewish-Hungarian relations had been the self-identification of the Jews. They chose to identify themselves as Magyars first, while also highlighting their Jewish faith. In this instance, when Kun wished to shirk his Jewish identity, he was unable to. He also appealed to the socialist and communist side of his identity, which would only further disintegrate his identity as a Hungarian. Instead, for many nationalists Bela Kun represented not only a Jew, but Hungarian Jews more specifically, despite his best attempts to self-identify in a radically different way.

Bela Kun's regime included several other individuals of Jewish origin. By some counts over 20 of his ministers and high-ranking officials were Jewish or identified by the Hungarian public as Jewish.<sup>9</sup> For many, especially right-wing nationalist, there was no difference between

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 95.

communists and Jews and the high representation of Jews in the regime fueled this narrative. Scholars of antisemitism have shown that an alleged Jewish influence or power is often associated with gentile leaders who are falsely depicted as “Jewish.” It is important to note that Kun and his supporters no longer saw themselves as Jewish. As a result of the short-lived Soviet Republic, antisemitism flowed back into the mainstream of Hungarian politics and society, an ominous development for Hungarian Jewry.

The journal kept by Major General Harry Hill Bandholtz corroborates this analysis. The American military officer was sent to Hungary to oversee the Romanian invasion that helped topple Bela Kun. The Americans would undergo their own Red Scare in this era and stamping out Communism was a major goal for the Allied powers, especially in Hungary where the Kun regime was viewed as relatively weak. General Bandholtz’s journal was published after his death. He never intended it to become public, making it a valuable source because he provides unmoderated insights. On September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1919, General Bandholtz recorded,

“On Saturday, a Colonel Nathan Horowitz reported me, despite the fact that I had previously telegraphed in code to Paris that it was inadvisable to send an officer of Jewish faith to Hungary at this time. In writing General Bliss about the matter, I explained to him that although all Bolshevists were not Jews nor were all Jews Bolshevists, nevertheless Béla Kun, the Hungarian Bolshevist leader, practically all his lieutenants, and most of his followers, were Jews, and as a result the people of Hungary were simply furious and determined to rid themselves of the Semitic influence. We have also heard reports about the Hungarians starting pogroms in several places.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Harry Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary* (Safety Harbor: Simon Publications, 2000), 80.

The reluctance of American commander to include an American Jewish officer on his staff at the time illustrates the extent of antisemitism. General Bandholtz even goes so far as to claim that most of the followers of the Bolshevik regime were also Jews. He does clarify that not all Jews are Bolsheviks, and indeed many Hungarian Jews were influential in the business community present in Budapest, but this is still a rather alarming statement. Another important aspect of his journal entry is that he cites the pogroms that were occurring in Hungary in response to the Bolshevik government. He does not say that communists were being attacked, but rather Jews, even though he admirably notes that not all Jews are communists.

Although the above explanation seems straight forward, for some Bela Kun's short rule does not represent a key turning point in Jewish-gentile relations because the hatred existed before the failed communist takeover and merely came to the surface as a result of the coup in 1919. According to Janos Kovacs, "the usual explanation of the rise of Hungarian antisemitism after the first World War, namely, that it was caused by the preponderance of Jews in the Communist regime of Bela Kun, does not quite suffice."<sup>11</sup> Kovacs argues that although there were certainly antisemitic reactions to Bela Kun, those reactions do not represent a new movement in Hungary. Instead of looking at the pre-war environment and seeing a Jewry that was well defended, he sees a fragile alliance that was shattered by the loss in the Great War, rather than brought out by the Jewish led coup. Kovacs further remarks that, "There can be no doubt that political antisemitism would have made its appearance in post-1919 Hungary even if Bela Kun's commissars had all been archbishops."<sup>12</sup> It does seem clear that other factors present in Hungarian society could have led to an increase in antisemitism after 1919, but it is not

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<sup>11</sup> Janos Kovacs, "Neo-Antisemitism in Hungary," *Jewish Social Studies* 8, no. 3 (1946): 152.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-153.

immediately clear that the impact of Bela Kun's regime should be dismissed outright. Such a prominent display of 'Jewry' is sure to have had an impact on a nation that was naturally searching for scapegoats. As Kovacs even admits, after the Treaty of Trianon went into effect, Hungary was left with only the Jews as a major minority group, "Perhaps if Hungary had not lost its national minorities, the full force of the attack might not have been directed toward the Jews; but with Rumanians, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats and Ruthenians gone, Jewry became the scapegoat."<sup>13</sup> With Jews as the only available scapegoat, they were left vulnerable to the nationalist violence that occurred. The political reaction to Kun was significant, as it facilitated the rise of the antisemitic leader Miklos Horthy to Regent of Hungary. In addition, I would agree that Bela Kun and his communist experiment do not represent a sufficient condition to explain the persistence of antisemitism in post-war Hungary, but the Soviet Republic episode cannot be dismissed.

Before addressing Regent Horthy directly, it is crucial to review the Treaty of Trianon, signed by Hungary on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1920. While the treaty was officially ratified in 1920, its effects had been in place to some extent since the end of hostilities in 1918. Czechoslovakia and Romania invaded and occupied territories in 1918 that would be turned over to their control legally two years later. The treaty had radical effects on what was now to be viewed as the Hungarian state,

"Of a prewar population of 21 million, Trianon separated 13,356,000 or 63.6 percent of Hungary's population to the states that succeeded the Habsburg Empire. Of the 125,600 square miles of the Hungarian kingdom, Hungary lost 89,700 square miles, or 71.4 percent of its territory, leaving the nation a population of 7.6 million with 35,900 square

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 152.

miles of territory... Of the Hungarian-speaking population of 10,050,575, as many as 3,219,579 went to the Successor States: 1,704,851 to Rumania, 1,063,020 to Czechoslovakia, 547,735 to Yugoslavia, and 26,183 to Austria.”<sup>14</sup>

These territorial adjustments were immense and deeply impacted not only the nation physically but had a scarring effect on the national psyche. The loss of territory went far deeper than lines on a map of Europe, with many ethnic Hungarians finding themselves in newly developed nations that deeply resented them for years of imperial control. Hungary was left feeling helpless to defend its own citizens, who now found themselves separated by borders that had not previously existed. Just like Hitler’s claims to the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia, a Hungarian claim over these lands would continue based on the idea that areas filled with ethnic Hungarians should belong to Hungary, not Romania, Yugoslavia, or Czechoslovakia. Ironically, just as the Hungarian people lost from the end of the Great War and the Treaty of Trianon, so too did the Jewish population. This parallel suffering should show the Jews as firmly part of the nation-state, yet these events only further push Jews into the category of ‘other.’

Beyond the loss of population and ethnic Hungarians to new nation states,

“Hungary’s economic losses were severe: the nation lost 61.4 percent of its arable lands, 88 percent of its timber, 97 percent of its fir woods, 62.2 percent of its railroads, 64.5 percent of its paved roads, 83.1 percent of pig iron output and iron ore, 50 percent of its iron works, 55 percent of industrial plants, 67 percent of its credit and banking institutions, and all of its gold, silver, copper, and salt deposits.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dezso Bartha, “Trianon And the Predestination Of Hungarian Politics: A Historiography Of Hungarian Revisionism, 1918-1944” (PhD diss., University of Central Florida, 2006), 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.



These losses hampered Hungary's ability to modernize, especially outside of the capital city of Budapest in regions overly dependent on agricultural production. Following their defeat in the Great War, there was an increased need for scapegoats to explain the national tragedy at Trianon. Having lost most of its population, the new Hungarian state, formerly a multi-ethnic empire, found itself with a firm Magyar ethnic majority. Janos Kovacs summarizes this development, "When the Treaty of Trianon detached the non-Magyar periphery of the Hungarian Kingdom, the ratio of Magyars in the total population rose to 92 percent. Consequently, the Jews of Hungary lost their value to the state as a group: the need to complement the numerical strength of the Magyar element had disappeared."<sup>16</sup> Having lost their utilitarian function as a group that bolstered the dominant population the Jews were no longer politically necessary to maintain Magyar power and were thus cast from the ruling coalition.

The Treaty of Trianon symbolized the shame that had been brought on by defeat in the Great War and by the Romanian occupation of Budapest that overthrew Bela Kun. Arguably, no other event has had such a deep impact on the 20<sup>th</sup> century trajectory of the Hungarian nation as this treaty. Even the current government of Viktor Orban keeps the memory of the disaster of Trianon alive today to enflame nationalist sentiments. Hungarian resistance to Trianon is summed up by the national slogan, "Nem, nem soha!" ("No, no never!").<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Kovacs, "Neo-Antisemitism in Hungary," 150.

<sup>17</sup> Bartha, "Trianon and the Predestination of Hungarian Politics: A Historiography Of Hungarian Revisionism, 1918-1944," 16.



Figure 1. [Source] Nem! Nem! Soha!, 1920/1940?, Poster collection, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, <https://digitalcollections.hoover.org/objects/18914>. Poster bearing a slogan resisting the changes of the Treaty of Trianon.

The above poster from the Hoover Institute collection, shows the motto of the Hungarian nation responding to the Treaty of Trianon. The poster shows Hungary being ripped into pieces to supply the new Habsburg successor states with territory. The poster was created by a publisher in Budapest, and although the exact date of publication is in doubt, the fact that the poster is believed to have appeared between 1920 and 1940, shows the long-lasting effect of the treaty on the Hungarian psyche. The blood-red background conveys the horror of the event for Hungarians and the divisions of territory being sliced off from Hungary in the center show the vast swaths of territory that Hungary was losing. The slogan itself highlights the refusal of Hungarians to accept

the treaty's provisions, a nationalist rallying call that still has an impact today, but that would especially characterize the inter-war political environment of the nation.

### **1.3: Regent Horthy, 1919-1944**

The political turmoil of the postwar period ended in late 1919, when Miklos Horthy backed by counter-revolutionary military forces rose to power and established a right-wing government that officially declared him Regent in January of 1920. This new authoritarian regime would last until 1944, when the German invasion replaced Horthy with the Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi.

As a representative of the Hungarian old guard and a former admiral in the Austro-Hungarian Navy, Horthy's goal was to return Hungary to her old ways. This should have been a good thing for Hungarian Jewry, but they soon found out that Horthy was not the ally they expected. In responding to the Bela Kun regime's red terror, Horthy instituted his own white terror. His white terror raged across Hungary, but Budapest was specifically targeted. Horthy referred to the capital as a "sinful city" associated with foreign and alien interests, not Hungarian interests.<sup>18</sup>

These remarks were clearly aimed at the Jews of Budapest, as punishment for their real or perceived collaboration with the communist regime. In effect, the white terror was "a series of bloody pogroms directed against leftists and Jews, usually regarded as identical...Jews were murdered in some fifty towns, usually by military detachments...public opinion regarded these

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<sup>18</sup> Istvan Deak, "Budapest and the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918-1919," *Slavonic and East European Review* 46, no. 106 (1968): 131-132.

events as just revenge for the for the sins of the Kun regime.”<sup>19</sup> The mix of state sponsored and sporadic civilian violence against Jews who were seen as communists and communists seen as Jews resulted in an unclear number of dead, but the violence left the Jewish community in a state of shock.

Major General Bandholtz wrote in his journal entry for August 31, 1919 that,

“It is believed that [Horthy] proposes to start a reign of white terror which will make Béla Kun’s red terror look like a billy goat by the side of an elephant. They have been beating and maltreating Jews in Budapest and now we have definite information that many wealthy and prominent men have been killed in the country. It is not enough for Hungary that the Roumanians are gutting her, but apparently she now insists on cutting her own throat.”<sup>20</sup>

General Bandholtz identifies the victims of this white terror as the Jews of Budapest primarily, but another aspect of his account is worthy of attention. He identifies the Romanian invasion as having looted the nation, but he refers to the anti-Jewish violence as the nation ‘cutting her own throat.’ From his perspective, the Jews were firmly a part of the nation of Hungary and violence against the group could only be described as self-inflicted harm against Hungary. Based on the pre-war standing of the Hungarian Jewish community, these comments seem entirely reasonable, but in light of the Treaty of Trianon primarily and the communist experiment, public opinion no longer favored the Hungarian Jewish community as part of the broader national community of Hungarians.

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<sup>19</sup> Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary*, 54.

