

# Ghost heroes: Forgetting and remembering in national narratives of the past

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## Abstract

This article takes a sociological perspective on the phenomenon of national myth making in collective memory. It develops an original theoretical concept, the *ghost hero*. The ghost hero, we posit, is a reinvented historical actor who, despite being implicated in acts of moral or legal turpitude, is elevated and venerated within national communities. In building a theoretical frame, we use two historical cases: Latvian aviator and Nazi-era collaborator Herberts Cukurs, and Marshall Ion Antonescu, pro-fascist leader of Romania in World War II. Our concept draws on the microsociological theory of Erving Goffman to characterize a historical narrative as the presentation of a national “self” and the structural functionalist perspective to examine the sociological functions of the ghost hero for state and society. We suggest that the ghost hero concept could extend beyond these cases and regions to analyze the heroization of historical figures implicated in atrocities.

## Keywords

Collective memory, symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, postcommunism, Latvia, Romania

## Introduction

On October 11, 2014, the curtain rose in Liepāja, Latvia, on a new musical, *Cukurs. Herberts Cukurs*. The show, which premiered in the hometown of Herberts Cukurs, traces the life of this controversial figure. It highlights his service in the battle for Latvian independence and daring flights in an airplane he

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built, as well as accusations of collaboration with occupying Nazi forces in World War II and his assassination in South America. The musical offers viewers a question – *Hero or murderer?* – but this cultural product offers just one socially acceptable answer.

The first half of the show introduces the audience to a young Cukurs. According to the playbill, “Herberts Cukurs is the most famous Latvian in the world. He gained his fame with his selfless and audacious flight from Riga to Gambia in 1933-1934, in a single-engine plane that he built with his own hands. Because of this heroic deed, the press all around the world wrote about Herberts Cukurs, while at home he became a national hero.” The opening elevates Cukurs as an aviation ace and devoted patriot.

The second half showcases a darker picture, thrusting Cukurs into the violence of World War II. Cukurs has been accused of complicity in, among other crimes, the murder of Jews in the Riga Ghetto in 1941 (Angrick and Klein, 2009). While the musical acknowledges his membership in the notorious Arājs Commando, which killed at least 26,000 Jews, Roma, and communists in Latvia (Plavnieks, 2017: 47), Cukurs is portrayed as a passive figure. There is an implication that Cukurs *saved* Jews: in one scene, he protectively clutches a boy as the audience hears the child’s father being shot by Nazis behind the curtain. In another scene, the cast surrounds Cukurs, whispering, “murderer, murderer.” In response, he sings an appeal to God, questioning the “justice” of his end.

Like Cukurs, Romania’s wartime leader Ion Antonescu has been reimagined decades after his post-war execution for the Holocaust and other crimes. Romania’s complex Holocaust history was obscured under communism and only brought to light after 1989. Antonescu, an ally of Adolf Hitler, ordered the killing of Jews in northeast Romania while establishing ghettos and camps for Jews and Roma in Romanian-occupied Soviet territories. During the post-war communist period, Antonescu was vilified in media accounts and history texts. The rehabilitation of his image began later: a 1975 novel portrayed him as a martyr and patriot in the war against the USSR (Bucur, 2009). Similarly, a postcommunist film, *The Mirror (Oglinda, 1993)*, characterized Antonescu’s death as a betrayal of a maligned national hero. A single line mentioned the fate of Romania’s Jews (Moldovan, 2015). Many Romanians still revere Antonescu and believe the Holocaust did not happen in their country.

The cultural products described are manifestations of a sociological phenomenon we call the *ghost hero*. In this work, we construct the ghost hero as a theoretical concept linked to collective memory that addresses the social remembering of historical actors, specifically, those who are morally or legally suspect, but have been elevated to positions of prominence and even veneration in narratives of the past.

This work makes three key contributions. First, we take a sociological perspective on the phenomenon of heroization in collective memory, particularly as it concerns actors implicated in atrocities. In the postcommunist period, the revived and revised figures of Cukurs and Antonescu have been featured in contemporary narratives and cultural representations, often in forms that obscure guilt and complicity.

Second, we expand the sociological analysis of collective memory by drawing on the microsociological theory of Erving Goffman, whose work has not played a prominent part in the literature on collective memory. Goffman’s work (1959) offers an opportunity to examine states and communities as entities engaged in impression management and public historical narratives as social performances, complete with actors, scripts, and audiences. While Goffman recognized that institutions engage in impression management, his focus was on micro-level social interactions. We employ Goffman’s concepts in the construction of an analytical tool for the examination of the ghost hero and his place in collective memory narratives.

