

## Chapter 8: Memory Unravelling: The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising in U.S.-Hungarian Relations

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2006 promised to be a big year in Hungarian-U.S. relations. Just three years before, the Republic of Hungary had joined the United States as one of the countries of “New Europe” in its invasion of Iraq, opening a new chapter in the two nations’ geopolitical relationship. Now Hungary was celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its 1956 uprising against its own Communist government, which, not in the least because of its tragic ending in Soviet armed suppression, at the time was widely interpreted in the West as a whole people’s desperate stand for freedom. Now both the United States and the Hungarian governments were planning a series of anniversary events involving representation at the highest level, where they would elegantly derive from the heroic past messages for the challenges of the present and guideposts for a shared future. Diplomats in both countries were expecting unproblematic, well-executed events of dignified remembrance, polite commendations of the veterans of that conflict, and emotional reminiscing by Americans about their sympathy for the teenage Budapest streetfighters and the thousands of Hungarian exiles who the United States took in after the crushing of the revolution.

Yet the official commemorations in Budapest proved to be anything but unproblematic. On October 23, 2006, 50 years to the day when Hungarian civilians battled their own security services and Russian troops on the streets of Budapest, the United States Embassy in the city watched with bated breath as Hungarian extremists, crowds in opposition to the Hungarian government, and even the veterans of the original 1956 events themselves, battled Hungarian riot police with everything they could get their hands on – including an original and still functioning 1956 tank.

Deploying approaches from Memory Studies and Performance Studies, this chapter will be an analytical history of how the memory of 1956 unraveled in Hungarian-U.S. relations in the fall of 2006. In government documents, personal interviews and their attendant media coverage, I will trace the anatomy of failure by both national governments to anticipate the explosion of commemorative protests by right-of-center and far-right political forces within Hungary, which arguably undid both countries’ commemorative diplomacy during the anniversary. This case study of the 2006 commemorations of the 1956 Hungarian uprising demonstrates that even the most carefully crafted official remembrance of the past is vulnerable to challenges to its memory régime by non-state actors – and national governments and their diplomats must plan for such contingencies.

### *Definitions: Commemorations as Performances of Cultural Memory*

Of the many, nuanced but contentious definitions of collective memory, my use of the term *public memory* is closest to Jan Assmann’s concept of *cultural memory*, which denotes the ways of institutionalized remembering of (most usually) the national past. Assmann defined cultural memory as “that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image. Upon such collective knowledge... each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.”<sup>1</sup> As Wulf Kansteiner subsequently elucidated, “Cultural memory consists of objectified culture - that is, the texts, rites, images, buildings and monuments which are designed to recall fateful

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” In *New German Critique*, lxxv (1995), 126, 127, 132.

events in the history of the collective. As the officially sanctioned heritage of a society, they are intended for the *longue durée*.”<sup>2</sup>

It is especially fruitful to apply to cultural memory the interpretive framework of Performance Studies as defined by Diana Taylor in her 2003 book *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Here, the author theorizes the relationship between forms of knowledge fixed in objects, and embodied practices. Taylor defines the archive as containing “documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change.” On the other hand, the repertoire “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Taylor is careful to point out that while the archive is often privileged over the repertoire, these two forms of knowledge work in complementary ways, and materials from the archive can shape performance practices.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter interprets official national commemorations as codified performances in the repertoire of the dominant memory régime of a nation state, which utilize the archive of cultural memory. Such commemorations have been adapted by national governments for purposes of international diplomacy. However, at what John Bodnar called the “vernacular” level of memory,<sup>5</sup> non-state actors also utilize such commemorative events to advance their own agendas by performing challenges and alternatives to the officially sanctioned national narrative. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 Uprising in U.S.-Hungarian relations is a story of the contestation of the official commemorative performances, as well as of the very memory of the original event, by non-state actors, disseminated by international media.

### *The Memory Régimes of 1956 in the Cold War and After*

The original events of October and November 1956 unfolded as an uprising-turned popular revolution by Hungarian students and workers, which, through its alliance with so-called “reform Communist” politicians in power and the Hungarian army, and under withering fire from the Hungarian Communist state security (secret police), was radicalized in its goals and eventually aimed for full independence for Hungary from the Soviet orbit. During the brief interim period when the revolutionaries were consolidating their gains, old-guard Communist

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<sup>2</sup> Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: a Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies”, In *History and Theory*, xli (2002), 182.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19, 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> In his scholarship of U.S. public memory, John Bodnar distinguished two co-existing, often competing forms of culture: “vernacular” and “official.” He identified vernacular memory as sub-national, belonging to families and neighborhoods, and he also counted war veterans and their kin and social networks as vernacular figures. According to Bodnar, vernacular culture is often based on personal or family experience, and has specialized and mutable interests and stakes in ‘memory work.’ “Official” culture, on the other hand, is most often represented by national political leaders, who try to establish and maintain national unity and continuity, and loyalty to the status quo. “Public memory,” according to Bodnar, “emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions.” Yet such dichotomies are often complicated by cases like the fall 2006 riots in Budapest, where ultranationalists both commemorated and attempted to ‘complete’ the 1956 Hungarian uprising against the Soviet-backed Communist régime, or when in the late Cold War American Indians ‘hijacked’ U.S. commemorations of the national past to campaign for Native sovereignty rights. These cases suggest that the groups Bodnar would call “vernacular” sometimes draw on and strategically use national public memory in an oppositional fashion for their own sociopolitical causes. For more, see John Bodnar, “Public Memory in an American City: Commemoration in Cleveland,” In John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.), 74-75; also John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13-14.

politician János Kádár visited the Soviet Union and requested Russian help in putting down the uprising. Soviet troops soon moved back into Hungary, crushing the mostly civilian resistance, sparking the emigration of over one hundred thousand Hungarians, and paving the way for the bloody political retribution that followed.

From 1957 until the end of Socialism in 1989, the events of 1956 were presented in Hungary as a “counterrevolution” orchestrated by “Western agents” in collaboration with (presumably former Nazi) Hungarian militants and common criminals. The official version aired in the media and represented in documentaries and school textbooks blamed *agent provocateurs* for firing at law enforcement from *within* the crowds in order to turn demonstrations into bloodbaths and protestors into armed militants. It dwelt on images of prisons forced open and common criminals let loose on the streets, then being armed by the enemies of the “people’s democracy”. It emphasized the gruesome horrors of the “lynchings” by bloodthirsty rioters of decent civil servants and officers who had tried to enforce the law. Above all, the dominant Socialist memory régime depicted the post-1956 supreme Communist leader, János Kádár, as the man who saved his country by requesting Russian help and assuming leadership.<sup>6</sup>

The turning point in national memory came in 1989, when the reformist section of the country’s Socialist leadership embarked on negotiations with its democratic opposition about a peaceful transition to free-market democracy. One of the most tangible milestones of this transition was the re-burial of reformist politician Imre Nagy, the “reform Communist” prime minister during the 1956 events, subsequent victim of a Soviet show trial. As Maya Nadkarni observed, during the 1989 negotiations for democracy, “the main forces of the [political] opposition wanted to evoke the spirit of 1956 without actually conjuring it up as a model for action.”<sup>7</sup> István Rév went as far as asserting that the common ground in the negotiations between the Socialist régime and its semi-underground democratic opposition was that both sides wanted to avoid a repeat of 1956 in 1989.<sup>8</sup> In this interpretation, the Hungarian opposition were using the memory of the events of 1956 as leverage for a peaceful transition to democracy.

With the first democratic elections in 1990, the revision of public memory also began. Now 1956 came to be regarded as a “popular uprising,” a “revolution” which began when students in Budapest demonstrated for reforms on October 23 of that year. Previously downplayed by the Socialist régime, the new version emphasized the convergence of workers with students to form the wide social base of the revolution. The conflict was presented as the result of years of terror by the secret police and totalitarian rule backed by Soviet advisors, and as a genuine struggle for freedom and democracy. The 1956 slogan “Ruszkik haza!” (“Russians Go Home”) was evoked to portray the demonstrations as a movement to rid the nation of its foreign oppressors. The street rallies were presented as peaceful until the secret police started to fire into the crowd from the rooftops, when they turned into battles to protect the homeland from ruthless Communist henchmen. The summary executions of supposed law enforcement and secret police by revolutionaries were rarely discussed at length – they were rather seen as acts of wrath or righteous vengeance for either recent atrocities or the preceding years of terror.

In this new version of the past, Communist reformist leader Imre Nagy was portrayed as an official who realized the merits and legitimacy of the revolution, and assisted it by forming a new government – and as a martyr who was later executed by the Soviets. Presented as the

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<sup>6</sup> Personal recollection of the language of elementary and high school history textbooks from the 1980s and early 1990s. Kádár was the topmost leader of Hungary between 1956 and 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Maya Nadkarni, “The Death of Socialism and the Afterlife of Its Monuments: Making and Marketing the Past in Budapest’s Statue Park Museum.” In Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 197.

<sup>8</sup> István Rév, paper at the *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and After: Impact and Contributions* Reunion and Conference at Bard College, New York, February 15-17, 2007. Personal recollection.

real heroes of the revolution were the youth of Budapest – teenagers who took on the Soviet tanks with home-made ‘Molotov cocktails’ (firebombs), tommy guns, and ingenuity in the side streets of the city, and fought until further resistance was hopeless - and were tried and executed sometimes only years later. Veteran organizations of the 1956 freedom fighters also contributed to this discourse: their phrase “the lads of Pest” came to evoke images of streetwise young revolutionaries on the barricades.<sup>9</sup> Their struggle was presented as a lost cause that was first encouraged by Western propaganda, and then abandoned by the West. In the post-Communist era, the foremost visual sign of the 1956 revolution was the Hungarian tri-color flag with a hole in the middle, where the coat of arms of the Communist system used to be.

## **A Policy for Hungarian Commemorative Diplomacy**

My initial question in this book’s investigation was whether the United States and Central European governments have had any coherent policy for using memory in their diplomacy across the Atlantic since the end of the Cold War. The fact that the Hungarian government has not had such a policy may be explained by several factors. As a mid-level Hungarian career diplomat who served in the United States during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations of the 1956 events explained, the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have a policy for using commemorations in its foreign relations – rather, it allows its embassies to “create [and] execute diplomacy on their own.”<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, such a ‘policy of no policy’ allows for the kind of flexibility in diplomatic relations that is needed to build and maintain good relations with the host country’s government. It also harnesses the expertise of the diplomatic post’s staff, and allows them to apply their training<sup>11</sup> and experience to embassy projects tailored to the host country. However, this freedom to conduct diplomacy has some limits: commemorative programming is usually not included in the foreign ministry’s budget, so embassies have to make a case for such events and request funding for them from Budapest, in addition to securing other sponsorship.