Antisemitic legislation followed the white terror of 1919, with the passage of the Numerus Clausus law, which limited Jewish representation in Hungarian universities to 6% of the student body.<sup>21</sup> This legislation marked the beginning of turning Jews into second-class citizens within their own state. As Janos Kovacs puts it,

“Between 1920 and 1933 a whole new generation of the Hungarian intelligentsia grew up in an academic atmosphere of Jew baiting and beating, tolerated by the university authorities and even abetted by some professors. Consequently the young Hungarian lawyers, teachers, physicians, engineers, administrators and even Catholic priests and Protestant ministers, who entered their respective professions in the late twenties and early thirties, had been trained in a sadistic type of antisemitism.”<sup>22</sup>

While Hungary lacked an organization dedicated to indoctrinating the youth in antisemitism, the experience of a gentile university student informally accomplished this task, with graduates prepared to view their Jewish peers as inferior. According to Roger W. Smith this was an important step in preparing the national consciousness for violence. In his article “Human Destructiveness and Politics: The Twentieth Century as an Age of Genocide,” Smith emphasizes the impact of dehumanizing a group that will be slaughtered: “The cruelty can perhaps be understood as the dehumanization—loss of compassion, psychic numbing, detachment.”<sup>23</sup> The indifference felt by university students to the suffering of their Jewish classmates was preparing those individuals and the nation for future actions aimed at differentiating Jews from Hungarians and eliminating the former group.

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<sup>21</sup> Kovacs, “Neo Antisemitism in Hungary,” 151.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>23</sup> Roger W. Smith, “Human Destructiveness and Politics: The Twentieth Century as an Age of Genocide,” ed. Isidor Wallimann and Michael Dobkowski (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2000), 23.

Laws keeping Jews out of higher education were just the start of the problems. It is also worth noting that the *numerus clausus*, though unique in their codification, were not unique in practice. Even American institutions of higher education practiced similar forms of discrimination, albeit informally.<sup>24</sup>

In 1932, Horthy appointed a new prime minister, Gyula Gombos, who would serve until his death in 1936. This period under Gombos threatened even further radical antisemitic policies and positions for the Hungarian state; however, this threat never fully came to fruition. Gombos was seen as such a threatening force in the eyes of Hungarian Jewry for many reasons. Most importantly, he was an outspoken antisemite, and had even, “helped organize an international anti-Semitic conference in Budapest” in 1925.<sup>25</sup> With his clear hostility towards Hungarian Jews, his time in office could have proved disastrous. Surprisingly, this was not the entirely the case and he even admitted that his role led him to “revise his ideas on the Jewish question.”<sup>26</sup> Gombos represents a difficult character to pin down in the narrative, but despite his new stance, he was not a harmless force either.

In an important gesture, Gombos visited the new Nazi chancellor of Germany in 1933, the first foreign leader to make such a trip.<sup>27</sup> This trip is an important symbol of the changing diplomatic situation for Hungary, whose leaders saw in Germany an ally capable of upending the post-war settlement and redrawing the borders of Central Europe. The close relationship with Hitler was an ominous development for Hungarian Jews, but their initial relationship was based on a mutual opposition of the post-war world order, not necessarily of Jews.

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<sup>24</sup> Judith Szapor, “Between Self-Defence and Loyalty: Jewish Responses to the *Numerus Clausus* Law in Hungary 1920–1928,” *S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation* 6 (2019) 1, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, 113.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

Author and historian Ivan Volgyes, an outspoken critic of the Horthy regime, points out that Hungarian-German relations were not a new phenomenon after the end of the war, but a continuation of years of cooperation and mutual respect.<sup>28</sup> He further argues that in this context, the Horthy regime had nowhere else to seek support, relying on the Nazis was their only option to seek restitution for Trianon.<sup>29</sup> Volgyes analysis is important, because he is not offering an excuse for Hungarian actions or trying to cover up collaboration, he instead emphasizes the long-standing friendship between Hungary and Germany to explain how Hungarian ambitions led to disaster once again. Hungary sought its old lands and saw the Germans as the agents to bring about the change, but it was not only German action that the relationship relied upon. The Hungarians would have their own role to play during World War II, marking the nation with its own atrocities committed in the name of overturning the Treaty of Trianon.

Initially Hungary benefitted from the alliance with Germany. In 1938, Hungary regained some of its former territories, when the Nazi regime dismembered Czechoslovakia. Not surprisingly, these territorial acquisitions came with a price tag. Hungary passed anti-Jewish legislation. This legislation was being called for not only by outside political forces in Germany, but also from the rising and emboldened fascist forces within Hungary organized as the Arrow Cross party. The legislation read:

“Industrial and commercial undertakings and banking houses employing more than ten persons are given five, or in certain cases ten, years in which to adjust the proportion of employees and of salaries, bonuses, and so on, to conform with the general rule that does not allow the Jewish share under any of these heading to exceed twenty percent of the

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<sup>28</sup> Bartha, “Trianon and the Predestination of Hungarian Politics: A Historiography Of Hungarian Revisionism, 1918-1944,” 151.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

total. In chambers of industry and commerce and in the legal, medical, and engineering professions, new Jewish members will be admitted at the rate of only five percent, until the Jewish proportion is reduced to the limit of twenty percent. New chambers in journalism and in the entertainment industry will be set up by the end of the year, and twenty percent *numerus clausus* will come into force at once.”<sup>30</sup>

With this law, Hungary was falling ever deeper into the Nazi sphere and directed attacks against its Jewish community as part of the deal to regain lost territory. Resembling the legislation passed in 1920, the concerns over relatively high Jewish participation in industries such as banking, the law, medicine, and journalism were the rationale behind the laws, but antisemitism was the foundational ideology that encouraged these actions. Unlike in 1920, the Jewish response was highly active. In 1920, the Neolog newspaper *Egyenlőség* (“Equality”) had acted in a limited capacity, challenging the legislation, but the paper faced heavy censorship. The paper’s first issue following the *numerus clausus* bore the front-page title “‘It is finished,’ invoking a biblical disaster.”<sup>31</sup> Not only was the law a disaster, but their inability to respond, as most of the following article was redacted, represented another disaster, too. Unlike in 1920, Jewish leaders did not merely keep their protests to heavily censored Jewish newspapers, they entered the public (gentile) and political sphere to air their grievances. The Union of Hungarian Jews proclaimed that:

“No one has the right to accuse them (Jews) of having taken up too great a number of positions in economic life—particularly in fields from which, according to the motivation

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<sup>30</sup> Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 122.

<sup>31</sup> Szapor, “Between Self-Defence and Loyalty: Jewish Responses to the *Numerus Clausus* Law in Hungary 1920–1928,” 28.



of the Bill, citizens professing other religions have kept away. No one can deny that without the activity of Hungarian Jews, the most important areas of industry, commerce, and credit in Hungary would not have been cultivated to their needed extent.”<sup>32</sup>

The Jewish leaders were correct. Hungary’s gentile middle class and industry was small as a result of a cultural inclination to favor agricultural production over modernization, a stance that left the modern industries open to Jewish employment. Despite the validity of their protest, that continued to further proclaim Neolog Jewish loyalty to Hungary, antisemitic legislation moved forward and the nation itself further aligned itself with the Axis powers, formally by 1940. More legislation would follow in a similar vein, ultimately classifying Jewishness along Nazi ideological foundations and furthering limiting Jewish economic life. With Hungarian Jews facing legal discrimination, they became isolated and vulnerable to future brutalization and ultimately genocide.

#### **1.4: World War II, From Horthy to Arrow Cross**

During World War II Hungary was a reliable ally of Nazi Germany. Hungarians participated in the persecution and killings of Hungarian Jews and of Jews in territories occupied by Hungarian forces. The distinction between a Hungarian Jew, though facing discrimination and rejection by the broader community and a foreign Jew, is crucial. In a bizarre and unique way, the Hungarian state, under the control of Horthy, would not at first sponsor violence against its native Jewish

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<sup>32</sup> Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, 117.

population, while Jews living in areas occupied by Hungarian forces lacked any protection.

Describing the Hungarian war record, Janos Kovacs states that “prior to March 1944 the record of the Hungarian government was fairly “good” as regards physical brutality, marred only by three dark blots.”<sup>33</sup> One of these blots came in July 1941 when “about 40,000 Hungarian Jews of “doubtful citizenship” were deported to German-occupied Poland, where 13,000 of them were summarily massacred and buried in common graves, many of them still alive.”<sup>34</sup>

In his book titled *Night*, Elie Wiesel discusses the massacres that occurred in Northern Transylvania. He described how a foreign Jewish man named Moishe the Beadle, was rounded up and deported from his hometown of Sighet. “And then, one day all foreign Jews were expelled from Sighet ... crammed into cattle cars by the Hungarian police, they cried silently.”<sup>35</sup> It might be expected that these deportations shocked the local Jewish population and raised a general alarm about the safety of the broader community, but Wiesel reports that no such effect was felt. Instead, “The deportees were quickly forgotten. A few days after they left, it was rumored that they were in Galicia, working, and even that they were content with their fate.”<sup>36</sup> The truth was quite different. These Jews had been deported to Nazi controlled areas to be executed. By a miracle, Wiesel’s friend Moishe survived and made his way back to Sighet to tell the tale, but nobody believed him. Importantly, Wiesel’s hometown of Sighet was viewed by Hungarian authorities as Hungarian territory and therefore Sighet’s native Jews were Hungarian and temporarily safe from deportations. Sighet was surrendered to Romania as part of Northern

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<sup>33</sup> Kovacs, “Neo-Antisemitism in Hungary,” 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Transylvania as a condition of the Treaty of Trianon and placed back under Hungarian control from 1940 until 1944.

It is important to recognize that although the Jewish community of Sighet would eventually be deported to the Auschwitz extermination camp, those deportations only began in the spring of 1944. In the initial roundups only the Jews labeled as ‘foreign’ were taken. This situation is quite odd, because it implies that even as the Jews of Hungary are being labeled as different from the Christian Magyars, so too are Jews from Poland or Slovakia being labeled as different and inferior to Jews of Hungarian descent. Regardless, this first act of deportation and the willingness of Hungarian authorities to serve as accomplices to the massacre of Jews highlights Hungarian agency in the Holocaust. It was not simply the Germans who were responsible for atrocities after occupying Hungary in 1944. Hungarian authorities were proactive participants in atrocities from the beginning. Wiesel also holds the Hungarian police accountable. “They were our first oppressors. They were the first faces of hell and death.”<sup>37</sup> Although Wiesel wrote those words after the Holocaust, they are still true for so many of the victims of the Holocaust who found themselves under Hungarian authority. The Nazis would certainly have a large role to play, but the Hungarian police and military were responsible for the loss of hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives.

Another ‘blot’ staining Hungary’s reputation is the massacre that occurred at Novi Sad, Yugoslavia. This portion of Yugoslavia was awarded to Hungary in 1941 as a reward for assisting the Nazi conquest of Yugoslavia. Today the area belongs to Serbia. The brutalization of the local population began immediately after the territory was taken, with looting of Jewish property and conscription of able-bodied Jewish men for service in labor battalions, where many

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 19.

would be killed attempting to clear land mines in Ukraine.<sup>38</sup> This initial wave of violence was surpassed when in late 1941 and early 1942, local partisan units began to resist Hungarian occupation. The Hungarians responded brutally, just like Nazis units in the Soviet Union and other parts of Serbia. The Hungarian occupiers organized public reprisal killings of civilians to terrorize and pacify the Bačka district that included Novi Sad. In January 1942, 3000 Jews and many gentile Serbians were shot as Horthy tried to regain control of the region.<sup>39</sup> The culmination of this terror in the areas around Novi Sad, was the mass shooting of over 1000 people, including 800 Jews in the town itself with their bodies left in the streets or dumped into the Danube River.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Hungarian Policemen and Soldiers Standing Over Murdered Jews In Novi-Sad, Yugoslavia, 23 January 1942,” Yad Vashem, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/this-month/january/1942-3.html>.

<sup>39</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Hungary Before the German Occupation,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/hungary-before-the-german-occupation>, accessed March 4, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> “Hungarian Policemen and Soldiers Standing Over Murdered Jews In Novi-Sad, Yugoslavia, 23 January 1942.”



Figure 2. [Source] “Hungarian Policemen and Soldiers Standing Over Murdered Jews In Novi-Sad, Yugoslavia, 23 January 1942,” Yad Vashem, accessed March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/this-month/january/1942-3.html>.

The slaughter was captured in this photo (figure 2) taken on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1942. It is clear to see the corpses of Jews executed on the pretext of being partisans. Where some of the partisans most likely of Jewish descent? Yes, but much like the white terror of 1919, Hungarian authorities are known to have committed atrocities against a Jewish community for its perceived wrongdoings and association with Communism,<sup>41</sup> rather than seeking out the individuals responsible for the partisan activities. These atrocities also highlight the similarities between the Hungarian and German forces and the brutality they were willing to unleash against Jewish and

<sup>41</sup> Ivana Nikolic, “Last Survivors Recall WWII Massacre In Occupied Yugoslavia,” *Balkan Insight*, January 23, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/23/last-survivors-recall-wwii-massacre-in-occupied-yugoslavia-01-22-2019/>.

more generally, civilian populations. In the waves of revisionist Hungarian history, the differences between Hungarian and German soldiers are emphasized, but the sources tell a different story. It is noteworthy that the perpetrators explicitly recorded their actions.

