

**Syllabus**  
**TA ENG 2228**  
**Scar Tissue – The Literature of Historical Trauma**

Instructor: Gábor Molnár  
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Time: M/W 10:15-11:45

**Description:**

The course offers an overview of the literature of historical trauma, focusing on literary works depicting the horrors of twentieth-century genocides, concentration camps and other atrocities committed by totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. As a part of the Crossroads program, the course examines a specific intersection of global and local perspectives.

The global aspect of the course is the general theory of historical trauma and its literary representation – a topic that is unfortunately relevant in many parts of the world, including the United States. The literature of slavery, Native American genocide as well as literary works dealing with war veterans' experiences provide points of comparison to our specific topic. From this general point of view, the problems of the representation of historical trauma include: the role of fiction in understanding historical reality, the role of the imagination to describe the unimaginable, the importance of subjective testimony to give meaning to history, the power of literature to lend a voice to the voiceless etc.

The local aspect is a specific examination of works detailing the experiences of Central and Eastern European people under the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and the Communist Soviet Union in the middle of the twentieth century. According to the historical best seller *Bloodlands* by Timothy Snyder, 14 million civilians were murdered by these regimes in Eastern Europe between 1933 and 1945. Countless others were imprisoned, tortured and forced to labor in gruelling circumstances, a practice that continued in Communist Eastern Europe beyond the end of World War II. In addition to reading literary works and watching documentary evidence of these atrocities, we will also visit sites of memory in Budapest (the Budapest ghetto, the Holocaust Memorial Center and the Museum of Terror ) and during our study trip in Northeastern Hungary (the site of the Communist forced labor camp at Reck and the remains of local Jewish communities destroyed during the Holocaust).

**Learning outcomes:**

- students will become better, more sensitive readers of modern European literature dealing with traumatic historical experiences
- students will have a better understanding of the experiences of people living under the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century
- students will understand basic concepts and theorems of cultural studies, historiography and literary theory relevant to the above topics (cultural memory, the politics of memory, trauma, testimoniality etc.), and will be able to produce their own interpretations of literary works using these concepts and theorems as analytical tools

**Methodology:**

Classes will be conducted in a discussion format to ensure participation by all students. Participants will be encouraged to share their own responses to the readings and formulate their own questions whenever they encounter difficulties.

Student-led discussions, peer instruction, formal and informal writing tasks, and out-of-class activities will be added to the discussion of readings.

## Readings:

Full works (students are expected to order the following editions; e-books are also accepted) :

Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man / The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf, Little Brown, 2003, ISBN: 9780349100135, link: <https://www.bookdepository.com/If-This-Is-Man-The-Truce-Primo-Levi-Stuart-Woolf/9780349100135>

Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. Ralph Parker, Penguin, 2015, ISBN: 9780141184746, link: <https://www.bookdepository.com/One-Day-in-the-Life-of-Ivan-Denisovich-Alexander-Solzhenitsyn-Ralph-Parker/9780141184746>

Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness*, trans. Tim Wilkinson, Vintage, 2004, ISBN: 9781400078639 , link: <https://www.bookdepository.com/Fatelessness-Imre-Kertesz/9781400078639>

Hertha Müller, *The Hunger Angel*, trans. Philip Boehm, Portobello, 2013, ISBN: 9781846272783, link: <https://www.bookdepository.com/The-Hunger-Angel/9781846272783>

Excerpts from other novels and memoirs as well as short stories, theoretical essays and poems will be scanned and shared by the instructor.

## Schedule:

Week 1 (Jan 29) – Introduction, syllabus, background

Week 2 (Feb 5) – background, visits to sites in Budapest

Week 3 (Feb 12) –Tadeusz Borowski, 'This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen', movie screening

Week 4 (Feb 19) – Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man/Survival in Auschwitz*

Week 5 (Feb 26) – Giorgio Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz*

Week 6 (Mar 5) – Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

Week 7 (Mar12) – Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Uses and Abuses of Memory' / Aleida Assmann, 'To Remember or To Forget?'

Week 8 (Mar 19)

**Midterm week – review and test**

Week 9 (Mar 26)

**Easter Holiday – no classes**

Week 10 (Apr 2) – János Nyíri, *Battlefields and Playgrounds*, Ch 1 / György Faludy, *My Happy Days in Hell*, excerpts

Week 11 (Apr 9) – Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness*

Week 12 (Apr 16) – Hertha Müller, *The Hunger Angel*

Week 13 (Apr 23) – Hertha Müller, *The Hunger Angel*

Week 14 (Apr 30) – poetry by Anna Ahmatova, Paul Celan etc.

Week 15 (May 7) – more poetry, final review