Seen in this way, the lack of a central policy for memory diplomacy may actually advance the effectiveness of commemorative programming. Hungary’s embassies like the one in Washington, D.C. usually have a calendar of anniversaries for the year, from which they are free to select events to commemorate in their public diplomacy programming. Yet not all historical events are regarded as equally suitable for remembering. One source identified a few historical events that he claimed were simply too controversial to create programming for – such as the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, which dismantled the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, assigning most of Hungary’s former territories to neighboring countries, and making millions of Magyars ethnic minorities in those nations. Commemorating Trianon would evoke conflicting memories by “several neighboring countries, and we wouldn’t want to be an elephant in the porcelain store.” Likewise, the Hungarian embassy would be reluctant to commemorate an event that implicated the US government in injustice or crimes, like those related to the removal of Native Americans to reservations.<sup>12</sup> In one diplomat’s own words, “I think what you need to do – and this is the classical role of diplomacy – is to highlight positive elements of the past” of bilateral relations.

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<sup>9</sup> Also see the exhibition “The Lads of Pest” of the House of Terror Museum. Online: <http://www.forradalom1956.hu/>.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Hungarian mid-level career diplomat, November 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Several staff working at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington, D.C. and at the United States Embassy in Budapest hold university degrees in American Studies, an interdisciplinary field that includes training in US history, government, culture and society. Personal knowledge and experience.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Hungarian mid-level career diplomat, November 2014.

A lack of dictation from the center can also make for a self-aware and thoughtful use of memory in diplomacy. One source in the Hungarian diplomatic community denied that the country's foreign ministry would have dictated any kind of narrative about historical events. He acknowledged that (especially in recent years)<sup>13</sup> there have been serious debates about historical revisionism and memory in Hungary, but claimed that these usually take place within the domestic sphere and government, and do not spill over into foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> His faith in the immunity of diplomatic posts to the intensifying domestic conflicts over national memory makes for a confidence in the embassy's commemorative projects, and in the kind of narratives he and his team communicated in their programming that commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 uprising in 2006. Yet such an attitude, which relegates the politics of memory to the domestic sphere, is also vulnerable to being blind-sided when non-state actors inject their challenges to the country's official memory régime in the international realm.

## Hungarian Commemorative Diplomacy in 2006

In 2006, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the 1956 uprising, the real driving force behind U.S.-Hungarian commemorative diplomacy was the small team at the Hungarian embassy in Washington, D.C.<sup>15</sup> Here, at least one key official shaping the events had not only experience in the Hungarian diplomatic corps, but he had also had extensive training in American Studies, an inter-disciplinary field of area studies which emphasizes historical scholarship and cultural analysis of the United States. In this sense, the success of the 2006 Hungarian commemorative diplomacy is to some extent an indication of the uses of this field of knowledge, with its reigning paradigms, guiding concerns and methodologies. Yet the same official had also been exposed to the commemorative programming of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the visit of Hungarian revolutionary Lajos Kossuth to the United States, held in 2001-02 by the previous cohort of embassy workers and makers of foreign policy. Thus, the repertoire of Hungarian memory diplomacy relied on the archive of both area studies training and the records of earlier commemorative performances.

The Hungarian Embassy's commemorative programming was part of its larger shift in focus and tools from a more traditional statecraft to what Zoltán Fehér has termed "creative

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<sup>13</sup> Since its election in 2010, the moderate conservative government party FIDESZ has been conducting or associated with a number of major memory projects, which have been accused of right-wing revisionism. These included the government's commissioning of 15 history paintings for the hard copy publication of the rewritten national constitution in 2011; the restoration of Kossuth (Parliament) Square "to its pre-1944 splendour"; and the memorial to Hungary during World War Two in Szabadsag Square. See, respectively, Imre Bednárík, "Government Commissions Painting of 2006 Mounted Police Charge." [in Hungarian] *Népszabadság* online, November 4, 2011. Online: <http://nol.hu/belfold/20111104-megfestettek-a-lovasrohamot> . Accessed May 28, 2016. "This is What Kossuth Square Will Look Like." [In Hungarian] *Index*, June 11, 2012. Online. <http://index.hu/belfold/2012/06/11/igy-nez-majd-ki-a-kossuth-ter/> . Accessed May 28, 2016. "Specifically Designated Memorial to be Erected in Szabadsag Square." [In Hungarian] *Nepszava* online, Dec. 31, 2013. Online. <http://nepszava.hu/cikk/1006864-kiemelt-emlekmulez-a-szabadsag-teren> . Accessed May 28, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Hungarian mid-level career diplomat, November 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Here my sources were themselves players in the events, which may make for some bias about their role in commemorative programming in 2006. Self-justification and –aggrandizement is a pitfall of elite interviewing, and information from such sources must not be taken at face value. Therefore, while my knowledge of some sources assures me of no such bias, this data will only be taken as indicative, not definitive. For more on elite interviewing as a method, see Michael C. Hall, "Elite Interviews: Critical Practice and Tourism." *Current Issues in Tourism*, Oct 2014, Vol. 17 Issue 9, 832-848; Joel D. Aberbach and Bert A. Rockman, "Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews." *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Dec., 2002), 673-676; and Glenn Beamer, "Elite Interviews and State Politics Research." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, Spring 2002, Vol. 2 Issue 1, 86-96.

diplomacy.”<sup>16</sup> Appointed in 2007 the Embassy’s “chief creative officer”, Fehér explained that in contrast with the previous practice of cultivating good relations with the U.S. elites and the Hungarian American community, the Embassy during this period was developing an approach to a wider target audience, featuring some new tools. In contrast with the earlier (1998-2002) Orbán administration’s efforts to target the U.S. Hungarian diaspora and use their lobbying power in the U.S. government, the two Gyurcsány cabinets’ (2004-2009) transatlantic diplomacy was pitched directly to the host country’s elites – as well as to the wider U.S. public. In addition to the American government, scholarly and media elite, who were by nature older, the new target audience were Americans in their twenties and thirties – a niche usually not very interested in, or understanding of, diplomacy, thus quite difficult to reach. Tailoring its tools to these target audiences, the Embassy aimed to use the personal memory of the older generations, and some forms of popular culture consumed by the younger demographic.<sup>17</sup>

Using their freedom to create diplomatic programming, the Hungarian embassy in Washington, D.C. planned an impressive series of commemorative events in 2006. Their programming involved the launch of historian Charles Gati’s book *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt*; an exhibition of 1956 photography in the Katzen Arts Center of American University; a conference at the Cold War Museum titled “Cold War Conversations: the Uprisings and Revolutions of 1956”; the premiere and a special themed evening of Béla Bartók’s “Blue Beard’s Castle” at the Washington National Opera; a series of classical music concerts by Hungarian performers; screenings of the feature film *Children of Glory* by Hollywood Hungarian American producer Andy Vajna and the documentary *Freedom’s Fury* co-produced by Vajna, Quentin Tarantino and Lucy Liu; and a national reception at the Organization of the American States.<sup>18</sup>

The Embassy’s programming itself revealed a microcosm of the major players of the politics of memory in the transatlantic realm. The post planned high (classical) culture performances and glitzy receptions to cultivate the U.S. government elite; they put on a history book launch and a conference for the scholarly community and the general reading public; they promoted a photo exhibition and two Hollywood-style films about 1956 to attract younger mainstream audiences and please popular cultural producers; and they invited and featured prominent members of the Hungarian American community, as well as Magyar veterans of the original events, at the more high-level and quality events.

Both its timing and its conceptual instinct allowed the Embassy to play what I call “heart strings diplomacy.” Beyond the fact that the drama and characters of 1956 lend themselves easily to storytelling – it was, according to the consensus, a ‘young people’s revolution’ – the planners of the commemorative diplomacy of 2006 consciously exploited the age of their target audience. As Fehér explained it, the Embassy calculated that the U.S. elites would be old enough to have had personal memories of 1956 from the U.S. media.<sup>19</sup> President George W. Bush with his 60 years was on the younger side of this demographic; many other senior policy

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<sup>16</sup> Zoltán Fehér, “From Back Channels to *The Colbert Report*: The Changing Face of Transatlantic Diplomacy in the 21st Century.” Talk delivered at the University of Iowa, Sept. 22, 2008. Zoltán Fehér, “The New Faces of an Old Art: Creative Diplomacy in the 21st Century.” Talk delivered at Charles University, Prague, November 20, 2014. Personal attendance and communication. Also see “Fehér to discuss transatlantic diplomacy Sept. 22.” University of Iowa News Release. Online. <http://news-releases.uiowa.edu/2008/september/091708at-a-glance.html>. Accessed June 2, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> One definite achievement on the part of the Embassy with this younger crowd was Fehér’s successful orchestration of several appearances of Hungarian Ambassador András Simonyi on *The Colbert Report*, starting on September 14, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> “A washingtoni magyar nagykövetség rendezvényei az 1956-os forradalom 50. évfordulójára. 2006. ősz.” [Events for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1956 Revolution – by the Embassy of Hungary, Washington, D.C.] Internal government document.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Hungarian mid-level career diplomat, November 2014.

and opinion makers were in their mid-to late sixties and seventies. Hence, the personal memories of the formative years of these people would have included the story of the 1956 uprising, its tragic end, questions about the role and response of the United States to these events, and their associated strong emotions.<sup>20</sup> The memory of 1956 – as mediated by contemporary U.S. news coverage – had been seared into the hearts and minds of this generation as children. Hence, for them remembering 1956 would have served not only as a “flashbulb memory,” but also as a recollection of their own childhood. Originally developed by Roger Brown and James Kulick in the 1970s, according to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “flashbulb memories” are recollections of especially momentous (“historic”) and dramatic events, as vivid and clear as flash photography, comprising records of the circumstances (the when, where and how) of the subject’s learning of the original event.<sup>21</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the changes in personal memory over time; however, it is fair to expect that such “flashbulb memories” will be overlaid with the subsequently produced images, texts and sounds of cultural memory. It was the layers of these types of memory that the Hungarian Embassy utilized in its commemorative diplomacy with the U.S. elite.<sup>22</sup>

Yet it was not only the Embassy’s “heart strings diplomacy” that sealed the deal with the Americans. The drive in Hungarian diplomacy to perform cultural memory in a transatlantic context also came from more mundane factors. For one, the Embassy’s leadership knew that the April 2006 Hungarian Parliamentary elections may result in their being replaced with another cohort of officials. Their urge to plan the events months in advance also came from a sense of historic opportunity to accomplish an American presidential visit to Hungary, which they regarded as a supreme achievement in transatlantic relations. Paradoxically, planning the commemorative events half a year ahead set the Embassy on a course which was easier to stay even as the commemorations in their home country exploded, threatening to unravel their transatlantic memory diplomacy.