Third, we apply a structural functionalist perspective to the ghost hero. Structural functionalism is a historical home of collective memory literature: it highlights the functions of social memory and rituals of remembering in collective consciousness and solidarity (Halbwachs, 1992). We show that it can be critically utilized to draw out sociological functions that explain the rise of the ghost hero in postcommunism.

This article is built on two bodies of material. First, it offers case studies of Cukurs and Antonescu. The cases comprise biographical backgrounds drawn from secondary and primary sources, and examination of public and historical representation of these figures. They were chosen because they fall into

the authors' areas of expertise and represent an opportunity to engage with cases that show commonalities of the ghost hero in countries with different experiences of the Holocaust and communism. Second, the article draws on the collective memory literature and integrates concepts from symbolic interactionism and structural functionalism. We use these cases to construct an original concept that illuminates a phenomenon of postcommunist heroization.

We begin with a review of literature in collective memory studies and an outline of the concept of the ghost hero. Second, we offer brief descriptive backgrounds on Cukurs and Antonescu. Third, we use Goffman's work on the dramaturgy of everyday life to look at history as theater and the ghost hero as an oversized actor on the stage of the past. Next, we pose the question of what functions are served by ghost heroes that underpin their existence and persistence. We end with a discussion of the sociological significance of the concept.

## Collective memory and the ghost hero

This work seeks to contribute to the academic conversation on collective memory through the theorization of the ghost hero. Early discussion of collective memory is found in the writings of Emile Durkheim, though he did not use that term. Durkheim posited that societal cohesion is underpinned in part by narrative and ritualized links to a (perceived) collective past. In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2008; orig. 1915), he noted in religious traditions the existence of "a whole group of ceremonies whose sole purpose is to awaken certain ideas and sentiments, to attach the present to the past or the individual to the group" (378). Maurice Halbwachs elaborated the sociological phenomenon of collective memory, emphasizing that individuals remember in a group context and highlighting the "social frameworks" of individual memory. Memory, he suggested, was socially constructed and required reinforcement through rituals of remembering. Halbwachs (1992) introduced an early version of "presentism," which posits that collective memory is shaped by the needs of the present, shifting in response to social change and context. George Herbert Mead (1964) also theorized the "nature of the past," suggesting that, "The past which we construct from the standpoint of the new problem of today is based upon continuities which we discover in that which has arisen, and it serves us until the rising novelty of tomorrow necessitates a new history which interprets the new future" (353).

More recent work highlights the variable of power in the production of collective memory, specifically hegemonic narratives of the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1984; Lowenthal, 1985). Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995: xix) writes that, "... the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production". Power is a key ingredient for understanding what communities embrace as their "national history" and historiography is recognized as a vehicle of political, cultural, and social domination. John Bodnar (1991) suggests that "public memory" is less an accurate representation of the past than a narrative that protects the status quo, functioning to legitimate an existing or anticipated social order. Contemporary theorizing has also taken on questions about individual or group reception (or rejection) of hegemonic stories (Kansteiner, 2002), inviting researchers to recognize resistance to dominant narratives (Ryan, 2010), which often privilege one social group's status over another.

A constituent part of national narratives is the heroic figure: C.H. Cooley (1992: 113–114) argues that the remembrance of the past begins with the remembrance of men. Anthony Smith (1999: 64–65) writes, "The future of an ethnic community can only derive meaning and achieve its form from the pristine 'golden age' when men were 'heroes'" (64–65). The "hero" himself (the gendered dimension of the phenomenon is explored later) is a vessel that carries a larger narrative of remembrance and commemoration. Barry Schwartz (1997), juxtaposing history ("objectively conceived, sustained by evidence, and unaffected by the social context in which its practitioners work") and commemoration, notes, "History disenchant the past; commemoration and its sites sanctify it. History makes the past an object of analysis; commemoration makes it an object of commitment" (470).

In postcommunist East and Central Europe, historical narratives have arisen to replace communist-era stories of the past (Kopeček, 2008). Katja Wezel (2016: 563) suggests that, “Memory politics is thus a part of the decolonization process and connected to Eastern European nation building”. Agents of memory include the state, as well as interest groups that vie for influence, including nationalists, academics, veterans, and communist-era dissidents. The outlines of a national narrative in postcommunist states can be gleaned from sources like teaching texts, commemorative acts, political pronouncements, and cultural products (Adler, 2012).

