

THE PAST REIMAGINED: THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL MEMORY IN POLISH AND HUNGARIAN POPULISM

Written for POL S 371: Populism and Democracy in Central Europe

By Cody Mackoway

ABSTRACT Collective memory is a driving force in populist and nationalist politics. The emotional appeals of a shared history, particularly relating to notions of victimhood and resistance, are deeply influential in national identity formation. In this essay, Hungary's Fidesz party and Poland's Law and Justice party (PiS) are explored in relation to their tendency to manipulate history to construct self-serving collective memories. Both Fidesz and PiS successfully employ selective interpretations of historical events to not only mobilize support but also to quell dissent, employing emotive appeals and moral justifications deeply rooted in the national psyche. In order to combat the illiberal and anti-democratic tendencies of populist manipulations of collective memory, this essay argues that strong civil societies and the promotion of alternative narratives of collective memory are necessary.

During the summer of 2018, costumed performers, equestrians, and opera singers filled Heroes Square in central Budapest. Scenes of police beating Hungarian civilians clothed in white in front of long-haired rock stars holding up signs calling for collective revenge is by no doubt invocative (Trianon Zenés Történelmi Játék 2018). Perhaps surprising to non-Hungarians, this two-hour-long rock-opera theatrical performance was conducted in memory of the signing of the Treaty of Trianon, which was implemented in 1920.¹ Although an entertaining example of public history, there is a deep political undercurrent behind this performance. The director of Trianon: The Rock Opera, Gábor Koltay, is an affiliate of Hungary's current ruling party Fidesz (Walker 2018). The use of Trianon as a political symbol of history is being used as more than a background set piece but as a significant wedge issue in Hungarian political discourse. This essay will investigate how Hungary's Fidesz party and Poland's Law and Justice party (PiS) use collective memory of the past to justify policies that have contributed

to democratic backsliding during the last decade.

The collective memory of a nation, which is the shared symbols, stories, and heroes of the past that define a national group's identity, is crucial for understanding the politics of both Fidesz and PiS. Collective memory is a society-wide phenomenon, in which reference to a shared history is used to anchor collective group identities. Placing the concept of the nation at the center of their political identity through the utilization of history, either invented or real, has the potential to unleash intense emotional power. Benedict Anderson (2006, 6-7) interprets the nation as an imagined community in which one will never know or meet most individuals within their nation. Still, he will inherently feel a deep fraternal camaraderie due to their perceived shared experiences. The stories of a collective past and a shared future are crucial for the existence of national identity formation. Issues of who is and who is not a part of the nation are equally important as to what the nation's

political destiny should be. In the words of Polish intellectual and communist-era dissident Adam Michnik (1985, 202): “Those who can succeed in reigning over perceptions of the past will also be able to manipulate thoughts about the present and future.” The ability of a national-focused political party to mobilize history provides immense potential for electoral and moral legitimacy.

In the case of both nations, narratives of collective memory promoted by these parties take on a notion of national victimhood. The nation, its people, its territory, and its spirit are all portrayed as suffering from a centuries-long struggle for independence. This narrative is not necessarily untrue, as citizens of both Poland and Hungary suffered greatly during the tragedies of imperialism, war, and genocide. A shared belief in collective trauma is unifying and does have strong collective appeals towards camaraderie for those considered within the national grouping. However, strong anti-pluralist tendencies result from a collective identity based on victimhood. First, is an outwardly hostile but internally unifying notion of the said nation versus other enemy nations. One may look at Poland’s strong political support for Ukraine as primarily an oppositional action against Russia, a former imperial power of historical Poland (Schmidtke 2023, 2). Second, it actively functions as an internally divisive force, forcefully excluding minorities from the national grouping. In Central-East Europe, Jewish peoples, but also other ethnic minorities, have been both historically and presently targeted as internal enemies of the nation.

Victimhood of the nation in Hungary and Poland takes on an emotionally dramatic characterization in the spirit of the 18th-century movement of Romanticism. PiS and Fidesz have revived this romantic tradition, moulding its deeply felt appeals to the nation for political gain (Średnicka 2018, 130). The modern

history of Central Europe is full of human tragedy but also has been the source of immense beauty in the arts. Poets, authors, and artists, such as Adam Mickiewicz, Sándor Petőfi, Milan Kundera, and more, played an important artistic role in modern conceptions of nationhood. Mickiewicz, for instance, poetically declared Poland the messiah of nations (Schmidtke 2023, 8; Świda 2012, 161). Not only did Poland suffer at the hands of European empires self-styled in the image of Rome, but it was also destined to experience a national rebirth that brought salvation to its people. High levels of adherence to the Catholic faith in both countries further enhance this Romantic appeal (Lipiński and Szabo 2023, 359).

To see how Romanticist collective memory has impacted present-day politics in Hungary and Poland, I will explore three distinct periods of the Twentieth century. First, the 1920s was a period of political autonomy and external conflict. Second, the Second World War and communist domination. Third, the transition from communism to democracy and the push to integrate with the West via the European Union (EU). All three periods are shared in the collective memory of both nations but have created different heroes and symbols. Nevertheless, the current erosion of democracy links to the impacts of these shared conceptions of the past.

THE 1920S AND REGAINED INDEPENDENCE

The First World War’s conclusion culminated in the destruction of the empire in East-Central Europe. As such, Poland and Hungary were, once again, on their own, awarding them true autonomy and sovereign statehood. In the case of Poland, the advent of the 2nd Polish Republic in 1918 occurred after 123 years of partition between the German, Hapsburg, and Russian imperial systems (Stachura 2004, 1,9). For Hungary, the opportunity for the state to act independently of the Austrians was a similarly anticipated notion in circles with national sentimentalities. However, these instances of regained sovereignty came with

immense costs. The two most dominant present-day mythologies are the Polish-Soviet War of 1920 and the previously mentioned Treaty of Trianon in Hungary.