### *Hollywood Enters the Fray: Popular Culture and the Transatlantic Memory of 1956*

As discussed in Chapter One, an especially powerful producer of cultural memory is the popular culture industry. This also holds true in the transatlantic realm, where, due to its dominance and the popular demand for its products, Hollywood shapes how its publics think about the past on both sides of the ocean. For their commemorations of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 uprising in U.S.-Hungarian relations, the Hungarian government had an ally in diasporic and immigrant Hungarian film makers. These entertainers and cinematic artists - first and foremost among them Andrew Vajna - acted independently of national governments, but their style of popular remembrance aligned well with the Hungarian government’s “heart strings” memory diplomacy, even as it conformed to U.S. conventions of film making.

As the anniversary year, 2006 saw the release of two major filmic portrayals of the 1956 uprising. Directed by Colin Gray and Megan Raney and executive produced by Lucy Liu, Quentin Tarantino and Andrew Vajna, *Freedom’s Fury*<sup>23</sup> was a documentary about the 1956

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Kodak Moments, Flashbulb Memories: Reflections on 9/11.” *The Drama Review* 47, 1 (T177), Spring 2003, 11-48.

<sup>22</sup> The fact that for most of the past 15 years, undergraduate university courses featuring a session on 9/11 usually had to begin by allowing the students to recall when, where and how they learned of the terror attacks and how they felt about them is a testament not only to the specific effects of what was arguably the most widely covered news event in history, but also to the imprint of such “flashbulb memories” in young people’s minds. Personal recollection.

<sup>23</sup> *Freedom’s Fury* [Hungarian title: A szabadság vihara], dirs. Colin Gray, Megan Raney. Wolo Entertainment, 2006.

Melbourne Olympics water polo semi-final match between Hungary and the Soviet Union, which turned into a public political contest to avenge the crushing of the Magyar uprising just weeks before. Directed by Krisztina Goda and produced by Andrew Vajna, *Children of Glory*<sup>24</sup> was a full-length feature film that wove together the story of the same match with a romantic thread, making for a story of two lovers, student leader Viki and water polo player Karcsi, who fall in love during the revolution, but have to part ways to fight for their country half the world away from each other.

As their star-studded lists of producers show, both films were created for popular audiences, and accordingly, over time they were distributed world-wide and in 6 countries, respectively. Their promotion was robust and also received attention from the two national governments. While *Children of Glory* only premiered on October 23, 2006, the day of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising, it had already been previewed on October 7 in the *Guardian*, and also had a presidential screening at the White House just five days after its release<sup>25</sup>. *Freedom's Fury* was officially released on September 7, 2006 in Hungary, but the documentary had already premiered in Budapest on December 6, 2005, had been previewed by Hungary's 1956 Institute on February 7, 2006, shown and reviewed at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York in late April of that year, and previewed on Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty on May 5<sup>26</sup>. Thus, both national governments clearly deployed these films to support their memory diplomacy.

The popular reception of the films was good overall, but neither became a runaway hit outside of Hungary. Despite opening only in October, *Children of Glory* became the top Hungarian film of 2006, attracting some 451,000 viewers.<sup>27</sup> General audiences panned the movie for its forced romantic thread, but they liked it for its strong acting, its ability to generate emotions in the viewer, its spectacles, and its integration of politics and sports in its storyline.<sup>28</sup> Viewers appreciated the historical authenticity of *Freedom's Fury*, as well as its dimension of sports history, its unhurried pacing, attention and space to the original participants – but some complained about its lack of historical context.<sup>29</sup>

The films' critical reception was mixed. *Freedom's Fury* received a glowing review from Hungary's Institute for the History of 1956<sup>30</sup> – which the documentary credited for

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<sup>24</sup> *Children of Glory* [Hungarian title: Szabadság, szerelem], dir. Krisztina Goda. Lionsgate, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> "A washingtoni magyar nagykövetség rendezvényei az 1956-os forradalom 50. évfordulójára. 2006. ősz." [Events for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1956 Revolution – by the Embassy of Hungary, Washington, D.C.] Internal government document.

<sup>26</sup> "Andy Vajna az '56-os olimpiáról: Forradalom a medencében" [Andy Vajna on the '56 Olympics: Revolution in the Pool]. Filmhu Hungarian film portal. December 7, 2005. <http://magyar.film.hu/filmhu/hir/andy-vajna-az-56-os-olimpiarol-andy-g-vajna-szabadsag-szerelem.html>; (uncredited, elsewhere attributed to) Martha Fischer, "Tribeca Review: *Freedom's Fury*". Moviefone.com, April 23, 2006. Online. <http://www.moviefone.com/2006/04/23/tribeca-review-freedoms-fury/>; Nikola Krastev, "Hungary: New Film Revisits 1956 Water-Polo Showdown." *Radio Free Europe - Radio Liberty*, May 05, 2006. Online. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1068204.html>. Accessed December 25, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Erik Kirschbaum, "Hungary Revolution Gets Hollywood Treatment." Reuters, February 12, 2007. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-berlin-film-hungary-idUSL1253811720070212> Accessed December 25, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Audience reviews of *Children of Glory*, September 2007 – October 2008. Rotten Tomatoes. [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/children\\_of\\_glory/#audience\\_reviews](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/children_of_glory/#audience_reviews). Accessed December 25, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> User reviews of *Freedom's Fury*, June 2006 – August 2008. International Movie Database. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0322332/reviews?ref=tt\\_q1\\_3](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0322332/reviews?ref=tt_q1_3). Accessed December 25, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> "*Freedom's Fury* Review." Culture Section, 1956 Institute, Hungary. February 7, 2006. Online. <http://www.freedomsfury.net/press-kit/FF1956Instt.html>. Accessed December 26, 2016.

support,<sup>31</sup> likely historical consultation<sup>32</sup> – and some film connoisseurs praised its use of archival footage and interviews with the participants of the original events.<sup>33</sup> Yet some critics panned the documentary for factual inaccuracies, its length and the over-seriousness of its treatment of its topic; and implied that the film was missing its audience, because it was a historical documentary and not a sports piece.<sup>34</sup> *Children of Glory* was criticized both by Hungarian historians and some former players of the 1956 Olympic water polo team for its Hollywood conventions and its romantic portrayal of the uprising.<sup>35</sup> Other reviewers faulted the film for wanting to do too much, and claimed it lost its identity and audience between action movie, romantic drama, and sports flick. However, its spectacular depiction of civilians fighting the Soviet army on the streets of Budapest overwhelmed even the critical film connoisseur: as Tibor Fischer reviewing the movie for *The Guardian* confessed, “I have to admit I choked up.”<sup>36</sup>

In their promotion, both films were linked to the personal story of their producer, Andrew Vajna. The films’ public relations materials and interviews usually related how Vajna was sent to the West as a 12-year old by his parents as a result of the fateful events of 1956, and how this tragic journey propelled him into a career in the US film industry. Vajna went on to work on the production of a number of classic popular action movie franchises, including *Rambo*, *Die Hard*, and the *Terminator* films. He began thinking about producing a movie about 1956 back in the 1990s, but it took him and fellow Hungarian-American screenwriter Joe Eszterhas until they saw *Miracle*, a 2004 docudrama about the U.S.-USSR ice hockey struggle at the 1980 Winter Olympics, to hatch the idea of weaving a sports match into the drama of the Hungarian Revolution.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the creation story of *Children of Glory* was rooted in the original historical event of its topic through the very person of its producer. Driven by 1956, the life story of Vajna now came full circle with his grateful tribute to the heroes of the uprising on the streets and at an historic sports event – in a seamlessly woven Hollywood tapestry. The masterful personalization of this product by the American popular culture industry was thus

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<sup>31</sup> *Freedom’s Fury* [Hungarian title: A szabadság vihara], dirs. Colin Gray, Megan Raney. Wolo Entertainment, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> While the documentary did not credit any individual historical consultants, it thanked for their support the Hungarian Film Archives, the Hungarian Institute of History, the Institute of Political History, the House of Terror Museum, and the Hungarian Sports Museum. *Freedom’s Fury* [Hungarian title: A szabadság vihara], dirs. Colin Gray, Megan Raney. Wolo Entertainment, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> (Uncredited, elsewhere attributed to) Martha Fischer, “Tribeca Review: *Freedom’s Fury*”. Moviefone.com, April 23, 2006. Online. <http://www.moviefone.com/2006/04/23/tribeca-review-freedom-fury/>;

<sup>34</sup> Tibor Fischer, “Irresistible Melancholy.” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2006. Online. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/oct/07/film>; Russell Edwards, Review: ‘Freedom’s Fury’. Variety, April 10, 2007. Online. <http://variety.com/2007/film/reviews/freedom-s-fury-1200560208/>; (uncredited, elsewhere attributed to) Martha Fischer, “Tribeca Review: *Freedom’s Fury*”. Moviefone.com, April 23, 2006. Online. <http://www.moviefone.com/2006/04/23/tribeca-review-freedom-fury/>. Accessed December 26, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Tibor Fischer, “Irresistible Melancholy.” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2006. Online. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/oct/07/film>; Erik Kirschbaum, “Hungary Revolution Gets Hollywood Treatment.” Reuters, February 12, 2007. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-berlin-film-hungary-idUSL1253811720070212>. Accessed December 25, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Tibor Fischer, “Irresistible Melancholy.” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2006. Online. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/oct/07/film>. Accessed December 25, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> “Andy Vajna az ’56-os olimpiáról: Forradalom a medencében” [Andy Vajna on the ’56 Olympics: Revolution in the Pool]. Filmhu Hungarian film portal. December 7, 2005. <http://magyar.film.hu/filmhu/hir/andy-vajna-az-56-os-olimpiarol-andy-g-vajna-szabadsag-szerelem.html>; “Andy Vajna 56-ról forgat filmet” [Andy Vajna Shooting Film About ’56]. Mult-kor, December 7, 2005. <http://mult-kor.hu/cikk.php?id=11790>; Erik Kirschbaum, “Hungary Revolution Gets Hollywood Treatment.” Reuters, February 12, 2007. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-berlin-film-hungary-idUSL1253811720070212>. Accessed December 25, 2016.

combined with a sense of personal involvement in history (or a longing for it) by the film's makers, actors, and audience. Ideally, different age groups would be able to see themselves in the films' characters: while the over-60s would see their youth in the actors and veterans, the 18-40 age demographic could directly identify with the 'freedom fighters' and the athletes of the original events.