Notably for this work, the “normalization” of the postcommunist past has featured the revival of cultural, literary, or political figures who were written out of communist-era histories for ideological reasons (Eglitis, 2002; Verdery, 1999). The excavation of prominent historical figures serves a variety of purposes, among them the preservation of culture and cultivation of civic pride in the achievements of countrymen or women. However, one also finds figures elevated to positions of prominence while cleansed of significant transgressions: even dramatic acts of moral and legal turpitude may be masked in the figure of the ghost hero. Like the ghosts of popular imagination, ghost heroes are made real through the telling of stories, but they are as much myth as reality. Bronśław Malinowski (1948, orig. 1926) suggests that myths are stories with social functions: “. . . myth, taken as a whole, cannot be sober dispassionate history, since it is always made ad hoc to fulfill a certain sociological function, to glorify a certain group, or to justify an anomalous status” (125). Charles Horton Cooley (1922: 342) writes, “. . . the function of the great and famous man is to be a symbol, and the real question in other minds is not so much, What are you? as, What can I believe that you are?”.

Avery Gordon (1997, 2011) uses the term “ghost” to denote a figure that “has a real presence and . . . demands your attention.” She suggests that through the appearance of historical “specters or ghosts, . . . we’re notified of what’s been suppressed or concealed but is very much alive and present.” She posits that “haunting” is “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely” (2011: 2). While Gordon implies that “haunting” is accompanied by an imperative toward justice, the ghost hero is constructed to obscure past atrocities. Indeed, the atrocities at issue are not exclusively those committed by the ghost hero. Significantly, the ghost of history past is not just the specter of the dead hero; rather, it is a haunting that calls forth a past event that the larger global community has deemed reprehensible, and quite possibly illegal, through tribunals or institutional declarations. The crimes of the Holocaust fall into this category.

To be clear: the ghost hero as theorized here is a historical figure whose actions were taken within the context of an event that has been globally recognized as violating laws and ethics, including events that fall under the umbrella of crimes against humanity. While many historical leaders have engaged in acts that, particularly from the perspective of modern norms and practices, we would judge to be morally problematic, the ghost hero is narrowly characterized for the purpose of recognizing a phenomenon that has made itself apparent in postcommunism, though it may have broader applicability.

The ghost hero concept offers a means of explaining the revival of figures implicated in mass violence, including the Holocaust, something that is not closely addressed in collective memory literature. Katherine Verdery (1999: 52) writes, “In Eastern Europe, rewriting history has been perhaps unusually necessary because of powerful pressures to create political identities based expressly on rejecting the immediate past. The pressures came not just from popular revulsion with communism, but also from desires to persuade Western audiences to contribute the aid and investment essential to reconstruction” (52). However, the reanimation of actors implicated in the Holocaust does not appeal to “Western audiences.” The explanation for this phenomenon must be sought elsewhere. In this work, we illuminate “present functions” (Cooley, 1918) that underpin the elevation of the ghost hero and seek to understand the role he plays in postcommunist states and societies.

## The cases of Cukurs and Antonescu

In order to construct a historical foundation for the ghost hero, we provide a biographical overview of Cukurs and Antonescu, as well as a brief characterization of their historical representation.

### Cukurs

Herberts Cukurs was born in the Latvian province of the Russian Empire in 1900. As a young man, he fought for independence from the empire, which Latvia gained in 1918. Cukurs earned recognition for his adventures as an aviator: he built a plane and flew to The Gambia and Japan. In 1933, he received an international aviation award, the Harmon Trophy.

Cukurs sought public attention, becoming a media celebrity through reports of his exotic travels. Bernard Press (2000: 69–70), a Latvian-Jewish physician who survived the Holocaust, recalls Cukurs's frequent travel reports in newspapers. Press writes, “[a]t that time we could not have imagined that the same man whose sense of adventure we admired would only a few years later earn himself the title, ‘Butcher of Riga’ for his murder of countless Jews”.

Cukurs's celebrity shifted to notoriety in World War II. Latvia was occupied by the USSR in June 1940. After a year that saw the nationalization of private property and mass deportations, many Latvians welcomed the German army in late June 1941, hoping for a restoration of independence. Cukurs was among those who allied themselves with the Nazis, joining the Arājs Commando (*Sonderkommando Arajs*), a paramilitary killing unit populated by Latvian volunteers under Nazi direction. The commando was the brainchild of Latvian Viktors Arājs and German Walther Stahlecker, the commander of *Einstazgruppe A*, which operated in Baltic territory (Plavnieks, 2017). Some historians believe Arājs's men were responsible for killing as many as 60,000 Jews in and outside Latvia (Ezergailis, 1996: 173).

