



Hungarians' Collective Memory in Public Space

Kenneth E. Foote, Anett Árvay, *Contested Places, Contested Pasts: Sites of Memory and Commemoration in the Hungarian Landscape*, Routledge, 2025, 300 pp.

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Abstract

This article is a review of Kenneth E. Foote and Anett Árvay's book *Contested Places, Contested Pasts: Sites of Memory and Commemoration in the Hungarian Landscape*, published in 2025 by Routledge; ISBN: 9781032870274.

Keywords: Hungary; landscape; memorials; cultural heritage

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Authors' contribution: Both authors participated equally in the concept of the study and drafting the manuscript.

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Foote and Árvay's *Contested Places, Contested Pasts* (2025) is a detailed analysis of how twentieth-century Hungarian history has been inscribed into the landscape. Memorials, monuments, museums, and other historical markers across Hungary – in Budapest, but also in smaller towns and villages – for the First World War, the Second World War (including the tragedy of the Holocaust), the communist era, and the 1956 Uprising are all discussed by the authors. As they note, “some events are celebrated nationwide [...]. Others are marked modestly [...], while some remain unmarked and unacknowledged” (Foote & Árvay, 2025, p. 1). This uneven commemorative landscape is reflective of David Lowenthal's contention that “the tangible past is altered mainly to make history conform with memory” (Lowenthal, 1975, as cited in Foote & Árvay, 2025, p. 1), a theoretical stance which underpins the authors' approach. That is, the book treats Hungary's landscape as a “landshape” of memory – a spatial archive of contested histories, where struggles over meaning are made concrete in stone, steel, and space.

Foote and Árvay organize the book into thematic chapters. The first chapter outlines theoretical perspectives on landscapes of memory and sets out key questions. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of Hungary's “key moments” as background (the Habsburg era, post-Trianon interwar period, WWII, communist period). Chapters 3–7, in turn, examine five periods in detail: “The Many Legacies of the First World War”; “Confronting Defeat and Loss in the Second World War”; “Remembering the Holocaust”; “The Legacies of Communism”; and “The 1956 Uprising”. Each of these case studies traces how memory is publicly enacted – for example, by surveying monuments to fallen soldiers or by analyzing Holocaust memorials and museums. The final chapter, “Hungary's Unquiet Places, Unquiet Pasts”, draws together the threads and reflects on ongoing debates. Throughout, the authors include dozens of photographs, maps, and diagrams to illustrate the sites and their spatial contexts.

In terms of methodology, the study is explicitly comparative and multi-sited. The authors “crisscross the country” using the literature on the subject, sources, and extensive field-work “to document the stories behind dozens of major and minor memorials” (Foote & Árvay, 2025, blurb). They pay special attention to spatiality and materiality; for instance, they map how sites relate to one another at various scales (from rural roadside markers to urban national monuments). The book is notable for balancing attention between Budapest and the rest of Hungary – it deliberately goes beyond the capital to include towns and villages where lesser-known memorials exist. As the blurb says, it is “the first comprehensive, book-length study of Hungary's commemorative landscapes from the First World War to the present” (Foote & Árvay, 2025, blurb). By weaving theory (drawing on memory scholars) with rich empirical description, the authors situate Hungarian cases in relation to broader debates in Europe and North America.

One of the book's most significant contributions lies in its broad temporal scope, as it encompasses all major conflicts and political regimes of twentieth-century Hungary, dedicating individual chapters to each period. Foote and Árvay place particular emphasis

on the spatial and material dimensions of memory, drawing on concepts such as Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989) to demonstrate how monuments, public art, and physical sites embody contested historical narratives. A noteworthy strength of the study is its inclusion of a wide range of case studies: while the analysis addresses prominent memorials in Budapest – such as Heroes' Square and the House of Terror – it also attends to lesser-known sites in smaller towns and rural areas, thereby illuminating regional variations in commemorative practices. The book is richly illustrated, incorporating numerous photographs, maps, and diagrams that enhance the spatial analysis and allow readers to visualize the evolving "landscape of memory". Each chapter employs a thematic framework to explore the political and cultural debates surrounding sites of memory, offering insight into why certain issues – such as Hungary's role in the Second World War or the memory of the 1956 Uprising – have elicited controversy, contestation, or even vandalism in public space.

By detailing Hungary's experiences, *Contested Places, Contested Pasts* fills a gap in the literature on European memory. As Wawrzyniak and Pakier (2013) have noted, memory studies have suffered from "unconscious Western imperialism", focusing on Western Europe and the U.S. rather than Eastern Europe. This book advances that agenda by making the Hungarian case (and its distinctive post-socialist context) visible to an international audience. It highlights how the fall of communism unleashed what the authors describe as a kind of "mania" of memorial-making in Hungary. In this respect, the study also contributes to geography and landscape studies by showing how political change reshapes public space and collective memory.