The final incident on Kovacs's list that left Hungarians directly responsible for the murder of their Jewish neighbors was a policy that conscripted Jews into labor battalions. The Jewish men of Novi Sad were taken in the early phase of the occupation. Kovacs writes, "Finally, in the spring of 1942, approximately 60,000 Jewish intellectuals were shipped to the Russian front as labor servicemen. The avowed purpose of this gesture was physical extermination, the success of which is shown by the return of only 20,000 of the 60,000."<sup>42</sup> Although technically not a mass deportation, which did not officially begin until 1944 while Horthy was still Regent, this policy can certainly be interpreted as an attempt to exterminate Jews through hard and dangerous labor, which parallels strikingly to the objectives of the Nazi concentration camp system.

Through all of these acts of brutality, the Jewish population of Budapest and the surrounding region within the post-1920 borders of Hungary would remain largely protected, until 1944. Despite the atrocities committed along the periphery of Hungary, the vast majority of Jewish Hungarian citizens had remained physically safe from violence, though not economic degradation and second-class citizenship. That situation changed abruptly when Miklos Horthy attempted to withdraw Hungary from the war that he understood the Axis powers would inevitably lose. His decision set off a chain of events that saw the fascist Arrow Cross party and its leader Ferenc Szálasi installed in power, supported by a German invasion that brought Hungary back into the Axis alliance.

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<sup>42</sup> Kovacs, "Neo-Antisemitism in Hungary," 156.

Elie Wiesel documented the progression of new antisemitic measures under the authority of the new Arrow Cross regime, “The Hungarian police burst into every Jewish home in town: a Jew was henceforth forbidden to own gold, jewelry, or any valuables. Everything had to be handed over to the authorities, under penalty of death... Three days later, a new decree: every Jew had to wear the yellow star... Then came the ghettos.”<sup>43</sup> Just as these measures follow one after the other across just two pages of *Night*, so too was the pace of Nazi inspired policy implemented by the Hungarians. After ghettoization came deportation, where from May 15<sup>th</sup> to July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944 an estimated 437,000 Jews once protected by law before World War I were sent to Auschwitz and other death camps in Poland and Germany.<sup>44</sup> The remaining Jews, mostly based in Budapest, were subject to indiscriminate murder as Arrow Cross further implemented Nazi ideology into policy. In total, it is estimated that 565,000 of the Holocaust’s 6 million victims were Hungarian.<sup>45</sup> Randolph. L Braham, the premier Hungarian Holocaust historian and himself a survivor of the Hungarian labor battalions during the Holocaust, emphasizes the importance of Hungarian collaboration in the death of the nation’s Jews,

“The Nazis were well prepared for a lightning operation in Hungary...they updated the death factories in Auschwitz...And above all else, they acquired the whole-hearted support of the Hungarian government...for the implementation of the Final Solution. Without the unequivocal support of the new constitutionally appointed government that enjoyed the blessing of Miklos Horthy, the Nazis—as the cases of Bulgaria and Romania have shown—would have been helpless...[Hungarian Jews] were subjected to the most

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<sup>43</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 10-11.

<sup>44</sup> Joanna Kakissis, “Hungary’s New Holocaust Museum Isn’t Open Yet, But It’s Already Causing Concerns,” *National Public Radio*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/08/690647054/hungarys-new-holocaust-museum-isn-t-open-yet-but-it-s-already-causing-worry>.

<sup>45</sup> “Murder of Hungarian Jewry,” Yad Vashem, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/fate-of-jews/hungary.html>.

barbaric and speedy deportation and extermination campaign of the war. It was so massive and so swift that the crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau, updated as they were, could not cope.

Braham emphasizes the role of the Hungarian government, specifically Miklos Horthy, and the nation's security apparatus in the implementation of the Final Solution, as historical revisionists in subsequent years attempted to whitewash the role that Hungarians played in the mass murder of their neighbors.



Figure 3. *[Source] Jews accompanied by Hungarian gendarmes before boarding the transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Soltvadkert, Hungary, June 1944. Yad Vashem. Accessed September 15, 2020. <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/jews-of-hungary-during-the-holocaust.html>.*



The image above (figure 3) proves Braham's thesis. Hungarian gendarmes can clearly be seen rounding up Jews for transport to the Auschwitz extermination camp. The killings were halted when Soviet armies finally broke through to Budapest and routed German and Hungarian forces. For the remaining Jews, the Soviets were heroes who put an end to the slaughter and the nightmare. Survivor Denes Bara, who later went on to become a doctor for the Hungarian Army, described the experience in an interview years later, "for us this was the liberation! Later it turned into something else, but for us this was the great liberation!"<sup>46</sup> Bara's perspective is important, because as a survivor from Budapest with experience living under communist rule, too, he is able to speak of the Soviets as their initial liberators, but with hindsight, noting that liberation was not the end of Jewish suffering in Hungary.

### **1.5: Post-War Chaos, 1945-1948**

Liberation by the Red Army was not the end of the suffering for those who were still alive. Sari Reuveni, in her article "After the Holocaust: National Attitudes to Jews," details the treatment that Holocaust survivors received when they tried to go back to their old lives. She quotes Hungarian academic Istvan Bibo, from his 1948 article "The Jewish Question in Hungary After 1944," "At the time of the liberation antisemitism was negligible. Those who had never liked Jews continued to dislike them, but after the atrocities which the Jews had suffered, the antisemitics felt uncomfortable about voicing the usual anti-Jewish slurs. They simply stuck in

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<sup>46</sup> Denes Bara, "An Interview with Denes Bara", conducted by Virginia Major Thomas in 2007, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2010.

their throats. In later years, such inhibitions disappeared completely.”<sup>47</sup> Bibo’s assessment is important because he is one of the first voices on the subject in a meaningful academic way, but his analysis seems misguided and even contradictory at times. It would be logical that antisemitism would be running high in the nation after the population had largely allowed their Jewish neighbors to be massacred, or actively participated in the slaughter. Bibo wrote, “The 100,000 Jews who had survived in the ghettos of Budapest had done so, ‘not because people spoke up on their behalf, and even less because society’s goodwill, but because their executioners had neither the time nor the decisiveness to destroy them.’”<sup>48</sup> In light of this comment, it is hard to believe that Bibo simultaneously believed antisemitism to be negligible, yet prevalent during the war and Holocaust.

However, it is true as Bibo points out, that in later years antisemitism was unmistakably a force in the country. He roots the phenomenon firmly in the post-war environment, not as the relic of fascist Arrow Cross and Nazi ideology. One of the factors behind this neo-antisemitism was that Jews were once again featuring prominently in public life, especially within the communist party and its security apparatus.<sup>49</sup> It makes sense that Jews were being favored by the Hungarian Communist Party (HCP) as they would have no possible connections or sympathies to the fascist past that the HCP was hoping to eradicate. Regardless, Bibo cites the appearance of Jews in the secret police and security forces as a factor in what he describes as renewed hostilities, although it is more reasonable that the hostilities never left Hungarian society.

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<sup>47</sup> Sari Reuveni, "Antisemitism in Hungary 1945-1946," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, no. 1 (1989): 45.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Kelemen, "The Hungarian Communist Party, Ethno-Nationalism and Antisemitism," *Twentieth Century Communism*, no. 4 (May 2012), 204-205.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-206.

Another example that more accurately describes the post-war climate in Hungary is one of many violent outbursts that occurred in rural Hungary, the Kunmadaras pogrom of May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1946. While Reuveni uses the term ‘pogrom’ to describe the violence that occurs, not all historians agree that the violence reached an organized level consistent with the term. Instead, Éva Standeisky, proposes the term ‘atrocities,’ while still recognizing the antisemitic nature of the violence, she argues it was not committed in an organized manner and employs a different terminology.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of the terminology, Jews were massacred over the antisemitic accusation of blood-libel. Blood libel charges date back to the middle ages as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the Jewish community of Norwich, England was accused of murdering a local Christian boy who became a saint shortly after his death. Most blood-libel cases occur as a result of the disappearance or murder of a young Christian, but this case had other roots—cushions and quilts antisemitism. The term cushions and quilts antisemitism rose in Hungary, as Jews returned from concentration camps or came out of hiding and tried to recover their property. Reporter Hal Lehrman of *Commentary Magazine* wrote from Budapest in January of 1946 and described this type of hatred. He reported,

“The third cause (read pretext) of neo-anti-Semitism was the deportee. The surviving Jew came home from the shadow of the Nazi crematory. He had lost his family, was penniless, wanted his apartment back, his factory. As we shall see, he most often did not get it. But Hungarians who obtained Jews’ property through auction or forced sale or as a gift because they had the right kind of politics resented the newcomer’s intrusion, his

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 208.

insistence on having back what they already regarded as their own. Every returning deportee created ten anti-Semites.”<sup>51</sup>

The unwillingness of gentile Hungarians to return their Jewish loot was causing many to act out in antisemitic ways, but the situation also served as a justification for some to act on the antisemitic sentiment they already possessed. It is worth noting that Lehrman also commented on positive aspects of the post-war Hungarian climate, citing the abolition of the antisemitic laws and even inclusion of Jews once again in all areas of the state bureaucracy and economic life, but the dark force of hatred was still present, too.

The Kunmadaras pogrom fits this description of cushions and quilts antisemitism, because notably, there were no children who were even missing from the region when the accusations of blood-libel rang out, just Jews attempting to recollect the property their neighbors had stolen from them. In response, these few survivors of the Holocaust were beaten and even murdered by their neighbors.

Although the communist authorities brought the perpetrators to trial, there was also an outpouring of support for the accused. What followed was a mix of sympathy and condemnation. Some Hungarian newspapers went so far as to “express understanding for the acts of the rioters, describing them as 'poor, hungry, barefoot 15-16 years-olds whose feelings had been inflamed.’”<sup>52</sup> This characterization is interesting because the image of children who are just trying to survive to describe the Hungarians guilty of murdering their Jewish neighbors should be the exact way that the Jewish survivors were seen. They had been brutalized by their own population and the Nazis, and yet still struggled to gain sympathy in an inversion of reality. The

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<sup>51</sup> Hal Lehrman, “Hungary: Liberation’s Bitter Fruit,” *Commentary Magazine*, January 1946, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/hal-lehrman/hungary-liberations-bitter-fruit/>.

<sup>52</sup> Reuveni, "Antisemitism in Hungary 1945-1946," 52.

communists were also interested in the events but turned their focus on the accused as fascist elements that needed to be eliminated. They did seem to show support for the Jews, but through accusations against their political rivals in the Smallholders party, rather than uplifting the Jews of Hungary.<sup>53</sup> Another political faction, the National Farmers Party newspaper, “declared after the pogrom that ‘in order to calm tempers and bring about reconciliation between Christians and Jews, not only did the Hungarians have to contribute, but the Jews must also mend their ways.’”<sup>54</sup> This publication finds blame in the incident for the Jews themselves that had been massacred for daring to collect their property and rebuild their lives.

The gentile population expected that the approximately 200,000 Jews remaining in Hungary’s borders would passively accept whatever would be thrown at them, but the Jews counter-protested these sentiments, organizing marches and demonstrations in Budapest and around Hungary<sup>55</sup>. Jewish newspapers like *Uj Elet*, finally free to inform their readers, highlighted the antisemitic sentiments being expressed across Hungary. *Uj Elet* reported that during a demonstration at another village some of the demonstrators shouted, “Hurrah for Auschwitz.”<sup>56</sup> Contrasted with the picture that Bibo tried to illustrate of the state of Hungary in the immediate aftermath of the war, the article by Reuveni shows that antisemitism remained a powerful force in the country. This hatred fueled old religious based forms of antipathy towards the Jews and pogroms broke out leaving many dead for simply trying to reclaim the property that they saw in their neighbor’s possession. Property that had been looted from their empty houses as they were deported to what the Nazis and Hungarian authorities hoped would be their deaths.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>55</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Hungary After the German Occupation,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/hungary-after-the-german-occupation>, accessed on March 30, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Reuveni, "Antisemitism in Hungary 1945-1946," 53.

### 1.6: The Communist Period, 1949-1989

The final historical period that needs to be introduced to understand the modern situation in Hungary is the period of communist rule between 1945 and 1989. Out of the post-war upheaval, the Hungarian Communist Party eventually gained complete power and began to operate under the direct control of Stalin and the USSR. The leader of the HCP and of postwar Hungary was Matyas Rakosi, who was Jewish. He was appointed as leader after Bela Kun was executed as a Trotsky supporter during Stalin's purge in 1937.<sup>57</sup> Rakosi, a staunch Stalinist, began to implement his own crackdowns to secure his position as the general secretary of the party. The first major events occurred in 1949 and culminated in the trial of Laszlo Rajk, who served as Minister of the Interior and of Foreign Affairs. According to the *American Jewish Yearbook* (AJY) issue from 1951, Rakosi initially purged 310 HCP section leaders, 256 of whom were either Jews or of Jewish origin.<sup>58</sup> The AJY further laments that *Uj Elet*, the important Jewish newspaper, fell victim to the purges and was coerced into printing the HCP propaganda denigrating Jews as capitalists and enemies of the Hungarian workers.<sup>59</sup>

Not content with the low-level actions, the Rajk trial was the ultimate statement of Rakosi's own power. The trial was meant to harness nationalist sentiments among the Hungarian population and increase the legitimacy of his rule. Along with the former high-ranking minister,

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<sup>57</sup> Kelemen, "The Hungarian Communist Party, Ethno-Nationalism and Antisemitism," 200.