Cukurs has been implicated in the brutal killings of Latvia's Jews. In October 1941, Nazi authorities ordered Jews living in and around the capital city of Riga to move to the ghetto, which was sealed on October 25. Authorities later ordered the murder of nearly all inhabitants, about 25,000 Jews. The first operation commenced on November 30 when thousands were marched out of the ghetto to a killing pit in Rumbula forest. Andrew Ezergailis (1996) writes,

The Jews of the ghetto did not go gently to Rumbula. Jews were trying to leave the columns and hid in the eastern part of the ghetto. The estimates vary, but by noon some 600 to 1,000 people lay strewn around the ghetto streets . . . On November 30 there were two massacres: one in the ghetto, the other in Rumbula. Who did the killing in the ghetto is unclear. Due to the scale of killing, it is likely that everybody with weapons participated, which includes Cukurs and the Arājs men (249–250).

The second operation commenced on December 8, when “. . . smaller units of the Arajs Commando led by Cukurs were sent into the ghetto to force the evacuation” (Angrick and Klein, 2009: 155).

Survivor Henry Bermanis recalls in his testimony that Cukurs was directly involved in violence against resisters: he notes that Cukurs was a recognizable figure (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, USHMM, RG-50.030, 12 July 1995). Another survivor, Mendel Vulfovich, recalls,

Herbert Cukurs was one of the main leaders of [the Jews'] removal from out of the ghetto and to Rumbula, where they were all shot. [He] went about with his revolver and shot all of the laggards in the column, — the old and the sick — on the spot (Museum of Jews in Latvia, MEL PL 8404, 9 December 1944).

In 1944, the Soviet Army fought its way west and Germany retreated. Cukurs fled, blending in with Baltic refugees who found temporary shelter in Germany's Allied zones. Post-war German authorities sought Cukurs as a war criminal and he went into hiding, making his way in 1946 through France to Brazil. In 1965, an Israeli Mossad agent tracked down and killed Cukurs in Uruguay.

In 1991, Latvia regained independence. The newly democratic state promoted dramatic changes in economic organization and governance, alongside an effort to “normalize” history (Eglitis, 2002). The story of Latvians’ pursuit of independence replaced Soviet-era narratives of communist “liberation” from bourgeois nationalism and fascism. The postcommunist Latvian narrative of history highlights the victimization of Latvians by Soviet authorities, focusing on nationalization, deportation, and political murder in the first year of occupation and after re-occupation in 1944 (Wezel, 2016). Latvian culpability for Holocaust crimes is not part of the narrative.

In 2010, journalist Baiba Šāberte published a sympathetic account titled *Atļaujiet man runāt! Herberts Cukurs* [*Allow me to speak! Herberts Cukurs*], which alludes to Cukurs’s alleged last words. Cukurs also appears as the protagonist in a work of historical fiction, *Jūs nekad viņu nenogalināsiet* [*You will never kill him*]. In an interview, author Armands Puče asserted that, “turning against Cukurs is the same as turning against Latvia” (LETA, 2015).

Cukurs’s “heroism” is tenuous: the state and many public figures have kept a distance from cultural products like the musical, and some scholars have firmly rejected historical revisionism. At the same time, some prominent academic, cultural, and political actors continue to venerate Cukurs.<sup>1</sup>

## Antonescu

Born in Pitești, Romania in 1882, Ion Antonescu was a career military man who distinguished himself during the 1907 Peasant revolts and World War I and served as Defense Minister in 1937. In 1940, Antonescu came to power as Romania was confronting the rise of Soviet and Nazi power. The country’s leader, King Charles II (1930–1940), was unpopular after Romania lost nearly half of its territory to Hungary, the USSR, and Bulgaria at the beginning of the war. Forced to abdicate in 1940, Charles turned over powers of the state to Antonescu and the crown to his son, Michael.

When most parties refused to join Antonescu in forming a government, he turned to the anti-Semitic Iron Guard Party. Antonescu adopted measures “to purify” the Romanian nation of “alien influences”, the most dangerous of which he believed were the Jews (Solonari, 2007). Romanian policies disenfranchised Jews, encouraged their emigration, robbed them, and eventually targeted them for mass murder (Ionescu, 2015). However, Antonescu’s alliance with the Guardists was short-lived. In January 1941, the Guardists rebelled, and Antonescu suppressed their rebellion, establishing a dictatorship.

In June 1941, Antonescu joined the Axis invasion of the USSR. The war provided Antonescu the opportunity to implement his own version of the Final Solution, dubbed *cleansing the land* (Solonari, 2007). The head of the rural police noted, “By cleansing the land we understand: exterminate on the spot all Jews in rural areas; imprison in ghettos all Jews in urban areas; arrest all suspects, party activists, and people who held accountable positions under the Soviet authority, and send them under escort to the legion” (Friling et al., 2004: 96).