As a film, *Freedom's Fury* told the story of a sports event that, because of its contemporary geopolitical context, became a political performance. Uncharacteristic of a sports documentary, the film did not assign much decisive agency to its protagonists. For one, it made clear that both teams were representing their countries, which had been locked into a struggle over Hungary's self-determination. Describing the fateful match, players from both sides characterized the Soviet team as "victims of circumstance." While both teams seem to have shared the Soviets' desire to play just to win – and not for political purposes – the geopolitics of the event overwhelmed them once they felt the audience's response. Thus, the Hungarian players are said to have been driven into a frenzy by their supporters, and the Soviet athletes matched their roughness in the heat of the game. Former members of both teams claimed that it was the media that sensationalized the event as the "Blood in the Water" match, and that in actuality they did not play out of hate. Yet two Hungarian players also interpreted the event as symbolic vengeance by their side against the Soviet Union for its recent crushing of Hungary's attempt at independence. As one put it, since they felt powerless militarily, the Hungarian team "turned the [sports] match into a battlefield."<sup>38</sup>

If the viewers expected to see the surviving athletes' scars at their reunion arranged by the film makers 46 years later, they would have been disappointed. They were treated to a strong dose of reconciliation instead. While one Hungarian former player expressed some trepidation, the careful editing showed the surviving team members from both sides embracing in friendship, and only exhibiting their wayward boyishness in tender ways. Thus, at the end of their second and last meeting, "they say goodbye to each other – but will take with them the memory of an historic match resolved into peace."<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the Hungarian players could afford to be gracious not only because they were reliving their youth, but simply because they had *won* all those years ago, and thereby had achieved some personal and group catharsis. Their 2002 reconciliation also carried no price: Hungary had already become a free and democratic country 13 years before, therefore they were also victorious through history.

The documentary's reconciliationist message was only amplified by its preview on Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty in May 2006:

#### An Opportunity For Reconciliation

But the film [...] is also a tribute to the ability of men who once met as bitter foes to forgive with the passage of time and to come to terms with history.

Gray says that when the filmmakers were finally able to get together the 13 surviving players in 2002, the reunion was a profound emotional moment. [...]

"Both teams were as much a victim of the circumstances and really both countries were imprisoned by the same ideology -- and these guys were able to finally reconnect as human beings and as fellow athletes," says Gray. "That was something that we really wanted to

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<sup>38</sup> *Freedom's Fury* [Hungarian title: A szabadság vihara], dirs. Colin Gray, Megan Raney. Wolo Entertainment, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> *Freedom's Fury* [Hungarian title: A szabadság vihara], dirs. Colin Gray, Megan Raney. Wolo Entertainment, 2006.

highlight, the sort of humanistic side to counter the sort of oppression of ideology that everyone had suffered under in the Eastern bloc.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, whether it was constructed by the film makers or articulated by the original players, the U.S. popular culture industry’s dominant trope of ‘band of brothers’ was projected on Hungary in 1956 and the Hungarian-Soviet match in Melbourne. The fact that Radio Free Europe, the long-time cultural diplomacy arm of the United States government, chose to emphasize this aspect of the documentary proves as much the government’s use of this product of popular culture in its memory diplomacy, as Radio Free Europe’s effort to retroactively exonerate itself from the charges levelled against it of encouraging the armed uprising and resistance in Hungary in 1956.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, it is this victory in the log arc of history that was emphasized by the film makers as the moral of the documentary. The film’s last montage traced the ‘spirit’ of 1956 through a series of events loosely defined as freedom struggles, from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, through Tiananmen Square in 1989, the “end of Apartheid” in South Africa in 1994, to Serbia’s “ouster of dictator” Slobodan Milosevic in 2000.<sup>42</sup> In this expression of cultural memory, the original water polo match of *Freedom’s Fury* was transformed into a symbolic revision of 1956 as a victory for the Hungarians in their long (and otherwise universalized) search for freedom. In a rather forced move, the film makers even attempted to link this mythical historical force to the Olympics, attributing to the Games some kind of liberatory power. As in the film’s final image an athlete kindles the Olympic flame in the arena, the voiceover proclaims, “One thing is for certain: the struggle for freedom continues to this day, bringing the light of hope to this world.”<sup>43</sup>

## U.S. Commemorative Diplomacy in 2006

The fact that the Bush administration prioritized the commemorations of 1956 in 2006 has several explanations. While the Hungarian diaspora in the United States had lost the political significance it held during the Cold War as a community of exiles from the Eastern Bloc with a special anti-Communist propaganda value, certain members of it still held high office and political power, such as Congressman Tom Lantos, founder of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus and the only Holocaust survivor to serve in the U.S. Congress (another episode of international memory politics), who just the following year would go on to chair the United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs.<sup>44</sup> One other reason for the attention by the

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<sup>40</sup> Nikola Krastev, "Hungary: New Film Revisits 1956 Water-Polo Showdown." Radio Free Europe - Radio Liberty, May 05, 2006. Online. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1068204.html> . Accessed December 26, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> For other, more academic attempts, see A Ross Johnson, “Setting the Record Straight: [The] Role of Radio Free Europe in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.” Working paper. Woodrow Wilson Center and Hoover Institution. 2006; subsequently published in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. Online. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/happ.OP-3.pdf> . Accessed December 2016.

<sup>42</sup> *Freedom’s Fury* [Hungarian title: A szabadság vihara], dirs. Colin Gray, Megan Raney. Wolo Entertainment, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> *Freedom’s Fury* [Hungarian title: A szabadság vihara], dirs. Colin Gray, Megan Raney. Wolo Entertainment, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> The Hungarian diaspora, now mostly in residue, originated in a labor migration to the United States by (then Austro-)Hungarians around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was strengthened in several historical waves that included the arrival of Hungarian Jews and Displaced Persons after World War Two, those fleeing the Communist takeover of the country after 1947-48, and finally the influx of some 50,000 refugees of 1956. This diaspora historically developed its own social, economic and cultural organizations, and during the

U.S. government to commemorating 1956 was that the events provided a stage for the symbolic shoring up of the current geopolitical alliance between the United States and “New Europe” (such as Hungary and Poland) in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This latter function of American commemorative diplomacy emerges from a close reading of U.S. anniversary programming in 2006.

In its memory diplomacy, the U.S. government used some of its tried and true tools. On October 18, 2006, the Office of the Press Secretary issued a presidential proclamation titled “50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution,” in which he declared October 23 of that year the day for Americans to commemorate the uprising.<sup>45</sup> Even in its brevity, the proclamation managed to position 1956 in the history of the progress of liberty against tyranny – a hallmark of the idealist strand in US foreign policy.

The story of Hungarian democracy represents the triumph of liberty over tyranny. In the fall of 1956, the Hungarian people demanded change, and tens of thousands of students, workers, and other citizens bravely marched through the streets to call for freedom. [...] The lesson of the Hungarian experience is clear: liberty can be delayed, but it cannot be denied. [...]

The United States is grateful for the warm relationship between our countries and for Hungary's efforts to expand freedom and democracy around the world in places such as the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Cuba. By spreading the blessings of liberty, Hungary is helping to lay the foundation of peace for generations to come.”<sup>46</sup>

For Bush, the guidance of Hungary’s failed revolutionary project for the present was that freedom would triumph over tyranny – a trans=historical (if not ahistorical) application of a Cold War event to the battlefields of the Global War on Terror. Accordingly, a celebration of the events of 1956 also served to “recognize the friendship between the United States and Hungary; and [to] reaffirm our shared desire to spread freedom to people around the world,”<sup>47</sup> most recently evident in the Hungarian contribution of a contingent of troops in Afghanistan (2003-2013), the country’s 300 soldiers in the “Coalition of the Willing” in Iraq, and the 77 Hungarian T-72 tanks donated to the new Iraqi military just the previous year.<sup>48</sup>

The rhetorical parallel between the 1956 Hungarian uprising and the U.S.-Hungarian alliance in the War on Terror may have been the creation of a clever White House speech writer

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Cold War wielded lobbying power in the US government. History. Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, United States Congress. Online. <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/about/history> . Accessed May 30, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> “50th Anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. A Proclamation by the President of the United States of America.” Release from the Office of the Press Secretary, October 18, 2006. No pagination. Online. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061018-2.html> . Accessed May 30, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> While by parliamentary decision, Hungary withdrew its logistical contingent from Iraq in 2005, the country provided over 70 of its tanks to the Iraqi army in the same year. See, respectively, László Szűcs, “Krétától Afganisztánig: Tíz békefenntartó misszió, amelyben magyar katonák vettek részt” [From Crete to Afghanistan: Ten Peacekeeping Missions with Hungarian Involvement]. Nov. 2, 2013, *Honvédelem.hu*. Online. <http://www.honvedelem.hu/cikk/40804> ; Steve Schifferes, “US Names 'Coalition of the Willing.'” *BBC News* online, March 18, 2003. Online. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/2862343.stm> ; Operation Iraqi Freedom. Coalition Members. The White House – George W. H. Bush [archived online]. March 27, 2003. Online. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030327-10.html> . Iraq Receives T-72s & BMPs – With Another Armored Brigade Planned. *Defense Industry Daily*, Nov 21, 2005. Online. <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/iraq-receives-t72s-bmps-with-another-armored-brigade-planned-01512/> . Accessed May 30, 2016.

– or of a non-state actor. On March 20, 2006, President Bush had given a speech at the City Club of Cleveland on the War on Terror and Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the Q&A that followed, a man representing the “Cleveland Hungarian Revolution 50th Anniversary” commission had an exchange with the president, in which the questioner drew just this parallel. This interaction was quite telling about the American politics of the memory of 1956.

Q: Thank you, Mr. President. Welcome to Cleveland. It's an honor to have you here. I represent the Cleveland Hungarian Revolution 50th Anniversary –

THE PRESIDENT: That's good. I was there, by the way.

Q: Thank you. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: At least for the celebration in Capitol - with Tom Lantos. But go ahead.