<sup>58</sup> Mark Landes-Rosen, "Hungary," *The American Jewish Year Book* 52 (1951), 366.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

7 of other officials were directly put on trial, with a total of 37 eventually facing charges stemming from the incident. Of the 37 communists who fell victim to Rakosi, 27 were of Jewish origin, with many added to the trial to add a Jewish component because Rajk was a gentile.<sup>60</sup> The defendants were found guilty of varying levels of treason and many received harsh sentences, including Rajk who was hanged alongside 3 of his alleged accomplices. Historians Paul Kelemen and Peter Hidas note the addition of Jewish defendants.<sup>61</sup> Kelemen further explains that, “for good measure, Gábor Péter, the notorious head of the secret police and himself of Jewish origin, specified that ‘Rajk’s defense lawyer must be an ugly Jew.’”<sup>62</sup> Both Kelemen and Hidas point out the addition of Jews to be executed or purged from the HCP, but why was this a goal of top party officials like Rakosi and Peter, who were themselves Jewish?

Hidas’ response to this question is that HCP leadership wished to display their impartiality when it came to the Jewish question, which crushed Jewish faith in the party that had liberated them from mass slaughter only a few years before.<sup>63</sup> Kelemen offers a bleaker explanation, claiming that beyond merely showing impartiality, HCP leaders hoped to utilize the antisemitic feelings of the population to gather nationalist support for the regime. *The AJY* believed that Rajk would be charged with as many counts as possible in the trial, including antisemitism to heap blame on the accused, but these charges were never a part of the trial.<sup>64</sup> Charges of being a nationalist, like those thrown at Tito of Yugoslavia, were also absent from the condemnation of Rajk and the others, with both factors combining to suggest that Rakosi’s

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>61</sup> Kelemen, “The Hungarian Communist Party, Ethno-Nationalism and Antisemitism,” 211. Peter I. Hidas, “Canada and the Hungarian Jewish Refugees, 1956–57,” *East European Jewish Affairs*, 37:1 (2007), 75.

<sup>62</sup> Kelemen, “The Hungarian Communist Party, Ethno-Nationalism and Antisemitism,” 211-212.

<sup>63</sup> Hidas, “Canada and the Hungarian Jewish Refugees, 1956–57,” 75.

<sup>64</sup> Landes-Rosen, “Hungary,” 367.

objective was to use antisemitism and nationalism as political forces to reinforce his own power and the legitimacy of the HCP.

The major turning point in postwar Jewish life was the Hungarian Uprising in October 1956. Many factors contributed to the crisis of the regime including similar protests in Poland. The renunciation of Stalin's cult of personality by his successor Nikita Khrushchev was an important factor, driving not only the Poles, but also Hungarians to the streets.<sup>65</sup> In an attempt to appease the population in the months before the revolt in October, Rakosi allowed the body of Laszlo Rajk to be reburied with special honors. He also released hundreds of political prisoners.<sup>66</sup> These gestures would not be enough to stop the revolutionary movement and Rakosi was removed from his office by the USSR, who replaced him with one of his close allies, a move that also failed to appease the Hungarian population. In October, Hungarians finally revolted against the HCP and its Soviet influence. They demanded that the reform-minded communist leader Imre Nagy be made head of state.

During the uprising, Nagy would serve briefly as the leader of the Hungarian people, but he was unable to stop Soviet armored units from retaking Budapest when they rolled into the city on November 4<sup>th</sup>, after briefly withdrawing after intense fighting with the Hungarian revolutionaries who were joined by segments of the Hungarian Army. Nagy had hoped the UN and Western powers would come to Hungary's aid, but the West was unwilling to commit to open conflict with the USSR over the future of Hungary.

Historian Peter Hidas references multiple acts of antisemitic violence that occurred across the countryside during the uprising, "György Marosán, the Minister of State in the Kádár

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<sup>65</sup> "Hungary," *The American Jewish Year Book* 59 (1958), 336.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.



government charged that ‘pogroms’ had taken place in the villages of Vámospercs-Nyíradony, Hajdúnánás, Balkány, Marikocs and Nyirbátor.”<sup>67</sup> Despite the violence in the countryside, smearing the revolutionaries as antisemites does not offer a satisfactory explanation of the event. Historian Eva Ständeisky draws a line of distinction between the revolution in the countryside, where small scale and uncoordinated attacks were made on Jews and the urban environment of Budapest, which avoided major antisemitic issues, even as the crowds revolted against a regime that still had prominent Jewish figures at the top of its leadership.<sup>68</sup> The urban and rural divide in Hungary was an important factor, because the center of revolutionary activity was always Budapest. As the vast majority of the nation’s Jews lived in the city, the lack of violence directed at them suggests that the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in Budapest had more to do with outrage at communist abuses, while in the countryside that charge expanded to include scapegoating the Jews. The *AJY* even dismissed later attempts to focus on the incidents in the countryside to label the revolution in its entirety as antisemitic, citing such accusations as attempts by the new HCP leader Janos Kadar and the Soviets to dismiss the popular uprising as fascist or reactionary, instead of accepting that the demands made in Hungary, as in Poland, were justifiable after years of Stalinist oppression.<sup>69</sup>

Ultimately, the uprising was brutally oppressed and its leaders including Nagy were executed. The new communist leader Janos Kadar initiated several economic policy reforms that became known as ‘Goulash Communism.’ Even Holocaust survivor Dr. Denes Bara acknowledged that the lives of average Hungarians improved. In response to a question about the new conditions in the 1960s under Kadar, Dr. Bara responded, “[Hungarians] not only thought

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<sup>67</sup> Hidas, “Canada and the Hungarian Jewish Refugees, 1956–57,” 75-76.

<sup>68</sup> Kelemen, “The Hungarian Communist Party, Ethno-Nationalism and Antisemitism,” 213-214.

<sup>69</sup> “Hungary,” 339.

Communism had gotten better but they had on the one hand the belief that every year it would get a little better and on the other hand the major security, the social security, that everyone had the possibility and reality of a job... Kadar was given the credit for the advantages, it was a better life.”<sup>70</sup> For the average Hungarian, life was improving, though the Jewish experience was still different, Dr. Bara clarifies that in Hungary, “There were [still] no basic human rights at all available.”<sup>71</sup> Kadar might have improved life under Communism, but even for gentiles, life under a communist regime did not offer freedom, rights, or protections from state violence.

Many Jews did not wait to see what Hungary would become under the Soviet appointed Kadar and instead choose to migrate to the West or Israel. The *AJY* estimated that following the Hungarian Uprising 13% of Hungary’s Jewish population chose emigration which amounted to close to 20,000 Jews fleeing the country.<sup>72</sup> From a holistic approach, the revolution was not antisemitic, but many Jews still felt uneasy and took advantage of the brief window of opportunity to leave the country. Peter Hidas specifically studied the migrants who made it to Canada, noticing that Jews made up a sizable portion of those seeking asylum in Canada and other Western nations like the United States, Great Britain, or Holland.

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<sup>70</sup> Denes Bara, “An Interview with Denes Bara”, conducted by Virginia Major Thomas in 2007, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> “Hungary,” 339.

**Table 1. Showing religious affiliation (%) of Hungarian refugees moved to Canada, December 1956 to 25 January 1957.**

Religion	December 1956	1–25 January 1957
Roman Catholic	65	42.8
Jewish	20	39.6
Protestant	15	17.6

\*28 January 1957, NAC, RG 76, Box 862, File 555-54-565, part 2.

The table above shows the religious affiliation of Hungarian immigrants. Hidas argues that the raw data do not accurately represent the percentages of immigrants. “These figures should be modified upwards because a large number of Jews did not reveal their religious background. Fear of Antisemitism, fear of persecution...made many Hungarian Jews refuse to reveal their religion or cultural background.”<sup>73</sup> Some Jews may have had good reason to hide their identities, as antisemitic incidents were even occurring in the refugee camps as Jewish and gentile Hungarians vied for the opportunity to seek better lives away from their homes. While there was no violence at the camps, because Austrian police managed to protect the Jewish refugees, “In mid-January 1957 more than 1000 Hungarian refugees at the processing centre in Vienna staged an anti-Jewish riot because of rumours that Jews were getting preference in obtaining entry into the United States.”<sup>74</sup> Even after fleeing violence and oppression, antisemitism was still making its way into refugee camps, as the sentiment was common among Hungarians whether they supported or were fleeing from the regime.

<sup>73</sup> Hidas, “Canada and the Hungarian Jewish Refugees, 1956–57,” 78.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

## Chapter 2 Democracy in Hungary: Hope and New Challenges

### 2.1: Hope for the Democratic Era Fades

Life under Hungary's communist regime had been a mixed experience for Jewish Holocaust survivors. Jews initially welcomed Soviet forces as liberating heroes who saved the remainder of the Jewish population of Budapest from extermination. This first impression was certainly true. Without the Soviet intervention, there was no foreseeable end to the slaughter carried out by the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators. Despite this strong start, Jewish-communist relations soured to the point that when the second Hungarian experiment with Communism came to an end in 1989, many Hungarian Jews embraced the change. One of those optimistic Jews, Katalin Sos Radvanszky, spoke to *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller in 1990. In Miller's article titled "Out of Hiding", she quotes Radvanszky as saying "'Since the end of the old regime it's so much easier to be a Jew in Hungary.'"<sup>75</sup> With democracy replacing a repressive system, opportunities for Jewish life and culture began to thrive once again and Radvanszky's son, Gabor, was even sent to a Jewish school where the curriculum taught Jews to be proud once again of their identities.<sup>76</sup>

While there was good reason to be optimistic, the resurgence of open antisemitism freely expressed by individuals, rather than the communist regime became a reality once again. Jewish sociologist Andras Kovacs, cited by Miller in her article, identified three forms of antisemitism that remerged after the collapse of Communism. First, there was a mob-based antisemitism that

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<sup>75</sup> Judith Miller, "Out of Hiding," *The New York Times*, December 9, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/09/magazine/out-of-hiding.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Kovacs identifies with soccer hooligans chanting, “Go back to Auschwitz!” when the Budapest based soccer team with Jewish roots, MTK, was playing.<sup>77</sup> The team’s roster at the time had no players of Jewish descent, but the Jewish founders of the soccer team were not forgotten by this resurgent antisemitism. It makes no sense to shout such obscenities at an opponent when its roster has no Jewish players, but this illogical hatred persists. Racist crowds and terrace chants are unfortunately a common phenomenon across sports culture in Europe as a whole. One of the world’s best strikers, a black Belgian named Romelu Lukaku, faced racist fans in Italy who made monkey noises at him while playing in 2019.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile in Bulgaria, soccer fans responded to England’s 6-0 victory over their national team with Nazi salutes and more monkey chants to berate the many black English players.<sup>79</sup> These are just a few examples of racism in sports that highlight the simmering hostilities towards minority communities, a sign of broader xenophobia and antisemitism across the continent.

The second form of antisemitism that Kovacs sees permeating Hungary in the years following the collapse of the communist regime is an antisemitism that grows out of economic competition.<sup>80</sup> This form of hatred towards the Jews for what is viewed as over-representation in professions like the law or medicine was codified by the Horthy government under the numerus clausus and other legislation throughout the 1920s and 1930s and has made a comeback. For example, “an article in *Nepszabadsag*, the former Communist (now Socialist) Party newspaper, suggested that Jews limit their own employment in communications media and other visible

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Rory Smith, “When the Monkey Chants Are for You: A Soccer Star’s View of Racist Abuse,” *New York Times*, December 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/22/sports/soccer/romelu-lukaku-inter-italy-racism.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Nick Parker, “Racist Bulgarian Fans Abuse England’s Black Stars With Sick Monkey Chants and Nazi Salutes,” *The Sun*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/10135977/racist-bulgaria-fans-abuse-england-black-stars-football/>.

<sup>80</sup> Miller, “Out of Hiding.”

fields to prevent antisemitism from reviving. ‘They must be careful that the number of Jews does not dominate.’”<sup>81</sup> Whether the Jews are legally kept from employment or self-abstain from seeking jobs that might be seen as controlling of the economy or media, the result would be the same—antisemitism and the fear of persecution keeping Hungarian Jewry from living freely in their own communities.

The final form of antisemitism identified by Kovacs had nationalist undertones and was utilized in the political realm to attract voters. As Miller continued her exploration of the situation in Hungary with a turn towards the political landscape and the nation’s first democratic elections after the collapse of Communism, she noted this form and its harm, “During the campaigning, the Democratic Forum deliberately played upon Hungarian resentment of Jews. The message was coded but clear. In a radio broadcast, Istvan Csurka, a populist writer and a spokesman for the Forum, urged Hungarians to “wake up.” A “dwarfish minority,” he said, was “robbing” Hungarians of their true national culture and symbols.<sup>82</sup> Although Csurka denied that his comments were antisemitic, claiming the menace he referred to was communist, not Jews, he still connected Jews to Communism. This trope was first present following the short-lived Soviet Republic of Bela Kun and highlights the fact that an improved place for Jews in Hungarian society did not mean that the broader society was ready to allow that integration.