In August 1941, Hitler offered Antonescu power over a new territory, Transnistria, carved out of today’s Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Transnistria provided Antonescu the opportunity to realize his vision of Romania without Jews: “It is a fight to life or death . . . Had we not started this war, to cleanse our race of these people who sap our economic, national, and physical life, we would be cursed with complete disappearance . . .” (Friling et al., 2004: 97). In spring 1942, Antonescu turned his wrath on the Roma. Over a four-month period, 25,000 Roma were sent to camps in Transnistria; nearly half died (Kelso, 1999). By 1944, Antonescu’s genocidal campaigns had killed about 280,000 Jews and 11,000 Roma (Friling et al., 2004).

In August 1944, King Michael arrested Antonescu and switched alliances, siding with the Allies. After the war, the Soviets took over Romania. In 1946, a Soviet-backed prosecution convicted Antonescu as a war criminal, in part for the deportations and deaths of Jews. War crimes trials were closely covered in communist media, laying a foundation for remembrance (Bucur, 2009: 156). A film crew captured Antonescu’s execution, recording him raising his hat in a seeming salute before a firing squad’s bullets rent apart his body. Adrian Cioroianu notes that Antonescu’s execution transformed him from a

historical figure to a mythical one, shrouding his death in a cloak of martyrdom (Romanian Public Television, 2006).

The official narrative regarding Antonescu shifted, as his wartime actions were variously denounced and praised under communism. For four decades after the war, Antonescu was a figure of official contempt. However, as communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu positioned Romania to move away from the Soviets during the 1980s, historians began writing about Antonescu as a patriot who protected the country against the Soviets, obfuscating his anti-communist stance and Holocaust crimes. Fascism was characterized as a German import; genocidal actions against Jews and Roma by Romanians were erased (Chioveanu, 2003). Schoolbooks mentioned victims of the Antonescu regime; however, they were primarily labeled as communists and/or Romanians rather than Jews or Roma (Friling et al., 2004).

After the 1989 revolution, nationalist groups widely venerated Antonescu as a defender of Romania and victim of the USSR. The narrative focused on Antonescu's anti-communist stance, which resonated with Romanians wearied by decades of communism. Nationalists also characterized Antonescu not as a persecutor, but as a savior of Jews. Antonescu's rehabilitation alarmed Western officials negotiating with Romania about entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Union (Chioveanu, 2003; Cioflâncă, 2004). In 2002, the government passed an ordinance banning Holocaust denial and fascist, racist, or xenophobic organizations and symbols, which included images of Antonescu. Two years later, Romania officially recognized its role in the Holocaust. Yet Holocaust erasure has persisted: in 2006, viewers of Romanian Public Television's (2006) series "Top Romanians" (*Mari Romani*) voted Antonescu into a media pantheon of the top 10 Romanians of all times. A 2007 survey found that just 28% of respondents agreed that the Holocaust happened in Romania (National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, 2007). In 2012, a Romanian senator claimed that "no Jew suffered at the hands of Romanians," which he credited to Antonescu's leadership (Agerpres, 2012).

In the following sections, we use these cases to build the concept of the ghost hero, integrating ideas from Goffman's theory and employing a structural functionalist perspective to consider the functions played by the ghost hero in postcommunism.

## Ghost heroes on the stage of history

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman employs a theater metaphor to highlight the creation and re-creation of the self in social interactions, as actors endeavor to guide and control the impressions formed by other actors, their "audience." We argue that one might also envision a national historical narrative as a dramatic play staged primarily by those with the power and resources to shape the script. We follow Trouillot (1995: 2) in distinguishing between history as "what happened" and "what is said to have happened": the former delimits the latter, but the latter is consciously shaped by social actors, particularly those with access to the resources that enable them to "guide and control" the contents of the story. Control over the story of the past, as told through cultural products, is powerful. Consider the Polish government's recent effort to establish a "historical policy" that rejects attribution of Holocaust crimes on Polish territory to Poles, to the point of making it a criminal act to "publicly and against the facts attribute to the Polish nation or the Polish state responsibility or co-responsibility for Nazi crimes committed by the Germany Third Reich" (quoted in Mikanowsky, 2018). As Marci Shore (2018) notes, there is "a Manichean division between innocence and guilt, and an assurance that everything bad came from outside."