Q: Mr. President, in the interest of free speech if you'll indulge me, I have to give a little context of my question. On this third anniversary of your - I consider - courageous initiative to bring freedom and basic human dignity to the Iraqi people, the image of the statue of the tyrant Saddam falling in Baghdad was very reminiscent of another statue, another tyrant, Josef Stalin, who fell in Budapest 50 years ago at the hands of many young Hungarian freedom fighters who were seeking to overthrow the tyranny of Soviet communism. Mr. President, just like our brave fighting men and women today, and many Iraqi people, those young Hungarian patriots paid a very heavy price for a few days of freedom. But they lit the torch that eventually set the captive nations on the path to achieving liberty. And so, Mr. President, our Cleveland Hungarian community is planning a major event in Cleveland in October -- (laughter) –

THE PRESIDENT: The guy sees the moment, you know - (laughter and applause.)

Q: Right.

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not sure what I'm doing in October. Put me down as a maybe. (Laughter and applause.) Sorry to interrupt.

Q: Just like you came for the children's game in 2004, we hope to have you here for that, as well. Mr. President, just want to let you know, to win the war on terror we feel that what was started in 1776, and continued in 1956, must be remembered in 2006.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. (Applause.)

Q: I'm at the question now. Thanks for your indulgence.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, good. (Laughter.)

Q: My basic question is, how can we help you, from the grassroots level, how can we help you promote the cause of freedom and liberty for all peoples throughout the world? ”<sup>49</sup>

Because in his subsequent response Bush did not use the same analogy, it is unlikely that the question was planted by White House staff. Rather, the questioner buttonholed the president and made kin between Hungarians and Americans in their global quest for freedom

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<sup>49</sup> “President Discusses War on Terror and Operation Iraqi Freedom.” Renaissance Cleveland Hotel, Cleveland, Ohio. Release from the Office of the Press Secretary, March 20, 2006. No pagination. The White House – George W. H. Bush [archived online]. Online. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/03/20060320-7.html> . Accessed May 30, 2016.

across several ideological systems and centuries – in order to lobby for a presidential visit to the Cleveland Hungarians’ 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Bush’s responses revealed a comfort level and familiarity with some of the most influential members of the Hungarian American community, as well as their agendas at the time. His reference to the March 2006 event in the U.S. Capitol featuring Congressman Lantos highlights the alignment of the US government and the Hungarian American community regarding the politics of the uprising’s memory. This event commemorated the March 15, 1848 Hungarian Revolution against Austria, but it also provided a forum for the diaspora and the Hungarian Embassy to lobby Bush and his staff for the highest level of U.S. representation at the official 1956 commemorations later that year.

Whether the analogy came from the Bush administration, earlier U.S. presidents,<sup>50</sup> the Hungarian American community or the Hungarian Embassy in D.C., the trope of 1956 as a predecessor of the coming of liberty in Iraq became the dominant message of the U.S. government’s contributions to the memorial programming of 2006. The most high-profile event of that year by the United States government was a presidential visit to Hungary in June – the first time since 1989 that a US head of state visited this tiny Central European country. Even though the visit was primarily for building bilateral relations and the commemoration of the anniversary, the fact that President Bush went to Hungary just days after the U.S.-EU summit in Vienna<sup>51</sup> makes it clear that his sojourn had diplomatic value in the larger context of transatlantic relations. In other words, this trip could be understood as an attempt to cultivate the American alliance with one of the countries of “New Europe” in the Global War on Terror and beyond – and to likely strengthen the U.S. position in negotiations with (other countries of) the European Union.

After meeting with the country’s top leaders and laying a wreath at the eternal flame,<sup>52</sup> in his remarks in Budapest President Bush elucidated the parallel between the two events, and the message of 1956 for 2006. Here Bush used the very place where he was speaking as a vantage point in time as well as in space.

I appreciate the opportunity to stand here on Gellert Hill, which offers a striking view of your beautiful city. Fifty years ago, you could watch history being written from this hill. In 1956, the Hungarian people suffered under a Communist dictatorship and domination by a foreign power. That fall, the Hungarian people decided they had enough and demanded change. From this spot, you could see tens of thousands of students and workers and other Hungarians marching through the streets. They called for an end to dictatorship, to censorship, and to the secret police. They

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<sup>50</sup> The trope was likely articulated by one of these actors during the Cold War, and survived the transition. In 1996, President Bill Clinton said in his October 22 campaign speech in Detroit, addressing his support for NATO expansion for Central and Eastern Europe, “We have a special bond because our nation was formed from the hopes and dreams of those who came to our shores from across the Atlantic seeking religious freedom, fleeing persecution, looking for a better life. From the Pilgrims of 1620 to the Hungarian freedom fighters of 1956, whose struggle we commemorate tomorrow, they gave America the strength of diversity and the passion for freedom. Remarkable generations of Americans invested in Europe’s peace and freedom with their own sacrifice.” “Transcript of the Remarks by President W. J. Clinton To People Of Detroit.” From United States Information Agency, 22 Oct. 1996. North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Online. <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1996/s961022a.htm> . Accessed June 23, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> The issues of this summit included as the first major item, “Foreign Policy – focusing on Iran, the Middle East and promotion of democracy.” EU-US Summit - Vienna June 2006. European Union External Action Service. Online. [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/us/sum06\\_06/index\\_en.htm](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/us/sum06_06/index_en.htm) . Accessed May 31, 2016. Also see “Hungary: U.S. President to Honor 1956 Uprising.” Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, June 20, 2006. Online. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1069320.html> . Accessed May 31, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> “Hungary: U.S. President to Honor 1956 Uprising.” Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, June 20, 2006. Online. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1069320.html> . Accessed May 31, 2016.

called for free elections, a free press, and the release of political prisoners. These Hungarian patriots tore down the statue of Josef Stalin and defied an empire to proclaim their liberty.<sup>53</sup>

Glossing over the civil war aspect and complex dynamic of the events of 1956, sidestepping questions about the responsibility of the U.S. government, Bush painted the usual broad-brush picture of the Hungarian people's struggle for freedom versus Soviet Communist rule enforced by Russian troops. That empire crushed the Hungarian rising, but the Magyars' yearning for liberty lived on in the thousands of exiles taken in by the United States, and in the inspiration their example provided for other freedom struggles.

Yet the greatest inspiration of 1956 was its lesson to national governments.

America honors your courage. We've learned from your example, and we resolve that when people stand up for their freedom, America will stand with them. [...] You believe that free nations have an obligation to help others realize the benefits of freedom.<sup>54</sup>

After spearheading the largely peaceful transition to democracy of the Eastern Bloc in 1989, Hungary kept working for its ideal of liberty, now as part of an international coalition. After being peacekeepers in Bosnia and Kosovo,

Hungarian troops are also defending freedom's cause in the war on terror. In Afghanistan, your soldiers have rebuilt schools and a medical center. They've helped train Afghan police to enforce the rule of law and to protect the Afghan people. In Iraq, Hungarian troops played a vital role in Operation Iraqi Freedom by providing security and delivering food and medical supplies to coalition forces. Today, Hungarian soldiers are helping to train Iraqi security forces. This is important work. By supporting these two young democracies, you are strengthening two new allies in the war on terror, and you're bringing hope to millions of people in a vital region of the world.<sup>55</sup>

For Bush, Hungary's current role in the two U.S.-led wars in the Middle East was a logical phase in the country's history of fighting for liberty and against oppression. According to the U.S. president, this country of "New Europe" was now bearing the burden of Western democracies to spread the universalized ideal of liberty around the globe, liberating people from oppressive régimes.

Next President Bush elaborated on the central message of this trip – and most likely, his whole European tour: shoring up the "Coalition of the Willing" in the Global War on Terror, in this case against the insurgency in Iraq.

Last week, I traveled to Baghdad. I was impressed by what I saw. Americans and Hungarians and other coalition partners can be proud of what we have achieved in partnership with the Iraqi people. I met with Iraq's new Prime Minister and was able to see firsthand his strong character, his commitment to freedom, and his determination to succeed. Hungarians will recognize this spirit. Prime Minister Maliki is committed to the democratic ideals that also inspired Hungarian patriots in 1956 and 1989. He has a sound plan to improve security, to unify his people, and to deliver a better life for the citizens of Iraq. The success of the new Iraqi Government is vital to

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<sup>53</sup> George W. Bush, "Remarks in Budapest." June 22, 2006. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=185> . Accessed May 31, 2016. Also see "Bush Sees Parallels: 1956 Hungary and 2006 Iraq. National Public Radio, June 22, 2006. Online. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5504566> . Accessed May 31, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> George W. Bush, "Remarks in Budapest." June 22, 2006. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=185> . Accessed May 31, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

the security of all nations, and so it deserves the support of the international community. We will continue to help the Iraqi Government establish free institutions, to achieve its goals, and we will continue to help Iraq take its rightful place alongside America and Hungary as beacons of liberty in our world.

Iraq's young democracy still faces determined enemies, people who will use violence and brutality to stop the march of freedom. Defeating these enemies will require sacrifice and continued patience, the kind of patience the good people of Hungary displayed after 1956. We will help them rebuild a country destroyed by a tyrant. We'll help the Iraqis defeat the enemies of freedom. Our commitment is certain; our objective is clear. The new Iraqi Government will show the world the promise of a thriving democracy in the heart of the Middle East.<sup>56</sup>

Here was Bush's memory diplomacy tailored to the commemoration of 1956: for the American president, the impulse driving the rebuilding of Iraq and the coalition's fight against the insurgency was the very same spirit that had animated the Hungarian revolution in 1956, and that country's transition to democracy in 1989. His Hungarian American questioner in Cleveland had already articulated the full trajectory of this arc of liberty: the spirit of the American Revolution of 1776 informed the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and it permeated not only the latter's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations in both countries, but also the current Iraqi front of the Global War on Terror.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, the foremost representative of the US government – and, as he especially emphasized here, of the American people – interpreted Hungary's 'spirit of '56' as one manifestation of the universal principle or force of liberty.

The lesson of the Hungarian experience is clear: Liberty can be delayed, but it cannot be denied. The desire for liberty is universal, because it is written by our Creator into the hearts of every man, woman, and child on this Earth. And as people across the world step forward to claim their own freedom, they will take inspiration from your example and draw hope from your success."<sup>58</sup>

Hence, two nations where the universal force of liberty had already triumphed – in the United States in 1776, and in Hungary in 1989 after its tragic premature bloom in 1956 – were now in a coalition, a partnership bound together by that shared spirit, the two countries working to help the spirit of liberty triumph elsewhere in the world.

