

Jeffery, Lucy and Anna Váradi (eds). *The Long Shadow of Communism: Replaying Communism - Trauma and nostalgia in European Cultural Production*. CEU Press, Budapest, 2025. 298 pp.

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It is always a fascinating academic question whether it is possible to replay the past. The answer is simple and brief: obviously not. However, reliving and rethinking the past, and posing well-founded and academically valid questions about historical narratives, is not only possible but also necessary. This is important, among other reasons, because historical narratives shape historical memory. Memories of the past are also highly diverse; not only do individuals' memories differ, but so do those of groups, as past events were experienced and are evaluated in different ways depending on one's social position.

Historical research plays a decisive role in fostering the development of a widely accepted canon of memory regarding our shared past. This is especially true when researchers not only seek to uncover and understand historical processes but also interpret them and analyze the impact of the past on the present and its role in shaping collective memory. This is why the collection of essays edited by Lucy Jefferey and Anna Váradi, titled *Replaying Communism: Trauma and Nostalgia in European Cultural Production*, is of great significance. This volume innovatively examines the connections between the past and the present, the impact of the past on the present, and the formation of historical memory.

The existence of communist regimes had a lasting impact on the transformations of Central and Eastern European countries and societies, not only in the second half of the twentieth century, but also after the collapse of 1989–90. Although three and a half decades have passed, the memory of this era—and the traumas that have still not been fully processed—remains present in the consciousness and memory of the societies of the former communist countries. Alongside the trauma, a sense of nostalgic memory is also perceptible, triggered in part by the unresolved nature of post-communist memory and the occasional intensification of economic and social crises. This duality and uncertainty have influenced and continue to influence the identities of societies in the region. Through its works, contemporary culture simultaneously creates the possibility of coming to terms with the communist past and confronting it. Not only do traumas become manageable, but the history of everyday life during the communist era also becomes more comprehensible.

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The twelve essays in the volume *Replaying Communism* take an interdisciplinary approach to examining works, spaces, and products of contemporary culture that engage with the communist past, with the aim of demonstrating its impact on the present and the present's relationship to that past. The essays, which address a wide range of subtopics, are linked by the paradigms of trauma and nostalgia, as well as the representation and interpretation of various types of memory fields. Another important common thread among the individual analyses is the examination and interpretation of the impact of the shared Central and Eastern European past on identity, using specific cultural spaces, products, and phenomena as points of reference.

The introductory essay by Lucy Jefferey and Anna Váradi, which presents original perspectives, provides the academic context for each analysis. The two authors' essay reviews the most important theoretical foundations, including definitions of concepts related to memory, politics, museum studies, and media studies. It is very important that the introduction defines and interprets the trauma/nostalgia paradigm in relation to post-communist societies in Central and Eastern Europe. It also highlights the fact that rethinking communist memories through contemporary cultural productions offers a new perspective for societies in Central and Eastern European countries to come to terms with their recent history and the long shadow of communism.

Each chapter examines the impact of the "reinterpretation" of communism on contemporary society, encouraging readers to reflect on how the communist era is continually reimagined and reinterpreted by contemporary artists and researchers in Central and Eastern Europe. Given the limited scope of this review, it is obviously not possible to provide a detailed overview of every study; therefore, I offer brief summaries and assessments.

Five essays deal in some way with museums' interpretation of the communist past and their role in shaping memory. In her study, Carmen Levick examined the Braşov History Museum's unique collection of comic books about the 1989 Romanian Revolution. Through these comics, which capture individual experiences, the museum sought to develop a different method of examining history, memory, and trauma. The result is a mosaic of extraordinary personal memories that illustrates how collective trauma can shape contemporary national identities in Central and Eastern Europe.

In her study, Samantha Vaughn analyzed the model apartment on display at the Museum of Living Under Communism in Warsaw. She emphasizes that nostalgia is not the museum's primary message, thereby enabling a nuanced presentation of the experiences of Polish communism that remains relevant to contemporary Polish communities.

Two other museum-themed studies interpret the construction of memory regarding communist oppression. In Bulgaria, there were plans to convert the Belene concentration camp into a museum, but this ultimately did not take place due to the specific nature of the Bulgarian de-communization process. Georgeta Nazarska's essay presents the debates and discourses surrounding the transformation of traumatic memories left by the Bulgarian communist regime into a museum, highlighting the multifaceted network of relationships between trauma and memory.

In the fourth museum-themed analysis, Katarzyna Jarosz examines the exhibitions at the Museum of the Occupation and Struggle for Freedom in Vilnius and Grūtas Park in Druskininkai. She points out that the primary function of these museums is to confront and process the traumas of the past. They document the atrocities of the Soviet era and thereby become sites of memory, emphasizing the narrative of independence, which strengthens Lithuanian national identity.

