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Coming to terms with the Holocaust in Hungary after 1945

In the aftermath of World War II, a certain inclination to document the national socialist crimes and to address the issue of the Holocaust could be observed in many European countries. This process was often accompanied by conflicting interests: on the one hand, the proclaimed necessity to suppress the Nazi past for social-pragmatic reasons in order to concentrate on the reconstruction of the nation state; on the other hand the question of how to honour „heroes“ and „victims“ in terms of historical justice and democracy while respectively starting proceedings against collaborationists and fascists.¹

In Hungary, in the first years after 1945 not only numerous trials of war criminals were initiated but also several commissions were established, which investigated the crimes committed by the Nazis or members of the Arrow Cross party. The main task of these commissions was to collect documents and accounts of witnesses to give evidence of the crimes. While the Hungarian communist state became increasingly totalitarian, the memory of the deportation and destruction of the Hungarian Jews received less and less attention. The needs and concerns of Jewish survivors came into conflict with the different political interests.

In my paper I will point out the motives according to which the Hungarian political parties in the short multi-party period approached the past and addressed the memory of the Horthy–respectively the Szálasi-regime. Analysing the protocols of the national assembly, we can observe the differences between the various parties. I will put my main emphasis on the debates around the Peoples’ Tribunals and the law on the stigmatization of the persecution of the Hungarian Jewry and the mitigation of its consequences as well as on the discussions, which were brought about by the peace negotiations in Paris. While focussing on Hungary, this analysis will also take into account the general European developments in the immediate post-War period.