### *The U.S. Embassy in Budapest: When to Use the Bunker?*

A careful observer could have arguably anticipated the explosion of the memory of 1956 on October 23, 2006 from some events that had preceded it. On September 17, 2006 a post-election speech by the Hungarian Socialist Party's Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány was leaked to the press. In the speech, Gyurcsány urged his parliamentary faction members to finally implement measures to restructure the country's ailing economy. His tone rather resembled that

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> In his claim, the Hungarian American representative had used a trope native to United States foreign policy: one and a half centuries before, Americans welcomed the news of the European revolutions of 1848 as a new phase in "the spirit of '76", and in the 1920s, the US government promoted in its relations with Latin America a pan-Americanism that was based on the 'shared' revolutionary heritage of the countries in the Hemisphere. NEED SOME SOURCES.

<sup>58</sup> George W. Bush, "Remarks in Budapest." June 22, 2006. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=185> . Accessed May 31, 2016. Also see "Bush Sees Parallels: 1956 Hungary and 2006 Iraq. National Public Radio, June 22, 2006. Online. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5504566> . Accessed May 31, 2016.

of a soccer coach – he used obscenities to punctuate his message and show his seriousness. The media de-contextualized Gyurcsány’s performance, displayed the crudest parts of the text and broadcast sound bites for days. While the Prime Minister’s immediate goal may have been to set a tone of familiarity and seriousness, as it was presented by the opposition and the audiovisual news media, his style violated the conventions and content of public political language. Even though Gyurcsány claimed the contrary, his references in the speech to not telling the truth to the electorate were widely interpreted by the political opposition as an admission that his government had lied about the state of the economy in order to win re-election.

While the parties of the left expressed unconditional support for the Prime Minister, the major forces of the opposition called for his immediate resignation and the removal of his government. Crowds gathered on Kossuth Square in front of the Parliament and chanted “You Screwed Up” – a modified line from his speech. During the night of September 18, 2006, groups of protestors converged on the nearby headquarters of the state television in Republic Square, demanding to air their grievances on television. When they were turned down, hundreds of them stormed the television building and eventually captured it. (Itself an event reminiscent of 1956.) Their battles with the police resulted in over 100 injuries, and some damage to the square’s memorial to the World War Two liberation of Hungary by the Soviet Red Army.<sup>59</sup>

While police backup cleared the building by the next morning, and most parliamentary parties condemned the violence, a number of (mostly right-wing nationalist) protestor groups lodged themselves in the area in front of Parliament, and continued to demonstrate there for the next month. Partly using the situation to win the approaching municipal elections, the opposition’s major conservative party FIDESZ proceeded to hold demonstrations in the same place for two hours every afternoon to force the resignation of the government. Those who stayed on the spot all day round – most of them nationalists - soon came to be called “the Kossuth Square demonstrators.” These far-right nationalist groups all agreed that the prime minister and the current government should resign, but their objectives varied beyond that. They all seemed to demand that some kind of a constitutional assembly be convened and the “Communists” be purged from power – these measures were to guarantee genuine freedom and a real and complete change from totalitarianism to democracy.<sup>60</sup> By being present with their bodies, signs and symbols, the protestors hoped to bring about change from the present to an older and partly imagined past.

The United States government and American diplomats in Hungary could have arguably anticipated some of the events of October 23, 2006. International media had been covering the mounting tensions in Hungarian politics<sup>61</sup> - to such an extent that the U.S. Embassy in Budapest

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<sup>59</sup> “Battle in Szabadság tér – State Television Besieged and Taken.” Inex.hu news portal. In Hungarian. Online: <http://index.hu/politika/belfold/ost060919/>. Accessed June 6, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> “What Does the Hungarian Nation Want?” A survey of Kossuth tér petitions. September 25, 2006. Online: <http://index.hu/politika/belfold/pet3326>, “Who Will be the Leader of the Kossuth tér Crowd?” Portraits of potential leaders. September 19, 2006. In Hungarian. Online: <http://index.hu/politika/belfold/kosvez0919/>. Also see Laszlo Nagy, “We will Take Back Our Ancient Land Along with Kossuth tér”. Interviews with the protestors. October 31, 2006. In Hungarian. Online: <http://index.hu/politika/belfold/folyt1031/>.

<sup>61</sup> For an assortment of news items, see “We lied to win, says Hungary PM”. *BBC News*. September 18, 2006. Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5354972.stm>. “Pressure growing on Hungarian PM”. *BBC News*, September 24, 2006. Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5374814.stm>. Pablo Gorondi, “Hungarian Opposition Gains in Elections.” (Associated Press) *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2006. Online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/01/AR2006100100909.html>. Accessed June 6, 2016. Craig Whitlock, “Protest in Hungary Draws 15,000; Calls Persist for Prime Minister's Ouster, but Recent Violence Also Sparks Concern.” (Washington Post Foreign Service) *The Washington Post*, Sep 21, 2006; p. A.14; “Swelling Protest in Hungary Urges Prime Minister to Quit.” *The Washington Post*, Sep 24, 2006. p. A.20.

reported that its Hungarian contacts complained about misleading reports and damage to their country's international reputation.<sup>62</sup>

The seeming lack of U.S. precautionary measures is all the more surprising because the United States government itself was no stranger to conflict over memory, the most notorious cases of which included the Smithsonian museum's 1992 *The West as America* exhibition, its 1994 display of the Enola Gay's fuselage to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. victory in the Pacific in World War Two, and National Endowment for the Humanities chair Lynne Cheney's criticism of the national history curriculum.<sup>63</sup> All these instances involved veterans and conservatives attacking a government-affiliated institution for its alleged lack of patriotism. Earlier, during the Cold War, the U.S. government itself had classified a number of domestic social movement and political organizations as potential terrorist groups for fear that they might disrupt its official commemorations of the Bicentennial of the *Declaration of Independence*, the nation's official birthday.<sup>64</sup> The government had also operated its own counter-radical programs, such as COINTELPRO, Operation Chaos and Operation Garden Plot in order to degrade any groups who may cause disorder or mount serious challenges to its power.<sup>65</sup> The recent (2017) explosion of and struggle in American memory about the Confederate side in the US Civil War, with its champions of Southern 'heritage' and activists against the memorialization of racism is another example of the contested terrain and mobilizing force of U.S. public memory.

What may have kept the U.S. government from acting on the threat of Hungarian domestic politics to the transatlantic commemorations of 1956 was an imperative not to interfere with its partners' internal matters. If this was the case, there is clear evidence that the Americans were concerned that something may go wrong in Budapest on October 23, 2006. According to the Wikileaks "Cablegate" archive, between September 20 and November 9,

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<sup>62</sup> "Budapest Demonstrations: Enter Stage Right." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Sept 22, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1929\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1929_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> See, respectively, Stephen C. Behrendt, Review of William H. Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1992). *Great Plains Quarterly*, 1, 1, (1992), 289-290. Online. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/652> . Accessed November 24, 2014. "Vox Populi" readers' comments book, *New York Times*, July 7, 1991. Online. [http://people.virginia.edu/~mmw3v/west/reviews/nyt\\_commentbook.pdf](http://people.virginia.edu/~mmw3v/west/reviews/nyt_commentbook.pdf) ; Neil A. Lewis, "Smithsonian Substantially Alters Enola Gay Exhibit After Criticism." *New York Times*, October 1, 1994. Online. <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/01/us/smithsonian-substantially-alters-enola-gay-exhibit-after-criticism.html> . Accessed November 24, 2014. Also see "The Enola Gay Controversy." History on Trial. Lehigh University Digital Library. Online. <http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/enola/> . Accessed November 24, 2014; and Lynne Cheney, *Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense - And What We Can Do About It* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

<sup>64</sup> These groups included the American Indian Movement, the Weather Underground, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee. See "Threats to the Peaceful Observance of the Bicentennial. Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-Fourth Congress, Second Session, June 18, 1976." U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1976. Online. [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Threats\\_to\\_the\\_peaceful\\_observance\\_of\\_the\\_bicentennial.djvu/1](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Threats_to_the_peaceful_observance_of_the_bicentennial.djvu/1) . Accessed May 30, 2015.

<sup>65</sup> These federal programs had been launched to gather intelligence on the domestic dissent movements of the 1960s, their possible foreign infiltration, and to plan for restoring order in the case of mass domestic disturbances such as the urban riots of 1967. The programs were allegedly discontinued in the early 1970s; however, the high secrecy surrounding active programs as well as the records of discontinued ones had prevented verification. See Book III: Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate, April 23, 1976, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1976. Assassination Archive and Research Center. Online. [http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3\\_0\\_Title.pdf](http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/book3/pdf/ChurchB3_0_Title.pdf) . Accessed May 30, 2015.

2006, the United States Embassy sent 20 cables from Budapest to the State Department in Washington, D.C., of which 18 discussed the country's political tug-of-war. The U.S. Embassy was monitoring Hungary's domestic pressure cooker in ways that may have gone beyond the usual diplomatic summaries of the host national media on relevant topics. The American diplomatic post sent its workers to the major political rallies and it even consulted a political analyst.<sup>66</sup>

Both the Magyars and the U.S. Embassy also recognized the importance of the upcoming 1956 commemorations as a day of truth in Hungarian politics. Two days after the capture of the national television building by extremists, on September 20 Prime Minister Gyurcsány specifically addressed the foreign ambassadors in the country, professing confidence that his government would stabilize the situation before the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1956. As the embassy's report put it,

Thoughtful but resolute, Gyurcsany was very much in command of the facts and of the situation. His comments to the diplomatic community reflect a leader who has considered the political, economic, and moral aspects of the issue ... and emerged convinced that his course of action is both right and worth defending.<sup>67</sup>

The Hungarian prime minister was fully aware of how important it was to reassure the diplomatic community in the face of a possible threat to the high-level celebrations on October 23.

In conclusion, Gyurcsany appealed to the diplomatic community to "help my government and help me personally" by putting his comments in context. He also asked that embassies inform their governments that his government will do everything in its power to return to "normal life." They are exerting a "strong effort" to "control the situation" and will restore Hungary's "traditional face" before the 50th anniversary. He encouraged the diplomatic community to come to the government "anytime" with questions and concerns.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, the leaders of the major opposition forces likewise made an appeal to the foreign representatives in the country. On September 26, 2006, former foreign minister János Martonyi and MP Zsolt Németh argued to diplomats that while still legal, the Gyurcsány government had lost credibility and legitimacy with the people, and therefore it would soon "lose credit" in the international community. These politicians finessed their previous demands for the resignation of the Gyurcsány cabinet into a demand for a "one-year provisional government of experts."