The continuity in mindset and antisemitic tactics highlights that hatred for the Jews never disappeared from Hungarian society. Instead, public expressions of such views were censored under communist rule. The use of antisemitism for political purposes would remain a common tool for many politicians, including the current Prime Minister, Viktor Orban.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

## 2.2: Viktor Orban, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018



Figure 4. [Source] Attila Kisbenedek, March 15, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-speech-hungarys-orban-attacks-enemy-who-speculates-with-money/>. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban delivers a speech in front of the building of the Hungarian Parliament in Budapest on March 15, 2018 during the official commemoration of the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1848-1849 Hungarian Revolution.

Today, one man stands at the center of the debate on antisemitism in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Orban was active in politics since his days as a student and served as the leader of his political party, Fidesz, during the 1990s as the nation transitioned to democratic self-

governance. He briefly served as prime minister from 1998-2002 and has since regained the position in 2010 after landslide election victories in subsequent cycles.

Orban's vision for Hungary can be best summarized as a quest to create an 'illiberal democracy,'<sup>83</sup> a term he first used to describe his governing tactics in a 2014 speech. Since then, he has pivoted to rebrand the ideology as 'Christian Liberty,' in recognition that illiberal democracy does not market well among other European Union states and his many other critics.<sup>84</sup> This new term is especially problematic for Hungarian Jews, who would appear to fall outside the scope of Orban's nationalist vision for Hungary.

To fully understand the assault on democracy and on Hungarian Jews, as well as the danger that Orban poses it is important to analyze another of his public addresses. This speech represents the best example of his political ideology and vision for Hungary and was delivered on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018 during an appearance to commemorate the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian revolution of 1848. Ironically, for all the antisemitism he unleashed to remember the event, it has to be noted that Jews proudly fought for the Hungarian cause in 1848. Jewish emancipation in 1867 was tied to this service to the nation.<sup>85</sup>

After a lengthy introduction, Orban homed in on his main point—condemning George Soros, a Hungarian survivor of the Holocaust who went on to make his fortune in the financial sector. Soros has also gained a reputation as a philanthropist supporting liberal causes. Orban said,

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<sup>83</sup> Edit Inotai, "Hungary's Orban Tries to Give 'Illiberalism' a Makeover," *Balkan Insight*, July 30, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/30/hungarys-orban-tries-to-give-illiberalism-a-makeover/>.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Rosenbluth, "Jewish Freedom Fighters of 1848 and Heroes of the Civil War," *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-freedom-fighters-of-1848-and-heroes-of-the-civil-war>.



“We do not have to fight against the anemic opposition parties, but an international network that has been organized into an empire. Media financed by foreign groups, and a domestic oligarchy, professional activists for rent, agitators, organizers of riots, chains of NGOs paid by international speculators which can be summed up by George Soros’ name.”<sup>86</sup>

Following these lines, the crowd reacted almost instinctively to the name George Soros and broke out into a chorus of boos, only settling down when Orban continued with his divisive speech, “this is the world we must fight against to defend our own. A good soldier does not fight because he hates the opponents before him, but because he loves what is behind him. Loves Hungary and the Hungarian people.”<sup>87</sup> The first part of this passage is full of antisemitic imagery and stereotypes that have long been a part of European politics. “The” Jew is portrayed as the financier, associated with foreign economic interests, depicted as manipulator of the media for financial profit, and finally as a quasi-domestic terrorist, seeking to weaken and destroy the respective nation.

All of these characterizations are harmful tropes, but coming from Prime Minister Viktor Orban, they are especially damaging because he offers the legitimacy of government to these misguided notions. Through speeches like this one, Orban creates a permission structure to connect nationalism, one's love for Hungary, with the desire to fight the enemy—described as George Soros and Jews more broadly. In his dystopia, an individual is not antisemitic for battling George Soros, they are simply someone who loves Hungary and the Hungarian people.

Following this mindset, it can be assumed that Soros and other Hungarian Jews are excluded

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<sup>86</sup> “Viktor Orban’s March 15 Speech,” March 16, 2018. Video, 8:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmoX9ovf8BM>.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:23.

from this group of true Hungarians. A final concerning point of this speech is its militarism. By relying on the analogy of a soldier fighting for their country, the metaphorical battle against perceived Jewish interests in the nation becomes a literal and physical struggle, too. Orban was not done with this theme but continued to a direct call to action,

“Respected ladies and gentlemen, I know this struggle is hard for everyone. I understand it if some are scared. It is understandable because we must fight an opponent who is very different than we are. Not with an open helmet (fair fighting) but hiding. Not straightforward but crafty. Not nationalist, but internationalist, who does not believe in honest work, but in financial speculation; who does not have a homeland, because he feels he owns the whole world. He is not generous, but vengeful and he always attacks the heart. Especially if its red, white, and green’ [national colors of Hungary].”<sup>88</sup>

In this excerpt, Orban takes his antisemitic position even further employing more antisemitic tropes. Orban portrays the Jew as crafty, international, and dishonest. They always attack the heart of the nation like a fifth column from within and therefore cannot be trusted. The red, white, and green Orban references are the colors of the national flag and a clear indication that George Soros and all he has been designated to represent are neither patriotic nor even Hungarian. This is precisely the nationalistic antisemitism that Andras Kovacs feared most following the transition to democracy in Hungary and Viktor Orban has weaponized these ideas as a powerful and unfortunately effective political tool to maintain his power and the support of many segments of the population.

Following the applause that accompanied his flag statement, Orban turned his attention to another dangerous notion, historical revisionism:

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 16:20.

“Hungarian history accustomed us to having to fight for the same things that are natural for luckier people. For us it is enough that there is a single wobbly leader; enough that there is a clumsy government. A single election result goes awry and everything vanishes that for years we worked so hard for. This is such a drafty corner of the world where history will never leave us alone, no matter how much we feel that we deserve a break.”<sup>89</sup>

These comments seem more mundane at first glance and maybe even normal in the midst of an election campaign. However, the political element of Orban’s comments aside, his references to history and the unlucky, or victim’s role for Hungary within world history needs to be approached cautiously. On the surface, the destruction of a once mighty empire into a small nation state picked apart by foreign treaties and the world wars may seem to suggest an unlucky nation, but we must dig deeper than that basic interpretation. The Hungarians were far from passive observers of world events. They were active participants in both world wars and the Holocaust, a legacy that cannot be covered up by what was done to the nation at Trianon. Although the Hungarian nationalists, Viktor Orban included, would like us to examine the nation’s history from a tragic perspective, Hungary was responsible for its atrocities far more heinous than the loss of territory, especially when those sins are unaccounted for or purposely blurred to hide the nation’s guilt.

Before concluding by telling young Hungarians that they would always have a homeland, Orban spoke about immigration. While not expressly antisemitic, his comments reinforce his nationalist perspective that relies on antisemitism,

“Such forces as now reveal themselves have not been seen in the world for a long time.

Africa will have ten times more young people than Europe. If Europe does nothing, they

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 17:06.

will kick down the doors, and Brussels will not protect Europe. They do not want to stop the migration, but rather support and organize it. They want to dilute and replace the people of Europe!”<sup>90</sup>

The concept of Europe and its culture being replaced by immigrants fleeing violent conflicts like in Syria or other migrants seeking security and economic opportunities is a common, yet dangerous, concern of far-right politicians. This xenophobia, if isolated, would still be a large problem for Europe and societies that embrace diversity and help those in need. Unfortunately, this rhetoric is far from isolated, as Orban points out himself,

“In 2010, when we recovered, revolted and started to fight for the Hungarians in Brussels and the other centers of the Empire, we were alone. But since then the Poles arrived. Then the Slovaks and the Czechs. Then America elected a president who opposes [illegal] immigration. The Brits have also set foot on their own path. Israel still perseveres. In Austria the patriots took power, and the Italians also said no to immigration.”<sup>91</sup>

From his own perspective, Orban is gaining powerful allies from across the globe in his campaign to end immigration. Investigating his list further reveals alarming trends in European politics and across the Atlantic in the United States. Far-right political ideologies are working their way back into the mainstream. These ideologies inevitably reinforce antisemitism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism in some form. With this in mind, Orban has become even more dangerous because other countries seem to be following his lead in ‘revolting’ against the guidance of the European Union, while what is occurring in the US is most likely unrelated, yet a

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 19:34.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 21:20.

parallel contemporary atmosphere. Interestingly, Orbán also includes Israel as an ally in the same speech he vehemently tears into Soros and Hungarian Jews for their disloyalty. The relationship between Orbán and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel is a complex one that will be discussed in detail later, but the mention of Israel is still worth highlighting.

It is precisely this combination of direct attacks against Jews through George Soros, exalting nationalistic thinking in as narrow minded a manner as possible, historical revisionism, xenophobia, and increasing authoritarianism that makes Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party a threat to Hungarian Jews and the foundation of a free and democratic society in Hungary.

To prove that Orbán's words have real consequences, it is possible to examine studies of the rates of antisemitism in the Hungarian population, completed since 1995, to demonstrate that Orbán is not just spewing antisemitic beliefs to a crowd, but rather that the crowd has embraced the message, too. To study the phenomenon, András Kovács and Ildikó Barna poured through the data compiled through surveys of the population and published their findings in an article titled "Religiosity, Religious Practice, and Antisemitism in Present-Day Hungary." They discovered that antisemitism was a fairly stagnant force in the nation from 1995-2006, with 2010 marking a major spike in antisemitic attitudes, a trend that has largely continued.<sup>92</sup>

**Table 2. The percentage of antisemites among the Hungarian adult population, 2006-2017.**

	<b>Extreme Antisemites</b>	<b>Moderate Antisemites</b>	<b>Non-Antisemites/Unclassified</b>
2006	18	16	66
2017	26	10	64

Table 2 shows that while antisemitic attitudes overall increased, the relative percentages of Hungarians who were antisemitic before Orbán, increased those sentiments, while the remainder

<sup>92</sup> Ildikó Barna, András Kovács, "Religiosity, Religious Practice, and Antisemitism in Present-Day Hungary," *Religions* 10, no. 9: 527 (2019): 1-2.

of the population could be considered not antisemitic or unable to be placed in a category. This would suggest that Orban is reaching his intended audience and further radicalizing Hungarians who are susceptible to antisemitic messaging to leverage political power. Importantly, Kovacs and Barna found strong correlations between antisemitic sentiments and expressions of religiosity, though they offer some hesitancy in their explanation,

“The hypothetical explanatory factor for the change is the rebirth of the “Christian-national” idea appearing as the foundational element of the new Hungarian constitution, according to which Christian culture is the ultimate unifying force of the nation, giving the inner essence and meaning of the state. In this discourse, being Christian is equated with being Hungarian. Self-declared and self-defined Christian religiosity plays the role of a symbolic marker for accepting the national-conservative identity discourse and belonging to the “Christian-national” cultural-political camp where antisemitic prejudices occur more frequently than in other segments of the society.”<sup>93</sup>

In this explanation, not only is antisemitism an increasing factor under the government of Viktor Orban, but his specific policies of ‘Christian Liberty’ seem to be the driving force behind the increases. These findings suggest Orban is directly responsible for the surge of antisemitism and that the increase is not a coincidence of some kind, but rather a result of Orban’s ideology and leadership as prime minister.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 1.

### 2.3: Viktor Orbán's War on George Soros

While Orbán's demonization of George Soros has already been made evident, it is important to know why he has become such a profound target of Orbán's propaganda. Soros was born in Hungary in 1930 to Jewish parents and fled the country in 1948 after surviving the Holocaust. By 1956, he had made his way to the United States where he built a successful hedge fund and became famous for his philanthropic efforts.<sup>94</sup> These are the two fundamental factors behind the portrayal of George Soros, he is a Hungarian Jew who has accumulated and spent his vast fortune championing liberal democracy around the world. According to Professor Stephen Whitfield of Brandeis University, these factors have propelled Soros into the role once held by the Rothschild's in the eyes of antisemitic conspiracy theorists, the wealthy Jew who engages in a conspiracy to control the world through his wealth.<sup>95</sup> Whitfield specifically cites the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, one of the most important antisemitic texts that claims Jews form a secret and elite cabal to control the world through their wealth. While the *Protocols* have been debunked as a Tsarist forgery, their message of greedy Jews and a massive conspiracy still find support around the world, and George Soros has become the name associated with the conspiracy theory in recent years.

Utilizing this idea in his propaganda, Orbán plastered Soros' face on billboards across Hungary in 2017 as advertising for his Fidesz Party in the 2018 Parliamentary elections.