In this thematic section, the author of the final essay, Natasa Jagdhuhn, examines how the visual and performing arts reinterpret the post-socialist Yugoslav legacy, distancing themselves from ethno-nationalism. The author analyses exhibitions at the Museum of the History of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Yugoslav Museum, as well as the roles of artists and curators, focusing primarily on the interpretation of trauma.

Another group of essays in this volume explores and interprets the manifestation and representation of the communist past in various visual media and spaces. In her analysis, Lucia Szemetová examines the cultural afterlife of state propaganda films by looking at Zsigmond Gábor Papp's eight-part *Retro* series, filmed between 1998 and 2022. The author emphasizes how Papp's creative documentaries enable today's Hungarian viewers to reconnect with memories of the Kádár era. Through Papp's re-enactment of films from the communist era, the act of remembering state socialism may offer viewers the possibility of a cultural belonging and national identity rooted in humor and creativity, in a manner that is partly ironic and partly nostalgic.

In their analysis of the TV series *Deutschland 89*, Lucy Jeffery and Anna Váradi examine the role played by post-communist trauma, the experience of a "heimatlos" (homeless) existence, and the cultural divide between East and West Germany in the existence of a unified German nation, long after "die Wende" (the transition). They also point out that the division between East and West Germany is stronger than the tradition of common history, and this has caused difficulties in the formation of a shared post-reunification identity.

Another fascinating development is that, over the past decade and a half, the portrayal of the socialist era has become uniquely politicized in Central and Eastern Europe as a result of the rise of illiberal cultural policies, a trend that has also influenced national film production. Veronika Hermann's essay also interprets this process by examining the Hungarian series *The Informant* (HBO Max, 2022) and the Czech series *Bez vědomí* (The Sleepers, HBO, 2019). She notes that contemporary Central and Eastern European television productions portray a transnational, Westernized image of socialism as a response to current trends in political authoritarianism and populism.

From the perspective of historical research, studies that examine memory constructions appearing on various online platforms in terms of the re-enactment of communism are particularly noteworthy. Kateryna Jeremieieva examines how anecdotes from the Soviet era appearing on Russian online forums serve, on the one hand, as a means of commemorating the Soviet past and, on the other hand, as an expression of nostalgia for that era. Through this, the author also analyses the lasting effects of authoritarian discourses on contemporary post-Soviet identities.

Some authors of this volume—David Scott Diffrient, Sam Ernst, and Claus Toft-Nielsen—take an innovative approach by incorporating computer and video games that re-enact events from the communist era into their examination of trauma, nostalgia, and memory. This allows players, for example, to experience the 1956 anti-communist Hungarian Revolution as historical figures or, in an Estonian-developed game, to immerse themselves in the trauma of a failed communist revolution in a fictional small town. Games truly offer the experience of replaying communism, even if only virtually.

Iana Nikitenko’s essay is also noteworthy for its choice of source material; in it, she analyses how two contemporary German experimental radio dramas —Andreas Ammer and FM Einheit’s *Sie sprechen mit der Stasi* (‘You are speaking to the Stasi’) and Susann Maria Hempel’s *Auf der Suche nach den verlorenen Seelenatomen* (*In Search of the Lost Soul Atoms*) —explore the lingering trauma experienced by people who lived under the communist regime.

The concluding chapter of this collection of essays examines how Europe’s identity is changing because of efforts to come to terms with the communist past. The authors summarize and evaluate how the cultural products discussed in the volume demonstrate that Central and Eastern Europe remains in transition and has not yet fully developed an identity free of the communist past. Considering recent geopolitical events, the authors raise the question of whether we can continue to hold fast to the conviction that lessons can be drawn from the Cold War regarding an integrated world, or at least an integrated Europe. They suggest that, while individual nations deal with their communist legacy in ways appropriate to their own country’s unique historical context, the trauma/nostalgia paradigm emerges as a fabric that connects post-communist efforts to come to terms with the contested past in Central and Eastern Europe.

I have only two minor critical remarks to make regarding this truly fascinating volume. If the theme is the traumatic memory of communism and its re-enactment and rethinking, then it might have been worthwhile to devote a chapter to the literary memory of that era as well. My other comment is this: since the memory of communism is the key issue, it would have been worthwhile to mention the memory-shaping effects of the post-communist transition in the book’s opening or closing essay.

Replaying Communism is a well-edited volume featuring relevant questions and analyses that provide relevant answers, all superbly framed—both conceptually and in terms of content—by the editors’ introduction and concluding essay. It certainly deserves the attention not only of researchers but also of readers interested in history, the recent past, and historical memory. Returning to the questions posed in the introduction: “Can the past be replayed?” “Can communism be replayed?” The answer is obviously negative. However, with a diverse and realistic scholarly approach, as demonstrated by the authors of the volume *Replaying Communism*, the interaction between the past and the present can be interpreted and presented in a nuanced way, even in the case of the communist era, which has now become part of the past.