In positing the value of a Goffmanesque lens, we suggest that dominant narratives of history are vehicles of "impression management," the presentation of which are subject to strategies employed by actors that include the state, nationalist parties, veterans, academics, cultural leaders, and even opposition groups. Among the techniques employed in impression management are *dramatic realization*, *idealization*, *misrepresentation*, and *mystification* (Goffman, 1959). In this section, we discuss impression management in the context of the ghost hero as an actor in a national narrative. We suggest that the

ghost hero is an outsized actor who represents idealized qualities. At the same time, he embodies a misrepresentation of history that is produced and reproduced with widespread audience consent.

The musical about Cukurs's life is a literal embodiment of Goffman's concept of *dramatic realization*, which Goffman defines as an actor's "attempt to mobilize his activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey" (1959: 30). The character of Cukurs is hyperbolic, staged as the story of a bold aviator and patriot. Strikingly, the second half of the musical snatches away the protagonist's agency, recasting him as a victim of historical forces. Indeed, cultural products may function as vehicles for revising history in dramatic fashion.

Describing the practice of *idealization*, Goffman writes,

... when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society... To the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of a society in which it occurs, we may look upon it, in the manner of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, as a ceremony – as an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community (1959: 35).

Among the "officially accredited values" of postcommunist states are vehement anti-communism and nationalism. States produce historical stories that marginalize the communist past, obscure complicity in Holocaust crimes, and elevate a glorious pre-communist history. This impression management targets two key audiences: first, it speaks to the citizenry; second, it presents a narrative to the outside world, in particular Europe, asserting an autonomous history that resists the perceived West European effort to homogenize history and deny the unique suffering of the region under communism (Mälksoo, 2009).

In Latvia, the heroization of Cukurs is built on a dramatic narrative that bookends his contributions with the century's great wars. His story mirrors that of the nation: the fight for a state after the collapse of Imperial Russia; the achievements of the years of independence; and the struggle against communism. In Romania's ghost hero narrative, Antonescu embodies anti-communism as a political and social virtue. After 1989, Antonescu was widely viewed as a valiant defender of his country, prescient in foretelling the destructive power of communism. In the first decade of democracy, groups of citizens erected statues of Antonescu and at least 25 streets took his name.

*Misrepresentation* is a tool used by actors to manage an impression in the face of unflattering information. The ghost hero is well-described by Cooley's phrase that, "the man may be only a mere incident with no definite relation to the idea of him, the latter being a separate product of the imagination" (1922). The ghost hero is a man, but he is also a myth. Malinowski (1948, orig. 1926) writes, "... myths serve to cover certain inconsistencies created by historical events, rather than to record these events exactly" (125). Indeed, ghost heroes are "revised" to comport to the impression management of a nation-state or powerful social group: as Goffman notes, the sustenance of a definition of a situation will "involve over-communication of some facts and the undercommunication of others" (Goffman, 1963: 141). The ghost hero is "discreditable," possessing a stigma that is discoverable (Goffman, 1963), but attributed characteristics like patriotism and courage obscure reprehensible deeds.

Finally, Goffman (1959: 67) writes of *mystification* that, "If we see perception as a form of contact and communion, then control over what is perceived is control over contact that is made, and the limitation and regulation of what is shown is a limitation and regulation of contact...". Mystification entails maintaining adequate distance between actor and audience to create a sense of awe. In interpersonal interactions, control of information is exercised by an actor. In the staging of a historical drama, the state or other powerful actors endeavor to manage an impression. This process may include control of information sources, though this is limited in democratic societies, as well as (re)construction of a historical event or figure to comport with instrumental imperatives.

Goffman (1959: 69) writes that, "... in the matter of keeping social distance, the audience itself will often co-operate by acting in a respectful fashion, in awed regard for the sacred integrity imputed to



the performer” (69). Analogously, the veneration of a ghost hero is abetted by a willingness of the audience, or at least some part of it, to ignore biographical details that are inconsistent with the hero myth.

Dominant historical narratives can be conceived through a Goffmanesque lens that recognizes them as “staged” episodes that elevate some actors and events, marginalize others, and present a past that is molded by powerful actors for public consumption. Below we expand this point, starting from a structural functionalist position in order to identify “functions” of the contemporary postcommunist ghost hero.

## **Sociological functions of the ghost hero**

Drawing from a structural functionalist perspective, we begin from the following logic: if the ghost hero exists and persists in postcommunist narratives, he must fulfill identifiable sociological functions. Drawing from our cases, we identify functions of the ghost hero, seeking to explain his outsized role in the play of past. In doing this, we use structural functionalism critically. That is, rather than assuming that the ghost hero is functional for society as a whole, we ask, “for whom is he functional?” This enables us to recognize that his function is predominantly ideological, reinforcing the power of the postcommunist nationalist narrative and its disseminators.