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<sup>94</sup> Stephen Whitfield, "The Persistence of the *Protocols*," *Soc* 55, (2018): 418.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.



Figure 5. [Source] Akos Stiller, July 10, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40554844>. A poster showing George Soros, saying "Let's not allow Soros to have the last laugh!". Someone has written "dirty Jew" on his forehead.

While Orbán claims that the campaign is not antisemitic, his supporters seem to understand the attacks on Soros for what they really are, attacks on Jews more generally. On this poster, someone added the slur 'dirty Jew' to Soros' forehead, clearly aware of the message Orbán intends to send and even emphasizing the campaign's antisemitic ideology.

With such blatant antisemitism directed at Soros, one of the world's foremost Jewish philanthropists and champions of human rights, it would be expected that Jews around the world would condemn this type of antisemitic fearmongering. While many have, one notable exception to the outrage is the state of Israel and more specifically Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Orbán vilifies the image of Soros to weaponize antisemitic and nationalist feelings just like the HCP intended with the show trial of Laszlo Rajk, but Benjamin Netanyahu has his own agenda



in the anti-Soros campaign that has linked the leader of an antisemitic government with the leader of the Jewish state.

Joshua Shanes, an associate professor of Jewish Studies at the College of Charleston, explains this odd phenomenon as Netanyahu attempts to redefine the term ‘antisemitism.’ Instead of its traditional meaning, Netanyahu is rebranding the term to mean any opposition to the state of Israel, which is really opposition to his own policies and territorial expansion agenda for a ‘Greater Israel.’<sup>96</sup> Under this new definition, anyone opposing Netanyahu’s colonial efforts in the West Bank or decrying any Israeli policy would be labeled antisemitic, even though there are many Jews, let alone gentiles, who oppose such policies. One of these Jews is George Soros, which explains why Netanyahu has been so willing to embrace a leader like Viktor Orban. They are sharing a common enemy. Netanyahu specifically, “accused Soros of organizing the diverse, global protests against Israel’s deportation of African refugees, for example, and Netanyahu defended his son when he posted an antisemitic meme portraying Soros as a global puppet master orchestrating the legal case against the Israeli leader.”<sup>97</sup> Just like Orban who hates Soros for his liberal policies and a pro-immigration stance, Netanyahu is also turning on Soros for his consistency in supporting immigrant communities. Soros is therefore vilified by both leaders as they utilize antisemitic rhetoric to further their own political ambitions, regardless of the cost of their actions.

While all world leaders should feel a moral obligation to denounce antisemitism and refrain from wielding it as a political tool, the leader of Israel is certainly burdened with additional responsibility to this cause. Shanes berates Netanyahu for failing in this task, “And so

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<sup>96</sup> Joshua Shanes, "Netanyahu, Orbán, and the Resurgence of Antisemitism: Lessons of the Last Century," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 37, no. 1 (2019): 109.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

it is that the government of Israel, a state founded in large part to protect Jews from the evils of European antisemitism, is now fully in bed with some of its most virulent contemporary manifestations.”<sup>98</sup> Not only is Netanyahu allowing antisemitic tropes about Soros to circulate, but by embracing a leader who is dealing in the international conspiracy theory of the Jews, Israel is giving a stamp of approval for further antisemitism, instead of leading the fight to combat the growing issue in Europe and around the globe.



Figure 6. [Source] Paras Griffin, July 27, 2020, <https://forward.com/news/451581/jon-ossoff-jewish-nose-david-perdue-antisemitic/>. An ad for Sen. Perdue attacking opponent Jon Ossoff.

While Orban uses the image of George Soros as a scare tactic on advertising all over Hungary, the idea of using a threatening Jewish figure has caught on in the United States, too. As part of a heated Senate race in Georgia, sitting Republican Senator David Perdue had a campaign ad made that featured his opponent, Jon Ossoff alongside Senate minority leader Chuck

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 114.

Schumer. Both Democratic politicians are Jewish, and the advertisement announced that the Democrats were trying to “Buy Georgia”<sup>99</sup> as the Democrats raised another \$3,000,000 to support Ossoff. The traditional use of Jews to discuss financial dealings of your opponents is despicable enough, but the incident could also be dismissed as a campaign attack without any antisemitic undertones, as Chuck Schumer is often a target of right-wing attacks and Ossoff is the candidate in question, but the ad went a step further. The image of Ossoff seems wrong somehow. A more careful examination revealed that the Perdue campaign altered his opponent’s nose to appear bigger and therefore more stereotypically Jewish.<sup>100</sup> Ossoff responded to this outrage by calling on Senator Perdue to donate the money he earned from the campaign and added that this ad featured the “oldest, most obvious, least original anti-Semitic trope in history.”<sup>101</sup>

Ironically, George Soros and Viktor Orban did not begin their relationship as the political enemies they are today. Orban, who portrays Soros as the enemy of Hungary for how he spends his money, was a recipient of Soros’ philanthropy, “Soros’s friends in Hungary’s liberal intelligentsia recommended Orban as one of their own. When Soros met him, he was captivated by the young activist’s charisma. He made a donation to Fidesz and gave Orban a scholarship to study civil society at Oxford.”<sup>102</sup> Not only did Soros jumpstart Orban’s political career with a scholarship to Oxford, but he was also supporting the political party that Orban now uses to smear his name and promote antisemitic hysteria.

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<sup>99</sup> James Arkin, “Ossoff Condemns Perdue Campaign for ‘Offensive,’ ‘anti-Semitic’ digital ad,” *Politico*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/28/jon-ossoff-david-perdue-anti-semitic-ad-384386>.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Franklin Foer, “Viktor Orban’s War on Intellect,” *The Atlantic*, June 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/george-soros-viktor-orban-ceu/588070/>.

#### **2.4: Revising the National Memory, Orban's First Term and Holocaust Revisionism**

While accepting responsibility and guilt for a nation's past crimes should become the standard approach of all governments, taking this step can be especially difficult for countries as they emerged from Iron Curtain at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Professor Jeffrey Blutinger from the California State University at Long Beach studied this phenomenon in his article, "An Inconvenient Past: Post-Communist Holocaust Memorialization." He focused on Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland, diagnosing these nations with aphasia, recognizing their difficulty or unwillingness to openly examine the Holocaust period.<sup>103</sup>

Famed Hungarian Holocaust survivor and scholar Randolph L. Braham also noted that the region was susceptible to a problematic historical memory. He wrote in his 1999 article, "The Assault on Historical Memory: Hungarian Nationalists and the Holocaust," that "The hotbed of antisemitism during much of the twentieth century, East-central Europe, the area in which four-fifths of the close to six million victims of the Holocaust had lived before the war—was a fertile soil for the quick and effective penetration of 'historical revisionism.'"<sup>104</sup> Braham and Blutinger identify that the path to an honest and open interpretation of the Hungarian Holocaust will already be treacherous, but with the Hungarian government actively supporting the revisionists

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<sup>103</sup> Jeffrey Blutinger, "An Inconvenient Past: Post-Communist Holocaust Memorialization," *Shofar* 29, no. 1 (2010): 77.

<sup>104</sup> Randolph L. Braham, "The Assault on Historical Memory: Hungarian Nationalists and the Holocaust," *East European Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 4, (1999): 411.

efforts, the situation becomes desperate to maintain an accurate historical record and national memory.

While the focus of this thesis so far has been on the damage caused by Viktor Orban during his time as prime minister from 2010 to the present, his efforts to rewrite Hungarian Holocaust history began already during his first term as prime minister from 1998 to 2002. One of the tactics he employed then is what Braham refers to as ‘denationalization,’ a tactic intended to transfer responsibility exclusively to the Nazis, ignoring and whitewashing the nation’s collaborators who helped make extermination possible.<sup>105</sup> Blutinger references Orban’s plans to redesign the exhibition in the Hungarian pavilion at the Auschwitz memorial as an especially egregious case of denationalization, with Orban having to withdraw his plans under international scrutiny that argued Hungary had “(a) basically falsified the history of the Jews in Hungary in general and the Holocaust era in particular and (b) appeared to have a political objective: the rehabilitation of the Horthy era by transferring almost all responsibility for whatever crimes were committed in Hungary almost exclusively to the Nazis.”<sup>106</sup> The effort to rehabilitate Admiral Miklos Horthy is a charge that is often used against Orban. The need to denounce this type of rehabilitation highlights the tactics of revisionist minded politicians and historians in Hungary today.

Having been forced to back down from his plan to renovate the Hungarian pavilion at Auschwitz, Orban turned his attention to a new project, the House of Terror, with a committee that included the controversial Hungarian historian Maria Schmidt. Schmidt had worked on the Auschwitz memorial pavilion project and defended its historical vision, “World War II was not

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>106</sup> Blutinger, “An Inconvenient Past: Post-Communist Holocaust Memorialization,” 86.

about the Jews or genocide’ adding that the extermination or rescue of the Jews ‘was a secondary issue—we may even call it a marginal one—which did not feature among the war aims of either side in the conflict.’ Schmidt also argued that the term ‘holocaust’ should apply not only to the extermination of the Jews during World War II, but also to the genocide committed by the Communists.<sup>107</sup> This philosophy is problematic, if not simply inaccurate, and it carried over into the construction of the House of Terror.

The House of Terror museum, opened in 2002 in Budapest, occupies the building that was not only the former headquarters of Arrow Cross, but also the communist secret police, setting the tone for a split in the atrocities that the museum would educate the public about. Sharing the building to discuss the victims of the Holocaust and the HCP is not inherently problematic, as both fascist and communist governments had used the buildings to terrorize Hungarians, but the dynamic needed to be managed carefully to avoid sending revisionist messaging. Instead, Schmidt, the general director of the museum, included barely three rooms in the four-story museum devoted to the Holocaust with the focus of the rooms being to disperse blame and depict the Hungarians as victims of Nazi aggression, rather than pay tribute to the Jews who had been slaughtered.<sup>108</sup> By dedicating the bulk of the museum to the communist experience and whitewashing Hungarian collaboration during the Holocaust, Jewish suffering and victimization is downplayed significantly and even buried in comparison to what Orban, Schmidt, and other revisionists wanted to focus on, the suffering inflicted by the HCP. Braham describes this argumentative strategy of revision as ‘generalization,’ in which it is argued that Hungarian suffering was equal to or worse than Jewish Hungarian suffering, and therefore, the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 83.

collective or general trauma is what deserves the focus.<sup>109</sup> This message is especially degrading to the Jewish experience, as funds were diverted from a museum that planned to honor Holocaust memory to finish constructing the House of Terror.<sup>110</sup>

Beyond the revisionist agenda of the House of Terror museum, some critics have questioned its very designation as a museum. One critic, Budapest Professor András Rényi, argues “that the House of Terror is less a historical and more a rhetorical achievement, proudly admitting that it does not calmly observe history from a distance, but rather directly, dedicatedly, and passionately *creates* history.”<sup>111</sup> The emphasis on ‘creates’ is important because the government is creating history that is more favorable to nationalist sentiments, rather than examining the events to come to an honest characterization. While the historical record is constantly evolving to consider new evidence and discoveries, to implement change for political purposes cannot be allowed. Rényi continues to offer “a very sharp dividing line between the general definition of museums and the self-classification of the House of Terror: ‘It is common knowledge that so far the House of Terror has established no archival background, and it is more than questionable even for laypeople whether the museum’s attempt at a coherent historical conception would stand up to even the most basic professional scrutiny.’”<sup>112</sup> The most basic professional scrutiny, by an academic like Rényi, does tear down the false narrative created by Schmidt, but the House of Terror still stands committed to its ideological foundation—denying Hungary bears responsibility for collaborating with the Nazis—while simultaneously

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<sup>109</sup> Braham, “The Assault on Historical Memory: Hungarian Nationalists and the Holocaust,” 416-417.

<sup>110</sup> Blutinger, “An Inconvenient Past: Post-Communist Holocaust Memorialization,” 86.

<sup>111</sup> Zsofia Reti, “Past Traumas and Future Generations: Cultural Memory Transmission in Hungarian Sites of Memory,” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (2017): 382.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

emphasizing the trauma of the communist period of Hungarian history, helping to reconstruct a nationalist conception of the nation.

### **2.5: Historical Revisionism Continued, Orban's Second Term**

Orban began his second term once again with a focus on Hungarian victimization. A super-majority in parliament allowed him to rewrite the nation's constitution. In an article published in 2020, Randolph L. Braham and Paul Hanebrink, a Rutgers historian, investigated the issue of Holocaust revisionism and titled their findings "The Holocaust in Hungary: A Critical Analysis." These scholars quote the new constitution, "In a crucial passage in the new preamble, the framers declared: 'We date the restoration of our country's self-determination, which was lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944, from the second day of May 1990' (when Hungary had its first free and fair post-Communist elections). 'We shall consider this date,' they continued, 'the beginning of our country's new democracy and constitutional order.'"<sup>113</sup> This dating system paints a broad picture of Hungarian victimization spanning decades where oppressive regimes reigned over the Hungarian people, while redefining the period of the Holocaust in Hungary to exclude the possibility of Hungarian culpability. If the country lacked autonomy, how could it be held responsible for its actions? This is a dangerous precedent for any nation, but for one with a complex relationship to its Jewish population and who actively assisted in the murder of

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<sup>113</sup> Randolph L. Braham, and Paul Hanebrink, "The Holocaust in Hungary: A Critical Analysis," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 34, no. 1 (2020): 2.



hundreds of thousands of those Jews between 1941 and 1945, the issue must not be glossed over and covered up, especially not in a foundational document like the national constitution.

