



## Limits of Universalization: The European Memory Sites of Genocide

Éva Kovács <sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, Wien, Austria; <sup>b</sup>Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

### ABSTRACT

The twentieth century became known as the era of genocides. However, historians do not yet agree on the use of the category of genocide for all mass killings in the twentieth century and still are debating their place in European civilization. My article focuses on the European *lieux de mémoire* of the genocides within the associative framework of the fundamental question about the material evidence of crime. This framework helps highlight the limits of universalization in European memory politics. In understanding them as a dynamically developing social phenomenon, this article analyses it in two dimensions: the emergence of the memory of the Holocaust as an archetype of genocide, and the crimes of Communism as a rival memory framework in Eastern Europe. In closing, I will return to the incessant search for the material evidence of genocide. This article challenges the general concept of the European *lieux de mémoire* of the genocide from this point of view as well.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 October 2017  
Accepted 19 July 2018

### KEYWORDS

Sites of memory; genocides; Holocaust; Holodomor; gulag; killing sites

## Introduction: The Evidence of a Crime

[My guide] started asking me about the Jews when we were in Butare, in southern Rwanda, where I was visiting Thierry Sebananwa, who had made his own private genocide museum in his flat. In 2005, Thierry, together with a group of people who had survived the genocide in Rwanda, went to Israel and visited Yad Vashem. “This was when I realised,” he said, “that I have to tell the people in my country about it.” [...] Black and white photos, which Thierry brought from Yad Vashem, are hanging on the walls: streets on fire, people in striped pyjamas, documents left by the Nazis. “We don’t have any documents,” said Thierry, “only tales and stories. [...] I also don’t want to spend my life among these pictures. But ever since I found out about the Shoah, I can’t get my mind on anything else.”<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt from a report written by Konstantyn Gebert, an international journalist and founder of the Polish Jewish intellectual monthly *Midrasz*, emblematically shows the complexity of the European memory of genocides. The Murambi Genocide Memorial in Butare is one of the darkest killing sites in the world. It is rated by the “darkometer” of the

**CONTACT** Éva Kovács  [eva.kovacs@wvi.ac.at](mailto:eva.kovacs@wvi.ac.at)

<sup>1</sup> Konstantyn Gebert, “Murambi naprawdę istnieje” (Murambi really exists), *Polityka* 16 (March 2009): 82–4, cited in Małgorzata Wosińska, “Turning to the Present: A Practical Approach to Human Remains in Comparative Genocide Studies,” in *Mapping the “Forensic Turn”: The Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond*, ed. Zuzana Dziuban (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017), 124–5.