First, the ghost hero fulfills a societal need to maintain control over the national historical narrative, particularly as Western Europe attempts to move toward a unified narrative of the past. During the 20th century, Latvia and Romania, alongside other East European states, experienced World War II and the imposition of communism. The Soviets crafted a narrative about history, which highlighted the USSR as a heroic liberator of Europe from fascism, and Germany as the architect of atrocity. This narrative downplayed the role of other state collaborators and obscured the ethnicities of victims, including Jews and Roma (Mark, 2010: 66–67). Historians, among others, worked the exculpatory narrative into the national consciousness of East European states, obscuring Holocaust crimes. After the fall of communism, Western states used political entities like NATO and the EU to signal to these states that their acceptance into “Europe” was conditional on the acceptance of a new historical narrative.

The “new” framework was characterized by a Western script that highlighted the culpability of Eastern Europe, where most of the Holocaust’s victims had lived. Commemoration and education were prescribed, supported through organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Little space was granted to researching and commemorating the trauma of communism, which negatively affected perceptions and receptions of the new Holocaust narrative (Mälksoo, 2009). One way to uphold national histories and mark local sufferings has been to segregate Holocaust history. In Romania, state-issued textbooks largely skim over or ignore the country’s participation in the Holocaust, though teachers may offer it as a separate course (Bărbulescu et al., 2013). The ghost hero embodies a way that postcommunist states would like history to be remembered (or forgotten), even if agents of the state do not specifically elevate the ghost hero.

Second, the ghost hero embodies a narrative of vindication for historical wrongs attributed to his group. The perceived victimization and vilification of the ghost hero is analogous to that of the group, which may feel wronged by outsiders and history. As Verdery (1999: 33) points out, nearly all national ideologies in Eastern Europe “emphasize ideas about suffering and victimhood”. Lidia Zessin-Jurek (2015) notes, however, that the dominant Western European narrative makes national guilt rather than victimhood central.

It is telling that, “in the second half of the 1990s, the term genocide became a standard classification in Latvia for the mass deportations and forced migrations of the Stalin era and was prominently used by historians and in official documents” (Wezel, 2016: 567). This was part of Latvia’s “quest for acknowledgement of victimhood” (Wezel, 2016: 560). The postcommunist period has been characterized by Western critique of Latvia’s resistance to coming to terms with Holocaust crimes and the

complicity of Latvians in the extermination of over 90% of Latvia's Jewish population (Angrick and Klein, 2009). Cukurs gives symbolic voice to the constituency of Latvians who resent international accusations and endeavor to preserve the mantle of victimhood. Among journalists and historians seeking to build a heroic image of Cukurs, there is an effort to credit him with *saving* Jews, including a young woman who accompanied him to South America and the mechanic at the Arājs Commando vehicle depot (Ezergailis, 2014).

Like Cukurs, Antonescu is credited with saving Jews, albeit on a mass scale. Some historians have crafted an image of Antonescu's Romania as a haven for Jews from which they immigrated to Palestine, which amalgamates truth (some Jews were allowed to immigrate) and obfuscation of the murder of hundreds of thousands (Randolph Braham, 1994). For Romanians brutalized by the dictatorship of Ceausescu, acceptance of responsibility for Holocaust crimes is an ill fit with their sense of 20th-century victimhood. The heroization of Antonescu permits Romanians to embrace the myths that the nation was not an active participant in the Holocaust and ethnic Romanians were the greatest victims because of the communist takeover of their country.

Third, while the ghost hero is a vessel for the stories a nation tells about itself, he also functions to amplify the position of a particular group or groups in that society. This function can be tied to gender as well as ethnic identities. Ghost heroes are predominantly male, reinforcing the story that significant history is made by men and heroism is a masculine trait (Verdery, 1999: 41). Ghost heroes reinforce their group's status through hyperbolic performance of the ascribed qualities of the dominant group. Membership in a particular gender or ethnic group amplifies the heroic characteristics of the figure.

The ghost hero offers a means for entering a field of contesting historical narratives and amplifying the perspective of groups that feel they are not being heard. This is not to say that the groups are socially marginal. Rather, a *perceived* lack of voice may help bring into being a ghost hero who turns up the volume of a particular story: for instance, in increasingly multicultural societies, groups who have historically been dominant may feel threatened and the ghost hero may become a vessel that carries their historical position and grievances. Antonescu's regime was dominated by ethno-politics, placing ethnic Romanians at the center of power. After 1989, minorities, suppressed during communism, were recognized by the state and granted political and cultural rights. Nationalists invoked Antonescu's image to counter the rise of minorities they perceived as threats. The Romanian mayor of Cluj, which has a large Hungarian population, for instance, called Antonescu a "martyr of the people" (*Ziarul din Iasi*, 2002).