A move by Orban in 2014 also drew heavy criticism, the announcement of a new monument dedicated to the German invasion of Hungary in 1944. The German Occupation Monument (figure 7) shows the Archangel Gabriel, representing Hungary, being assaulted by a large eagle, Germany, that includes an anklet with 1944 inscribed on it.



Figure 7. [Source] Szilas, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/hungary/goodbye-historikerstreit-hello-budapest-city-of-angels-the-debate-about-the-monument-to-the-german-occupation/>. Monument to the Victims of the German Occupation, Szabadsag Square, Budapest.

Hungarian historian and professor Ferenc Laczó describes the fallout from the announcement of the statue's construction, "critics of the German occupation statue saw in the initiative a blunt attempt to visually represent the thesis of the preamble of the new Hungarian

so-called basic law whereby Hungarian sovereignty was terminated on 19 March 1944, that is prior to the mass deportation of the majority of the Hungarian Jewish community. The preamble thereby aims to externalize Hungarian responsibilities.”<sup>114</sup> Critics are justifiably outraged, because the message that Hungarians were the victims of Nazi aggression dispels the history of collaboration and even the alliance that Horthy had formed with the Nazis. At the very least the monument ignores the suffering of the Jews under the Nazi occupation by grouping the whole society together, the generalization tactic that Braham described, as if the persecution had been evenly distributed across the nation. These critics saw the statue as an attempt to ignore the nation’s own guilt for the Holocaust, rejecting the claim that Hungary seized to be an autonomous nation after the Nazis invaded. This is a powerful statement of historical revisionism, and even worse, as the Laczó mentions, these ideas were written into the constitution of 2011.

With 2014 marking such a wayward year in Holocaust revisionism and remembrance in Hungary, it is not surprising that Randolph L. Braham issued a powerful rebuke of Viktor Orban, his Fidesz party, and the campaign to undermine the nation’s historical record. Braham wrote in a powerful letter asking for his name to be removed from the Library and Information Center at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest:

“The history-cleansing campaign of the past few years calculated to whitewash the historical record of the Horthy era, including the changes in the constitution that “legalized” the sinister measures that were subsequently taken to absolve Hungary from the active role it had played in the destruction of close to 600,000 of its citizens of the

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<sup>114</sup> Ferenc Laczó, "Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt? Commemorating the Holocaust in Hungary," *Südost Europa* 64, no. 2 (2016): 180.

Jewish faith, have left me, and I assume many others, stunned. The straw that broke the camel's back in my decision was the government's resolve to erect a national statue relating to the German occupation – a cowardly attempt to detract attention from the Horthy regime's involvement in the destruction of the Jews and to homogenize the Holocaust with the "suffering" of the Hungarians – a German occupation, as the record clearly shows, that was not only unopposed but generally applauded."<sup>115</sup>

Braham had previously been awarded the Medium Cross of the Order of the Republic of Hungary for his status in the field of Holocaust studies, but as part of his denunciation of revisionism, he also returned the award.<sup>116</sup> Braham continued "I ... a survivor whose parents and many family members were among the hundreds of thousands of murdered Jews, cannot remain silent, especially since it was my destiny to work on the preservation of the historical record of the Holocaust."<sup>117</sup> Braham's protest was noted by scholars and activists around the world, including Paul Shapiro, the director of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Shapiro praised Braham as, "the world's most important and most authoritative scholar of the Holocaust in Hungary... In [Braham's] protest ... it is important to recognize the impeccable authority with which [he] speaks and to hear, at the same time, the voice of a Hungarian Holocaust survivor who is defending the dignity and memory of the hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews who were delivered to their deaths by Hungarian authorities during World War II and cannot speak for themselves."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Randolph L. Braham, "Randolph L. Braham's Open Letter," *Hungarian Spectrum*, January 26, 2014, <http://hungarianspectrum.org/2014/01/26/randolph-l-brahams-open-letter/>.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Pablo Gorondi, "Holocaust Historian Returning Award to Hungary," *Associated Press News*, January 26, 2014, <https://apnews.com/article/e45662f077314ed79fa265bb1314a91e>.

Historical revisionism pushed by Viktor Orban and his government by rewriting the constitution and constructing monuments to reflect their altered view of the past are especially egregious in a nation like Hungary, where the wounds from Holocaust collaboration need to be reviewed honestly to rebuild trust with the Jewish community. In addition, the persistent emphasis of his policies reveals the importance he places on rewriting history to erase nationalist guilt, an end that he must not be allowed to achieve.

## **2.6: The Struggle Over Education**

Prime Minister Viktor Orban has also taken aim at the system of education in Hungary to further his illiberal vision. These tactics include,

“[lowering] the age at which compulsory education ends from 18 to 16, triggering a spike in high-school dropouts. Textbooks and curricula, once the domain of municipalities, have been centralized and now inculcate the regime’s politics...The country’s universities, which had been free, have begun charging tuition, and the cost now exceeds the reach of most Hungarians. Hungary used to have the highest level of university enrollment in postcommunist Europe; it now has one of the lowest. Once-great institutions have become venues for cronyism. Law students are more likely to receive stipends if they study at the one institution filled with Fidesz loyalists.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Franklin Foer, “Viktor Orban’s War on Intellect.”

These changes serve the purpose of under educating the public or forcing those Hungarians who are seeking education to become reliant on the government. Either option leaves the average citizen vulnerable to political manipulation or unable to sort through the truth and lies of Orban's propaganda campaigns. Hungarian political analyst and director of the Budapest-based Political Capital Institute, Peter Kreko, summarizes the moves, "The government is quite clear that patriotic education is as important as transferring knowledge."<sup>120</sup> Outside of Hungary, similar initiatives and plans are also underway to rewrite history from the far-right nationalist political perspective, under the self-prescribed label of 'patriotic education.'

In the United States, attempts have been made to obscure the nation's past transgressions in favor of a comforting story about slavery, racism, and other stains. While Donald Trump recently lost the 2020 Presidential Election, his campaign platform included calls for a new type of education in the United States. NPR reported on this story with an article titled "Trump Announces 'Patriotic Education' Commission, A Largely Political Move." According to NPR, "In austere, starkly divisive remarks, President Trump on Thursday said he would create a commission to promote "patriotic education" and announced the creation of a grant to develop a pro-American curriculum... 'Teaching this horrible doctrine to our children is a form of child abuse, the truest sense,' Trump said. 'For many years now, the radicals have mistaken Americans' silence for weakness. They're wrong. There is no more powerful force than a parent's love for their children. And patriotic moms and dads are going to demand that their children are no longer fed hateful lies about this country.'"<sup>121</sup> Likening an honest look at a nation's past to

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Alana Wise, "Trump Announces 'Patriotic Education' Commission, A largely Political Move," *National Public Radio*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/17/914127266/trump-announces-patriotic-education-commission-a-largely-political-move>.

child-abuse is a stretch, but the messaging from a government leader is the same: we need to think positively, not honestly about our shared history. An important difference between these scenes is that the federal government of the United States cannot intervene in a state's educational curriculum, while Orban's actions are just that, direct intervention.

In the United States, this nationalist ideology and historical remembrance has been challenged across academia, especially by the New York Times' 1619 Project. The New York Times initiative aimed to study slavery from its earliest roots in the nation, to reveal the deeper relationship between the institution and the modern state of America. President Trump and his right-wing allies have pushed back against the New York Times' project with an announcement that his patriotic education program would be called the 1776 Commission.<sup>122</sup> Interestingly, this idea of returning to 1776 as a date of national pride mirrors Orban's rewritten constitution, where he suggests which dates constitute real Hungarian history, while other dates must be ignored.

Orban's most notable attack on Liberal educational values was launched in 2017 against the Central European University (CEU) and successfully forced the university to close its Budapest campus. This end was achieved by passing legislation requiring that all foreign-based universities in Hungary also have a campus in their native country. While CEU did not have a campus in the United States at the time, they quickly formed a partnership with Bard College in New York. Ultimately, their efforts were in vain, and the university relocated to Vienna.

CEU, as a bastion of free expression and academia, openly challenged Orban's authoritarian and illiberal agenda. The university also has close ties to George Soros. This combination certainly influenced Orban's thinking and led him to take action against the renowned university. CEU was founded through George Soros' philanthropic efforts in 1991 and

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

bolstered by a \$250 million donation to CEU's endowment in 2001.<sup>123</sup> The university's mission was to promote democracy and the values of a free society in the former Soviet bloc, while also helping to train the next generation of intellectuals to mold the newly open society.<sup>124</sup> While it would seem attacks on the university were almost inevitable, with its mission and Soros' connection, many were shocked and outraged that Orban would take such a bold step. Michael Ignatieff, the president of the university spoke to the New York Times saying, "C.E.U. has been forced out. ... This is unprecedented. A U.S. institution has been driven out of a country that is a NATO ally. A European institution has been ousted from a member state of the E.U."<sup>125</sup> Ignatieff's comments highlight one of the major concerns of Orban's actions, his country belongs to NATO and the EU, and yet these organizations seem unable or unwilling to curb his authoritarian and antisemitic tendencies in a meaningful way. The EU did intervene in the case of CEU, ultimately ruling in court that, "the conditions introduced by Hungary to enable foreign higher education institutions to carry out their activities in its territory are incompatible with EU law."<sup>126</sup> While this ruling initially appears to be a defeat for Orban's hopes to evict CEU and forge ahead with his plan for an illiberal Hungary, the reality is not as clear. Soros, while praising the ruling as, "a victory for the fundamental values of the European Union," also admits that, "The decision comes too late for CEU... We cannot return to Hungary, because its

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<sup>123</sup> Foer, "Viktor Orban's War on Intellect."

<sup>124</sup> "Hungary Passes a Law to Shut down a Bothersome University," *The Economist*, April 8, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/04/08/hungary-passes-a-law-to-shut-down-a-bothersome-university>.

<sup>125</sup> Marc Santora, "George Soros-Funded University is Forced Out Of Hungary," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/03/world/europe/soros-hungary-central-european-university.html>.

<sup>126</sup> Raf Casert, "EU Court Rules Against Hungary's Orban Over Soros University," *Associated Press News*, October 6, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/george-soros-courts-higher-education-hungary-education-444c42b54b945259603e1c263d770a47>.

prevailing laws don't meet the requirements of academic freedom."<sup>127</sup> Even when the EU steps in to correct antidemocratic behavior, it is too little too late to protect a prestigious university.

For younger Hungarian students, Orban has also implemented changes that will impact their ability to gain an accurate account of history and Hungarian literature. One of these initiatives involves altering the educational curriculum to include more nationalist writers, at the expense of Nobel Prize winning Holocaust survivors. Imre Kertész won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2002 for his book *Fatelessness*, which is based on his personal experience as a Holocaust survivor who was deported to Auschwitz in 1944.<sup>128</sup> As Hungary's first Nobel Prize winner in literature, Kertész's work should be celebrated as the masterpiece it is, but its subject matter no longer aligns with the nationalist messaging of the Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his regime. In place of an important text, the new curriculum highlights Hungarian authors with a special focus on those writers offering a nostalgic memory of Greater Hungary before the tragedy of Trianon in 1920.<sup>129</sup> Harvard Professor Susan Rubin Suleiman, born in Budapest before emigrating the US as a child, laments the exclusion of Kertész, while including three controversial authors on the reading list,

“Ferenc Herczeg (1863-1954), Albert Wass (1908-1998), and József Nyírő (1889-1953) are not exactly household names in Hungary today, though they were popular enough in their time. Herczeg was even mentioned for the Nobel Prize. But they certainly do not belong in the 20th-century literary canon, according to specialists. What all three writers have in common...is that they wrote ideological novels that glorify mythical ideas of

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Susan Suleiman, “Jewish Noble Laureate Imre Kertész Is Dumped From the Hungarian Curriculum,” *Tablet Magazine*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/holocaust-hungary-viktor-orban>.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.



“Hungarianness” and present Hungary as a victim of Western powers after the Great War; implicitly or explicitly, they call for a return to pre-1919 borders...that all three were convinced anti-Semites goes almost without saying.”<sup>130</sup>

As Professor Suleiman points out, the alterations to the curriculum continue to revolve around the nation’s perceived borders and the notion of what was Hungary compared to what it is today. From an educational perspective, the decision does not make sense, as quality authors are being pushed aside in favor of inferior ones, so the driving forces behind the changes must be political. These political motives are clear, the removal of a Holocaust narrative in favor of antisemitic authors glorifying Hungary and lamenting the tragedy of World War I reveal another phase of Viktor Orban and his regime’s attempt to rewrite history at the expense of the nation’s Jews while bolstering their nationalist vision of what it means to be Hungarian.