U.S. Embassy personnel communicated to Washington the seriousness of Hungarian domestic politics. Uncle Sam's diplomats clearly felt that the conflict between the governing Socialist-Liberal coalition, the opposition force FIDESZ and the far right over Prime Minister

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<sup>66</sup> See, respectively, "Budapest Demonstrations: Enter Stage Right." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Sept 22, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1929\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1929_a.html) ; "Hungarian Confidence Vote: Gyurcsany's Majority Holds." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy in Budapest, Hungary to the Department of State in Washington, D.C., Oct 10, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2045\\_a.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2045_a.html) ; and "The Land of the Blind: All Eyes on Parliamentary Confidence Vote." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Oct 6, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2026\\_a.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2026_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> "PM Gyurcsany on Continuing Protests." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Sept 20, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1902\\_a.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1902_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Gyurcsány's leaked speech was spinning out of control, and they blamed this on the choice by opposition leaders like Viktor Orbán to push for the resignation of the whole government through the use of popular rallies and civil disobedience. U.S. Ambassador April H. Foley's analysis of the September 26 FIDESZ appeal to the ambassadors considered the opposition party to be lacking strategic vision in a position of tactical advantage, and deemed it to be controlled by party head Orbán's heedless and reckless drive for power.<sup>69</sup>

At least one member of the FIDESZ delegation to the foreign ambassadors seized on memory as a tool to delegitimize the Gyurcsány government.

Nemeth went further in his brief remarks, describing the PM as "a notorious pathological liar." He cast the Gyurcsany government's policies as "living Kadarism" and stated, "this is about our past - about communism" and about the betrayal of "Hungary's judeo-christian values." That is why the nation had "spontaneously" and "fantastically" risen up in response. Should Gyurcsany not pursue the government of experts, he concluded, there are "more negative scenarios" including a "declining moral and economic situation" and "growing social unrest and instability."<sup>70</sup>

Casting the conflict in moral terms, Németh claimed that Gyurcsány was the political descendant of János Kádár, the man whose defection provided legitimacy to the Soviet crushing of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, and who ruled the country as a dictator until 1988. Here Németh not only skilfully painted Gyurcsány as a "communist" – the same group who were the villains of 1956 – but he also recast the opposition's recent riots and ongoing demonstrations as the same kind of "spontaneous" and "fantastic" reach for freedom by the people as 1956 in transatlantic cultural memory. Likewise, he implied that just like in 1956, events may yet spin out of control, into even more serious and bloody conflict. In his party's effort at transatlantic diplomacy in a crisis, Németh was using the dominant memory régime of 1956 to recast the current struggle in Hungary in the appealing terms of the past.

More than two weeks before the commemorative riots of October 23, 2006, the U.S. embassy in Budapest received an even more explicit warning – this time from their local political consultant.

As Szabados also noted, the shadow of 1956 looms large over the current debate. FIDESZ members talk sincerely of the current showdown as a chance to "finally win the revolution" and often describe their opposition as a struggle against "communism." Although the government's convergence plan represents an effort to address Hungary's future priorities, FIDESZ continues to look resolutely backward, blind to its own disturbing turn toward what Orban has termed "popular democracy." As the 50th anniversary approaches, Szabados agrees that the confidence vote is "not the end but the beginning" (reftel). Whatever the results of the vote in Parliament, he believes FIDESZ will step up its actions to challenge - or openly obstruct - the government in the streets.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> "Budapest Demonstrations: FIDESZ Out for a Spin." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Sept 20, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1953\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1953_a.html) . Also see "Raising the Stakes: Gyurcsany Government to Call For Vote of Confidence." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Oct 3, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2005\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2005_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. also see "Budapest Demonstrations: FIDESZ Out for a Spin." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Sept 20, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1953\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1953_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> "The Land of the Blind: All Eyes on Parliamentary Confidence Vote." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Oct 6, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2026\\_a.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2026_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

This was a rather clear prediction that the major opposition party would be engaging in counter-commemorations on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1956, attempting to thereby force the government to resign under pressure of a popular(ized) protest – or to damage its own credibility by aggressively responding to extra-legal street action.

The above warning should have given the U.S. Embassy cause for making arrangements for an emergency. They may not have done so also because on October 11 the opposition FIDESZ party's leader, Viktor Orbán made a 'head fake' in his own appeal to foreign ambassadors:

Responding to questions from the diplomatic community regarding the upcoming 50th anniversary celebrations, Orbán categorically rejected the possibility of participation in government-sponsored events. "The government is a lie," he commented, "and we will not participate in a lie" but rather organize events "100 times bigger." He also questioned whether President Solyom would choose to participate in the events with PM Gyurcsany. (Note: We have received no indication that the President, an official host of the commemorative events, is considering any such step. End Note.)<sup>72</sup>

Orbán's promise not to interfere with the official celebrations and to keep the opposition's alternative commemorations peaceful may have reassured the diplomatic community, including the American post. In hindsight, it is clear that he either had not intended to keep this promise or he should not have made it. It only likely complicated matters that one week later, in a separate meeting with G7 ambassadors, Orbán said that he and his party would still attend parts of the celebrations involving the president of the republic.<sup>73</sup>

The American diplomatic post may not have made arrangements for an emergency also because they seem to have believed the Hungarian government's promises. In his September 20 meeting with the diplomatic community, PM Gyurcsány was optimistic about the prospects of a peaceful transatlantic commemoration of 1956 in a month's time.

He believes the situation will return to normal before the 50th anniversary celebrations, commenting that "not even I would accuse the opposition" of "soiling the memory of the revolution" with "violence in the streets."<sup>74</sup>

Whether the U.S. Embassy relayed serious concerns about Hungary's domestic politics or its own security – there is no evidence to support or refute this – the American government may have actually scaled back its level of representation at the anniversary. On September 25, the Office of the Press Secretary announced the roster of the delegation appointed by President Bush for a commemorative visit to Hungary. Besides U.S. Ambassador to Hungary April Foley, the only high-level delegate on the team was New York state Governor George Pataki. Like him, the two other delegation members were both Hungarian Americans: former professional

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<sup>72</sup> "Postcards from the Edge: Fidesz Calls for Parliamentary Boycott, Public Demonstrations." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Oct 11, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2048\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2048_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>73</sup> "Orbán Tells Ambassadors Instability Is "A Risk I'm Prepared to Take"". Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Oct 18, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2111\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2111_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> "PM Gyurcsany on Continuing Protests." Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Sept 20, 2006. Wikileaks "Cablegate." Online. [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1902\\_a.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST1902_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

football player Peter Gogolak, and finance mogul Steven Udvar-Hazy.<sup>75</sup> Thus, Bush sent to Hungary not cabinet-level representatives, but members of the U.S. Hungarian diaspora, people who could be regarded as the most unproblematic American representatives – or the best potential cultural mediators.

The American delegation's meeting with Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány was admittedly anti-climactic. The day before the official commemorations, Gyurcsány spent little time dwelling on the past:

Gyurcsany opened the meeting by reflecting on the anniversary as both a historical event and as a “mirror in which we see ourselves today.” He referred frankly to the “tough political fight” with the opposition, but emphasized his desire to “make sure the picture includes all colors.”<sup>76</sup>

The prime minister's eagerness to move on to discussing the present rather than the anniversary was surprising especially because of the “hearts string diplomacy” that the U.S. delegates played in the meeting.

Governor Pataki recalled watching the events of 1956 as a young man and referred to the uprising as “the only time I ever saw my father cry.” The experience remains with him to this day and inspires the entire world. Delegates Peter Gogolak and Steven Udvar-Hazy recalled their own paths from Hungary to the United States in the aftermath of the uprising, expressing their hope that the anniversary would help unite the nation behind the reforms necessary to ensure long-term prosperity.<sup>77</sup>

While the three U.S. delegates all wanted to recall their personal (childhood) impressions of 1956 – their flashbulb memories - Gyurcsány, born 5 years after the event, relied on cultural memory to establish common ground. Whether because of the ethnic ties, the transatlantic links of memory, or the mutually recognized urgency of Hungarian domestic politics, the conversation soon turned to the present. Gyurcsány asked for advice on implementing reform, and the U.S. delegates urged him to be decisive and steadfast in his policies.<sup>78</sup> The American participants of this meeting clearly used the encounter to derive from the memory of 1956 a message of resolution and unity for Hungary's troubled today.

### *Memory Unravels: The Budapest Riots of 2006*

In spite of an agreement between the protest camp and law enforcement to share Parliament square announced just three days earlier,<sup>79</sup> in the early morning of October 23, 2006 police decided to remove all demonstrators from the square. Authorities claimed that this measure was necessitated by the protestors' refusal to be subjected to the security search that

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<sup>75</sup> “Presidential Delegation to Attend 50th Anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in Budapest, Hungary.” Press release, Office of the Press Secretary, Sept 25, 2006. The White House web archive, President George W. Bush. Online. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060925-1.html> . Accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> “Lost in Translation: PM Gyurcsany's Meeting with U.S. Delegation to the 50th Anniversary Commemorative Events.” Diplomatic cable from US Embassy Budapest to Washington, Oct 25, 2006. Wikileaks “Cablegate.” Online. [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2161\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUDAPEST2161_a.html) . Accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> SZ. I. M., “ORFK [Budapest police] Yields, Kossuth ter Demonstrators can Stay.” October 20, 2006. In Hungarian. Online: <http://inmdex.hu/politika/belfold/demonstr646>.

they had previously agreed to. During the operation, police took photographs of the weapons found at the protestors' campsite.