While Foote and Árvay's volume is analytically grounded and offers valuable insights into the politics of memory, its extensive chronological and geographical scope inevitably constrains the depth with which individual case studies can be explored. The authors successfully combine comparative analysis with archival research, and their treatment of Hungary's commemorative landscape is consistently informed by relevant theoretical frameworks. However, the effort to address multiple historical periods – from the First World War to the post-communist era – and to document memorial practices across both urban and rural sites results in a synthesis that privileges breadth over close, contextualized examination. Although their analysis does identify important patterns – such as the differential treatment of interwar, wartime, and communist-era figures – it sometimes risks flattening the local specificities or political nuances of individual monuments. In our opinion, while the book makes a significant contribution as a national-scale survey with clear analytical value, it also highlights the need for complementary, micro-level studies that engage more fully with localized memory practices and their social meanings.

In terms of theory, the authors ground their analysis in established memory scholarship while also emphasizing spatial theory. Their notion of the "landscape" of the past reflects a creative merging of cultural geography and memory studies. Chapter 1's "Theoretical Perspectives" and the Introduction make it clear that it is an explicitly interdisciplinary

project (geography, memory theory, and Hungarian history). The study weaves such theory into good storytelling, which should appeal to both scholars and general readers. By interrogating both consensus monuments and contentious sites (e.g. the repeated vandalism of Horthy's monuments or the uproar over relocating Imre Nagy's statue), the book sheds light on the politics of memory. The discussion of such cases ties contemporary events (e.g. Viktor Orbán's nationalist agenda) to long-standing issues in public memory. Indeed, one of the book's final arguments is that understanding Hungary's memorial sites has implications for Europe as a whole.

The book's empirical focus and visual documentation are well-matched to its geographic orientation. Foote's prior works (e.g. Foote, 2003) on U.S. commemorative landscapes (e.g. terrorist attacks of 9/11) find a parallel here, and the authors handle archival and field data with skill. The inclusion of detailed site maps and photographs is both informative and persuasive. In memory studies, analysis is too often abstract; here, one can see exactly what the memorials look like and where they are. Methodologically, the comparative case-study design is appropriate: it allows the authors to compare, for instance, how a World War II memorial in one town differs from another, or how post-communist regimes re-use older sites. Such attention to material and spatial detail strengthens the argument that memory is not only ideological but also embodied in place.

However, there are some limitations to note. The very breadth of the project means that not every topic can be explored exhaustively. For example, although each historical period is introduced, the book cannot fully substitute for specialized studies on, say, the Holocaust in Hungary or the intricacies of the 1956 Uprising. Scholars of those topics will still rely on dedicated works, whereas Foote and Árvay provide a broad overview from a spatial perspective. Also, the focus is squarely on physical commemorations – monuments, museums, plaques – which is justified by the geography lens, but readers interested in intangible or performative aspects of memory may find less coverage. Future research might complement this by looking at how ordinary Hungarians internalize and transmit memory beyond the monuments.

Finally, in terms of academic impact, *Contested Places, Contested Pasts* will be highly relevant across multiple fields. Memory studies will welcome the novel focus on Hungary, a country less represented in English-language scholarship. Geographers and landscape scholars will find a rich case study of how politics and place interact. Specialists in Hungarian and Central European history and culture will gain a useful synthesis (and much new empirical data) on commemoration. The theoretical framing – linking landscape and memory – is a strength, though one might wish for even deeper engagement with memory theorists (e.g. more explicit dialogue with Pierre Nora or Jan Assmann). Still, the book succeeds in bridging theory and empirical analysis. In critical terms, its originality and scope are significant, but its ambition means it serves best as a comprehensive survey rather than a collection of in-depth case studies (it is a trade-off).

In our opinion, *Contested Places, Contested Pasts* is a pioneering study of Hungarian memorial landscapes. Its descriptive section lays out the content, methodology and themes clearly: an emphasis on material sites of memory, a case-study approach spanning a period from WWI to post-communist times, and a wealth of visual documentation. The assessment above suggests that its strengths – breadth, empirical richness, and relevance to contemporary debates – outweigh its minor limitations. In sum, Foote and Árvay have produced a valuable contribution that not only fills a gap in Hungarian / Central European memory studies but also enhances comparative public memory scholarship by demonstrating how memories are physically and spatially negotiated in a post-socialist nation. This work will certainly stimulate further research on commemorative practices in Hungary and beyond.

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Abstrakt

Artykuł jest recenzją książki autorstwa Kennetha E. Foote'a i Anett Árvay pt. *Contested Places, Contested Pasts: Sites of Memory and Commemoration in the Hungarian Landscape*, wydanej w 2025 roku nakładem wydawnictwa Routledge; ISBN: 9781032870274.

Słowa kluczowe: Węgry; krajobraz; miejsca pamięci; dziedzictwo kulturowe

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