If the ghost hero amplifies the dominant position of some groups, he confirms the marginal position of others. Audience reception is critical to narrative acceptance, and, as Ryan (2010: 155) points out, "mnemonic resistance" to the "encroachments of powerful dominant memory" is always possible. At the same time, all narratives do not earn an equal hearing (Bird, 2003). Audiences privilege the integrity of their own group. When a socially marginal group offers an alternative, the reception may be poor. Consider the narrative of Roma as a persecuted population under Antonescu. Their status as *victims* is an ill fit with a powerful narrative that labels Roma as beggars and bandits, *victimizers* of Romanians (Kelso and Eglitis, 2014). In Latvia, the persecution of Jews during the Nazi period has also been discursively recast to highlight a story that Jews cooperated with Soviet occupiers and contributed to the Sovietization of Latvia (Plavnieks, 2017; Zellis, 2006). Victims of mass murder are recast as victimizers and the mantle of victimhood is returned to the titular community.

Fourth, the ghost hero has economic functions. In modern states, history does not stand apart from economics: it may accrue financial costs and benefits for actors. Arguably, the ghost hero is an actor in the drama of reparations claims. For instance, while Romanian politicians after 1989 enacted legislation to restore assets to victims of communist nationalization, and limited restitution was offered to Jews immediately following the war (most of which was re-nationalized during communism), little has been offered to communities victimized by the Holocaust. Jewish and Romani communities continue to struggle to recover assets from the state and, in the case of Roma, to receive deportee pensions (Ungureanu, 2016). If many Romanians reject the story that Jews and Roma suffered persecution and

believe that Antonescu helped preserve these communities, it follows that restitution will remain a marginal priority.

## Conclusion

In this work, we develop an original theoretical concept that illuminates a sociologically significant phenomenon in postcommunist East Europe. While recent decades have seen the expansion of collective memory literature, this literature has not taken full advantage of the analytical tools offered by symbolic interactionism and structural functionalism. In developing our concept, we mine this literature to construct an analytical tool for understanding the widespread embrace of revived and revised heroes like Cukurs and Antonescu.

The concept of the ghost hero draws on Goffman to envision the dominant historical narrative of a nation-state as a stage play, populated by actors who enact history in ways favorable to powerful groups in state and society and relegate to the margins actors or events that interrupt a smooth presentation of the past. The ghost hero takes an outsized role, dramatizing, idealizing, and misrepresenting history. His existence and persistence are analyzed with the application of structural functionalism: to this end, we ask, “what functions does the ghost hero serve?” and, because we seek to take a critical approach, “for whom is the ghost hero functional?”

In the quarter century following the end of communism, states and societies have endeavored to “normalize” the past, reviving events and actors erased from communist-era histories. On the one hand, this process has brought to light national figures and stories that were marginalized because they failed to comport with communist ideologies. On the other hand, it has animated a cast of ghost heroes in the region. In Ukraine, there has been a revival of interest in the partisans of World War II who fought for Ukrainian independence from the USSR. Members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), including Roman Shukevych and Stepan Bandera, however, have been implicated in the deaths of thousands of Poles, Jews, and Roma in extermination operations conducted with Nazi German forces (Marples, 2007). In Slovakia, efforts to commemorate Josef Tiso, who led the country in World War II, have been controversial: the nationalist embrace of a figure who allied his country with Nazi Germany and oversaw the deportation of Slovak Jews has been poorly received by Western states and Jewish communities. Tiso’s defenders have argued that he was a patriot seeking independence for Slovakia who helped protect some Jews from deportation (Ward, 2013). Cases like Poland, Lithuania, and Hungary also offer opportunities for the study of the postcommunist ghost hero and for sharpening this concept by more fully understanding the functions this figure serves and how he is perceived and received by national communities.

While our article focuses on a particular region and period, the ghost hero concept may be broadly relevant. While answers to the question of what functions ghost heroes serve may differ across cases, this concept opens the door to critical inquiry into the phenomenon of ghost heroes over a spectrum of times and places.

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## Note

1. In *The Holocaust in Latvia 1941-1944* (1996), Ezergailis cited evidence of Cukurs’s complicity: “The heaviest evidence against Cukurs pertains to the atrocities inside the ghetto on the morning of November 30” (201, fn 87). Today, Ezergailis (2015: 389) claims evidence has surfaced that Cukurs did not participate in atrocities, leading him to “doubt the accuracy and veracity of Jewish survivors’ eyewitness testimonies”, which he has likened to “folklore.”

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