The removal of the Kossuth Square group only served to galvanize their sympathizers. In the course of the morning, as the official ceremonies got under way, over a thousand people gathered in several groups in places off the square. Riot police corralled them away from the ceremonies as they chanted "Get lost, Gyurcsány," "Traitor," "'56, '56," and "AVH" (referring to the Communist secret police). The prime minister obliquely responded to the protests in a parliamentary speech, emphasizing the difference between 1956 and 2006: back then people had no choice *but* to take to the streets, while now these groups were choosing to question the legitimacy of democracy as a system.<sup>80</sup>

Most media accounts agree that the removal of the protestors from Kossuth Square set the tone for the events of the day. Their own signs and repeated references to this confirm that displacement from the square inflamed their feelings and triggered further protests. When dignitaries laid wreaths at another site, protestors in an adjoining street shouted, "We want to celebrate! Gyurcsány, get out!"<sup>81</sup> Shortly after noon, a cell phone text message urged protestors around the city to "join the Kossuth Square group who were chased away by the liar Gyurcsány and his business partners. Now is the time to act together while the international press is here. Long live '56, pass it on."<sup>82</sup>

The displaced and other groups did hold their own commemorations – and the place they chose for it was another major site of 1956 memory, Corvin Lane. Once a spot of bitter fighting between young revolutionaries and Soviet tanks, the lane was now home to a movie theater of the same name, and it acquired a memorial statue to "the lads of Pest" back in the late 1990s. For the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 events, a public history exhibition was installed in the lane, complete with period trucks, tanks and an artillery piece.<sup>83</sup> Families were enjoying the interactive display, and 1956 veterans were wrapping up their own commemoration when the now several thousand strong Kossuth Square crowd converged on Corvin Lane. Soon more veterans arrived in period open-plateau Csepel trucks, which bore 1956 slogans.<sup>84</sup>

In Corvin Lane, the Kossuth Square groups took over the stage and sound apparatus of the previous event, and they listened to a number of speakers there. People such as the leader of the Goy Bikers Association urged the crowd to retake Kossuth Square. However, the media had reported that the police chief had declared the square "an area of [police] operation," indefinitely off limits to civilian traffic.<sup>85</sup> After about 2 hours, the crowd headed out of Corvin Lane.

At this point, the Kossuth Square demonstrators broke into several groups as the police tried to control them peacefully. As it is so often the case, it is not clear why clashes began around 3:30 PM in Alkotmány Street. The interaction between these crowds and the police soon escalated into violence. Demonstrators built barricades and threw stones at the police, who responded with teargas.<sup>86</sup>

Several episodes prove that people in the crowd consciously chose to 're-enact' episodes of 1956 in order to bring about change in the present. While articles and videos on

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<sup>80</sup> "Instead of Celebration, Street Fighting in Budapest." October 23, 2006. In Hungarian. Online: <http://origo.hu/itthon/20061023egyre.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> "Kossuth ter Minute by Minute." Website of the Kossuth ter protestors. In Hungarian. Online: <http://www.kossuthter.com/hu/node/1239>.

<sup>83</sup> Somewhere in the city there were also so-called "elokepek" – "tableaux vivants" of performers in period dress.

<sup>84</sup> "Kossuth ter Minute by Minute," "Instead of Celebration, Street Fighting in Budapest".

<sup>85</sup> "Kossuth ter Minute by Minute".

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., "Instead of Celebration, Street Fighting in Budapest."

major online news portals showed that they consistently linked their causes to the commemorations, and used the rhetoric of the uprising 50 years before (“revolution,” “’56,” “AVH”),<sup>87</sup> some protestors also tried to approximate period dress, carried the commemorative national flag with a hole in the middle, and used their environment as props. In Corvin Lane, they enthusiastically greeted the veterans of ’56 and climbed onto their period trucks.<sup>88</sup> Later, they tore down the giant letters “Capital of Freedom” displayed in front of City Hall, and used the word “Freedom” as a moving barricade.

In an episode that made headlines in most national and some international news media, demonstrators forced open a period tank on the living history display, managed to start it, and drove it towards the police, stopping short of tragedy. In fact, by that time protestors had already used several period vehicles as barricades and transportation – like the Csepel trucks mentioned above. However, the use of the tank as a single event seems to have come to epitomize the clashing and blending of memory, protest and commemorations on October 23, 2006.

For the purposes of this analysis, it matters little who started the tank and how. The tank episode highlights the crux of the 2006 October events - that even though former 1956 fighters participated in both the official commemorations and the spontaneous protests, their presence was overshadowed by what other people did. What made the protestors authentic in their own eyes was not some objective reality or historical fact, but their *performance*. This performance - their repertoire - was to some extent based on previous representations of the 1956 events – by their cultural memory’s archive of photographs, texts, and personal accounts, as presented by various printed and audiovisual media – as well as the opinion of their peers.

The tank did stop before it reached the police. The question of why it did so is important, because it may prove that protestors did not get lost in their re-enactment – that they possessed the double consciousness Jenny Thompson describes: an awareness that they were reliving not the actual events, only their representations.<sup>89</sup> While the museum director claimed that the tank stopped because it ran out of fuel (it had just enough to move up and down its carrier vehicle), the participant witnesses said that they stopped it because they deemed the ride too dangerous.<sup>90</sup> This would also mean that they wanted to keep their re-enactment protest in certain limits. For this and other reasons, although over 100 people were injured during the night of riots, no one died.

The rest of October 23, 2006 featured further barricade building, stone-throwing, tear gas attacks, water cannons, rubber bullets, police cavalry charges, the detainment of 131 and the injuries of over a 100 people, before the last group of protestors was finally dispersed around 1:30 AM the next day.

While various groups of protestors asserted their understanding of the message of 1956 to 2006 on the streets of Budapest, Hungarian and international politicians and historians performed their own interpretations of the past in efforts to fix the meaning of the historical conflict – mostly their own meaning. As their street fighter counterparts, they were waging the battles of the present through the past. Most of them lamented that the people of today “not only celebrate separately – they celebrate different things,”<sup>91</sup> and that they were “selective” and creative in their interpretations and commemoration of the past. Many wished to restore a unity of meaning that is elusive even for some professional historians. Although Prime Minister

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<sup>87</sup> For example, see the Origo.hu video galleries: <http://origo.hu/itthon/20061024nezen.html> or the Index.hu video galleries: <http://index.hu/politika/belfold/2006/elkurtuk/videok/>.

<sup>88</sup> “Kossuth ter Minute by Minute”.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 170-171.

<sup>90</sup> “Tank Driver May Get Up to 12 Years,” “Protestors Had Prepared to Steal Tank.”

<sup>91</sup> “Solyom: There is only One 56 Revolution.” Online: <http://index.hu/politika/belfold/solyom280/>

Gyurcsány pointed out that “every age uses every historical event to legitimize itself,”<sup>92</sup> not even he offered any self-critique.

Elsewhere I developed the concept of *counter-commemorations* - events in which a current social group claim the mantle of one of the participants of the original historical event, and attempt to ‘complete’ what they regard as the original project of the past in the present.<sup>93</sup> The October 23, 2006 riots in Budapest were this and more: the city was a pressure cooker for the multi-player game of the politics of the cultural memory of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, in which a number of groups were contesting the meaning of the original historical events with their commemorative performances. In this instance, the non-state actors of Hungarian right-wing extremists, the democratic opposition FIDESZ party and their power base, with some help from the veterans of 1956, converged to challenge the official memory régime of the Hungarian Socialist Party, and their transatlantic commemorative diplomacy.

### *Conclusion*

The official commemorations and the whole day of October 23 were marred by riotous counter-commemorations of crowds composed of Hungarian extremists and FIDESZ supporters. The carefully crafted official transatlantic performances of memory were drowned out in the international media by reports of barricades, burning cars, a historical tank hijacked by demonstrators, and tear gas and riot police dispersing the crowds – vernacular alternative performances challenging the legitimacy of the official memory régime of 1956.<sup>94</sup>

What ultimately saved the transatlantic memory diplomacy of 1956 in 2006 was not that either government, their foreign policy corps or diplomatic posts would have anticipated the commemorative riots that erupted from the pressurized domestic politics of Hungary. Commemorative diplomacy on both sides sailed through the storm of Magyar memory politics most likely because by the time the unrest happened on October 23, both governments had largely completed their commemorative events. As Zoltán Fehér recalled,

It is important that what we did in Washington had a very good response, and this – not in the least – offset the disturbances that took place back home. This is mostly due to the fact that we

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<sup>92</sup> “Gyurcsany Flattered Boross.” October 30, 2006. Index.hu. In Hungaian. Online: <http://index.hu/politika/belfold/elkurtuk2/>.

<sup>93</sup> For more on counter-commemorations as commemorative performances of current political claims, see Gyorgy Toth, “Performing ‘the Spirit of ’76’: U.S. Historical Memory and Counter-Commemorations for American Indian Sovereignty.” In Amanda Gilroy and Marietta Messmer, eds., *America: Justice, Conflict, War. The European Views of the United States* book series of the European Association for American Studies. Heidelberg, Germany: Winter University Press, 2016, 131-150.

<sup>94</sup> For an assortment of news items of the October 23, 2006 commemorative riots in Budapest, see “Hungarian Police Clamp Down on Anti-Government Protests.” *The Guardian*, October 23, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/23/1>; Pablo Gorondi, “Violence Marks Anniversary of '56 Revolt in Hungary.” *The Washington Post*, Oct 24, 2006, p. A.16. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/23/AR2006102301478.html>; Craig S. Smith, “Clashes Disrupt Hungarians’ Celebration of Anti-Soviet Revolt in ‘56.” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2006, p A11. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/24/world/europe/24hungary.html>; “Hungary Divided.” *The Economist*, October 25 2006. <http://www.economist.com/node/8073208>; Kate Connolly, “Echoes of '56.” *The Telegraph*, October 24, 2006. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1532274/Echoes-of-56.html>; Kate Connolly, “Deja Vu as Tank Blunders into Uprising's 50th Anniversary.” *Sidney Morning Herald* (via *The Telegraph*, London), October 25, 2006. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/soviet-tank-blunders-into-hungarys-50th-anniversary/2006/10/24/1161455724077.html>; “Hungarian Protesters Hijack Soviet-Era Tank.” October 23, 2006. *ABC News* (Australia). <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2006-10-24/hungarian-protesters-hijack-soviet-era-tank/1292866>. Accessed December 23, 2016.

began planning the events already in February. Then we put together the [US] presidential visit in June...

In other words, by the autumn we had created a kind of enthusiasm about the commemorative events, which continued in early September, and throughout October, they even screened *Children of Glory* in the White House on October 28... In sum, to some extent the sights and sounds of our fireworks drowned out the thunder and lightning back home [in Hungary].<sup>95</sup>

From the vantage point of rarefied elite diplomacy, the 2006 commemorations of 1956 achieved their goals of cultivating the transatlantic relations between Hungary and the United States. Yet what the wider audiences saw of the anniversary was a train wreck. As so often, the truth was somewhere between the two. The case of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations of the 1956 Hungarian uprising demonstrates that even the most carefully crafted official remembrance of the past is vulnerable to challenges to its memory régime by non-state actors. Governments and their representatives have to reckon with this.

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<sup>95</sup> Personal communication, May 3, 2016.

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