### **2.7: Orban Not Solely to Blame for the Crisis, the Case of Jobbik**

While Orban is the primary culprit, and the most influential in Hungary, for utilizing antisemitism and historical revisionism, other actors must be condemned, too. It was previously noted from the study of Kovacs and Barna (2019) that in 2010 there was a marked increase in antisemitic attitudes in the country, which continued to rise until their data ran out in 2017. With the election of Viktor Orban in 2010, it would seem logical that the issue at that time stemmed from his campaign; however, that was not the researcher’s conclusion. The study showed that

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

antisemitism in the political landscape was an important factor, but that Orban was not the chief offender. Instead, the increase was, “linked with the appearance on the political scene of Jobbik, an openly antisemitic party.”<sup>131</sup> This makes sense if one compares the degree of antisemitism within Hungary’s main parties. 51% of Jobbik voters were deemed ‘extreme antisemites,’ with another 19% harboring ‘moderately’ antisemitic views, for a total of 70% of party voters being antisemites.<sup>132</sup> At that point in time, Fidesz members were testing at 20% and 19% respectively for ‘severe’ and ‘moderate’ antisemitic views.<sup>133</sup> Orban has certainly increased his antisemitic messaging since 2010, likely attracting more of Jobbik’s voters, as the Jobbik party has declined steadily in parliamentary representation since their peak of 17% in 2010.

One of the main aspects of their antisemitic character was the creation of a militia unit called the Magyar Garda (Hungarian Guard) that strongly resembled the fascist Arrow Cross. In the Holocaust Remembrance Project’s analysis of Hungary, where the country earned the lowest possible score (red) for its historical memorialization of the Holocaust, the Jobbik militia was described as, “a paramilitary organization that struck a chilling resemblance to the Arrow Cross” and was ultimately outlawed by Orban and the Hungarian courts in 2009.<sup>134</sup> Even as a banned group, Orban and the courts could not fully suppress the militia or its ideology, as Jobbik leader Gabor Vona, “threw off his jacket in a swearing-in ceremony in 2014 to display the Guard’s ‘fascistlike uniform.’”<sup>135</sup> The recreation and glorification of Arrow Cross is too far for Orban, highlighting the differences between a skilled political operative like Orban, and a neo-Nazi style

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<sup>131</sup> Andras Kovacs, “Antisemitic Prejudices and Dynamics of Antisemitism in Post-Communist Hungary,” paper presented at the Antisemitism in Europe Today: the Phenomena, the Conflicts International conference, Berlin, Germany, November 8-9, 2013, 22.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>134</sup> Caderyn Owen-Jones, “Hungary,” *Holocaust Remembrance Project*, January 25, 2019, <https://www.holocaustremembranceproject.com/Countries/Hungary>.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

party like Jobbik. These open displays and marches of the Hungarian Guard may have been one of the factors inspiring the increase in antisemitism, even though the units were banned in 2009.

A final example that emphasizes Jobbik's antisemitic nature occurred in late November 2012, when Marton Gyongyosi, a leader of the Jobbik party, called for a list to be made of Jews who may pose a national security risk to Hungary. The comments came amid increased Israeli-Palestinian tensions and Gyongyosi justified his call for list by stating, "I think such a conflict makes it timely to tally up people of Jewish ancestry who live here, especially in the Hungarian Parliament and the Hungarian government, who, indeed, pose a national security risk to Hungary."<sup>136</sup> Any reference to lists involving Jews invokes the Holocaust, where infamous lists of Jewish citizens were put together or obtained by the Nazis and their collaborators to more efficiently massacre the Jewish population of Europe. The comments were rejected by all of the major Hungarian political parties, including Fidesz.<sup>137</sup> Only Prime Minister Viktor Orban remained "silent" on the issue until December, before finally issuing a statement, "On December 3rd Mr. Orban finally spoke out in parliament, saying that Mr. Gyongyosi's remarks were 'unworthy of Hungary'. He received Peter Feldmajer, the leader of Hungary's Jewish community, and pledged that all Hungarians would be secure and protected."<sup>138</sup> Even when Orban was not directly leading antisemitic campaigns, his silence on Gyongyosi's comments seem to suggest far more about his thoughts on the issue of lists than his late statement condemning the idea. Also, there is a difference between Orban pledging to keep Hungarian Jews safe, like he would argue Regent Horthy did, and combatting antisemitism. If Orban

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<sup>136</sup> Marton Dunai, "Anger As Hungarian Far-Right Leader Demands Lists of Jews," *Reuters*, November 27, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-antisemitism/anger-as-hungary-far-right-leader-demands-lists-of-jews-idUSBRE8AQ0L920121127>.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> "United Against Jobbik," *The Economist*, December 8, 2012, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2012/12/08/united-against-jobbik>.

wanted to be a true ally of Hungarian Jewry he would refrain from utilizing antisemitism to further his own political objectives.

In another parallel between the political climate in Hungary and the United States, in 2017 former President Donald Trump faced criticism for belatedly condemning hate after a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia left a woman dead and many more injured. The Guardian reported, “Donald Trump has bowed to overwhelming pressure and directly condemned the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis and white supremacists, two days after violent clashes left one woman dead. ‘Racism is evil ... And those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including the KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups that are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans.’”<sup>139</sup> When Trump finally seemed to abandon his narrative that both sides of the conflict were guilty of violent acts, he delivered a strong condemnation of the events that took place in Charlottesville, but for many, his comments came too late to be considered sincere and suggested his rhetoric was disingenuous.

Jobbik is certainly guilty of a list of antisemitic offenses, but another target of right-wing nationalists, including Jobbik supporters, is the Roma community of Hungary. Attacks against the Roma in Hungary seemed to be associated with the creation of Jobbik’s Hungarian Guard militia and began to turn deadly, culminating in what became known as the Roma serial killings in 2008/09. At least six Roma were assassinated and another 55 seriously injured. The attacks in different parts of the country left the whole community in a state of fear.<sup>140</sup> While the perpetrators may not have been affiliated with Jobbik, the party failed to denounce the attacks

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<sup>139</sup> David Smith et al., “Trump Finally Condemns Charlottesville Racism, Days After the Violence,” *The Guardian*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/14/donald-trump-charlottesville-response-washington>.

<sup>140</sup> Keno Verseck, “Decade After neo-Nazi Killings, Hungary Hostile for Roma,” *Deutsche Welle*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/decade-after-neo-nazi-killings-hungary-hostile-for-roma/a-47642342>.

and even utilized it politically, “The rhetoric was clear ... Everything was the fault of the Gypsies. And there was a campaign promise from Jobbik that they would force the Roma out.”<sup>141</sup> Even if not directly responsible, Jobbik was exploiting the situation to help win over voters in the 2010 elections. They even exceed Orban’s tactics, as they organized and championed violence against a minority community.

This is not an exhaustive list of Jobbik offenses, since they are not the focus of this paper. Instead, these examples highlight that antisemitic sentiment in Hungary are widespread. Apart from Viktor Orban other political actors also use anti-Semitism for political gain.

Recently Jobbik has joined a coalition of parties seeking to form the next government after the 2022 election and push out Viktor Orban. In a statement made jointly by the six largest opposition parties in Hungary, they said, “Hungary has entered the gates of a new era...For the first time in the last decade, there is a real chance that the Hungarian people will shake off the corrupt and dishonest rule of the Fidesz-KDNP.”<sup>142</sup> While it might seem like trading Orban and Fidesz for a coalition that includes Jobbik will not be much improvement based on Jobbik’s past, the switch could prove positive. The party has recently undergone changes “Since 2013, its leaders have attempted to reform their image and have become more centrist. Empirical research done on parliamentary speeches of the party even revealed that anti-Roma sentiment virtually disappeared and the party now, while still highly conservative, has been lauded by some members of the Jewish community and heralded as a way to fight Fidesz. The far-right within the party have since split, to form the fascist Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk

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<sup>141</sup> Chuck Sudetic, “Roma in Political Life: Hungary—From Transition to Hate Politics,” *Open Society Foundations*, November 10, 2013, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/roma-political-life-hungary-transition-hate-politics>.

<sup>142</sup> Vlagyiszlav Makszimov, “Hungarian Opposition Forces Unite to Beat Orban in 2022,” *EurActiv*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/hungarian-opposition-forces-unite-to-beat-orban-in-2022/>.

Mozgalom).”<sup>143</sup> After separating from its extremist right-wing members Jobbik has been able to rebrand to a degree and move closer to the political center. It is possible that some of the far-right principles could still be in place, with party members no longer freely expressing those sentiments, but removing Orbán is worth taking that risk. In addition, the coalition has taken precautions against any lingering extremist views by placing “conditions on selecting joint candidates, which include barring candidates that have made statements that ‘offend human dignity,’ participated in corruption offences or other violations of law, or have collaborated with Fidesz.”<sup>144</sup> Not only is this clause important in suppressing any remnants of far-right Jobbik ideology, but it also demonstrates that the coalition stands in opposition to human rights abuses and will likely be a willing partner in destroying the systems of historical revisionism and antisemitism that have become synonymous with the governance of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Beyond the proper ideology to restore an open society in Hungary, the new coalition also appears to have a chance to unseat Orbán. In the October 2020 local elections, the new coalition was able to defeat the Fidesz mayor of Budapest. Currently some national polls show the coalition 2-4% points ahead of Fidesz.<sup>145</sup> Will the opposition win the 2022 national election? It is too early to make reliable assessments. Orbán has changed laws before to suit his political needs and may alter election laws again to fend off the united coalition front. For now, there is hope again for a brighter future beyond Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

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<sup>143</sup> Caderyn Owen-Jones, “Hungary.”

<sup>144</sup> Makszimov, “Hungarian Opposition Forces Unite to Beat Orbán in 2022.”

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Analyzing Prime Minister Viktor Orban highlights how he makes use of a resurgent tide of antisemitism to maintain power and further his political agenda for an illiberal Hungary. Others may try similar tactics, but Orban is more socially aware than groups like Jobbik and his messaging is coded to appeal to a larger group of Hungarians. His dangerous message seeks to destroy democracy, reverting Hungary back to authoritarian rule. He also wants to eliminate the social institutions of a free and open society, exemplified by his struggle with Central European University. These moves can have dramatic implications for all of Hungary's racial minorities. With fewer checks on Orban's power, exploitation or scapegoating of Jews and Roma could escalate to dangerous levels. While physical violence against Hungarian Jews has yet to become a problem, violence against Roma has been an issue in recent years and underlines the consequences of denigrating minority groups.

Although gentile-Jewish relations were built upon a solid foundation of mutual trust in Hungary, that dynamic has been worn thin by decades of antisemitic attacks and political lies designed to bolster the aspirations of the individual or party willing to engage in this divisive rhetoric. Hungary still contains a large, mostly urban, Jewish population of roughly 100,000 citizens. The community's size is proof of its durability and desire to remain in Hungary as Hungarians. Importantly, this community still has allies within the nation. While Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Fidesz appeared to have a firm control over the nation's politics with supermajority victories in consecutive elections, that control is going to be heavily challenged in 2022. This should be viewed as a sign that it is possible to defeat the antisemitic, revisionist, and nationalist ideology that Orban and Fidesz have represented for over a decade.

Putting an end to historical revisionism must be a top agenda priority for a new government, as this force is one of the most damaging political instruments that Orban employs. Revisionism is especially dangerous, because as time continues to pass, the Holocaust may slip further into the recesses of our collective memory—this cannot be allowed to happen. By denying the crimes that were unmistakably committed, the Hungarian memory will continue to dismiss the importance of an honest understanding of the Holocaust. This gap in historical consciousness creates the opportunity for future antisemitism to thrive, or for new forms of more violent and suppressive policies to target Hungarian Jewry once again. In addition, with these practices becoming more widespread across Europe, it is essential that they be put down and opposed every step of the way by the EU and other international or national bodies that have a moral obligation to intervene. These ideologies must not be allowed to enter mainstream political culture, or they risk becoming normalized and legitimized.

It is not too late to reverse the path of Hungarian Jewish-gentile relations and counteract the rise of antisemitism across the globe. Viktor Orban must be replaced or undergo a radical transformation back to his early political days. At that time, he understood the value of education and that a rich Jew is not controlling the world, but rather supporting the future development of Hungary and other nations emerging from the iron curtain of Communism. In the United States, voters favored Joe Biden and Jon Ossoff over their challengers who employed tactics previously compared to those of Orban. In addition, Benjamin Netanyahu's grip on power seems to be slipping in Israel. Ultimately, defeating the forces of antisemitism, historical revisionism, and other forms of racist hatred is not only crucial for maintaining an open and inclusive global society that secures a future for all individuals regardless of distinguishing factors, but also achievable.



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