In 1920, one figure dominated Poland, Marshal and President Józef Piłsudski. Undeniably, this one Polish political titan dramatically altered the trajectory of modern European history. An extremely complex figure, he evolved from a leftist freedom fighter to a democrat and eventually assumed the role of an authoritarian figurehead. Piłsudski's decision to engage in an expansionist war against the fledgling Soviet Union delayed the Red Army's goals of spreading class revolution Westward. A sovereign 2nd Polish Republic would stand until German and Soviet invasion in 1935. Atrocities committed during the war consequently installed a deep-rooted opposition to communism in the interwar Polish political conscience. Polish democracy and statehood, even when flawed, became a symbol of direct resistance to Russian imperial and ideological dominance (Zamojski 2008, 134-137).

Naturally, in any political contestation between Poland and Russia, Piłsudski and his war with the Soviets provides an example of hope and victory in a long run of imperial domination. In a 2023 speech on Polish Armed Forces Day, President Duda tied the Polish-Soviet war to the present, underlining Poland's role in defending Europe from Russian aggression (Duda 2023). The idea of a historic battle between Poland and Russia is a primary motivation for the military and humanitarian support provided by Poland to Ukraine. To ignore the war is dangerous, as weakness in Polish support for Ukraine is considered to only threaten the future of Poles, as inaction would only increase the cost of a future conflict. Notably, Fidesz does not share this way of thinking in Hungary, where anti-Russian politics are not incorporated into the mythology portrayed by Orbán. Instead, Hungary has been overly critical of support for Ukraine and has even agitated for greater autonomy to be given to Hungarian minorities in Ukraine in response to the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 (Toomey 2018, 97). Hungary did not have a comparable experience to the

Polish-Soviet war in the 1920s. Still, it did feel the militaristic pressures of Moscow in the 1956 revolution (Benazzo 2017, 208). The ability for populist-nationalist leaders to be selective, or incoherent, in their choice of historical narratives gives extreme flexibility to justify a wide range of political positions in the present.

To harken back to the symbolism of the 1920s and the personality of Piłsudski, it is a direct call to the Romantic notions of morality and anti-imperialism (Michnik 1985, 212). As such, the collective memory of the era has been used by a wide section of Polish political society. Lech Wałęsa self-styled his first campaign for the presidency in the image of Piłsudski, going to the lengths of emulating campaign posters and rhetoric of regained independence (Jasiewicz 1997, 130). PiS leaders have similarly used the militaristic and autocratic symbolism of Piłsudski as an example for Poland's future. PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński links directly to the late autocrat as a symbol of leadership (Suski 2023).

For Hungary, the Treaty of Trianon plays an even greater role in the present collective memory of Fidesz. Rather than acting as a model of strength to be regained, notions of tragedy and victimhood call for present change and future revenge. Trianon, which saw large sections of formerly Hungarian-controlled territory divided among neighbouring states, is thought of by Hungarian nationalists as nothing more than a conspiratorial attack on the national spirit and identity. Although grievances associated with Trianon were prominent throughout the 1920s, in the present, they still hold immense emotional sway. The treaty, imagined as a "national tragedy," is a commonly held notion that crosses generational divides (Feishmidt 2020, 139). A strong social appetite for the "Trianon cult" means that parties like Fidesz can gather significant moral mandate from simply voicing sentiments of grievance for the past (141).

Applying the collective memory of trauma associated with the Treaty of Trianon has been politically lucrative for Victor Orbán's Fidesz. The most internationally controversial policy was for Hungary to extend citizenship to the Hungarian diaspora abroad (Benazzo 2017,

211). This policy aimed to politically reintegrate the Hungarian populations from the formerly Hungarian-controlled territories ceded by the treaty in 1920. Orbán has explicitly defined modern Hungarian nationhood on ethnic rather than civic identity factors (Fukuyama 2023, 117). This has certainly caused tensions abroad, as Hungary's neighbours, despite also being members of the EU, still have regions with significant populations of Hungarians. Because it would be impossible to ever reverse the over-a-century-old treaty, Fidesz can continually tap into this well of collective memory without fear of genuinely solving the associated tensions (Toomey 2018, 103). The rock opera mentioned at the opening of this essay perfectly encapsulates this phenomenon. Fidesz can show its domestic voters that it is trying to educate the public about Trianon in a spectacle of public history and theatre without concern for policy results.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND COMMUNIST RESISTANCE

The Second World War saw both Hungary and Poland first occupied by Nazi Germany, then the Soviet Union. The extent to which either country collaborated with the occupying forces did differ, with Hungary having a nationalist puppet government that cooperated with the German occupation (Toomey 2018, 100). Regardless, the impact of the war was still devastating for the populations of both countries. Most tragically targeted for destruction were the minority groups of the region, primarily Jewish communities. Neither nation is blameless in the Holocaust, with either official government actors or paramilitary militias eagerly engaging in genocidal acts of terror. As a result of ethnic cleansing and population transfer, both Hungary and Poland had lost nearly the entirety of their Jewish populations by the end of the Second World War. Incorporating home-grown antisemitic and nationalist political movements, Hungarian collaboration in Nazi atrocities was orchestrated at a notably greater level. Despite this memorialization of the victimization of their civilians, the Holocaust does not play a prominent role in the collective memory of PiS or Fidesz.

Instead, a larger narrative of national oppression overshadows the plight of Jews in Central Europe. Attention is often diverted away from the Jewish experience of the Holocaust and not embraced in public memory at a substantive level comparable to that of Polish experiences in the Second World War (Schmidtke 2023, 6). While aspects of elite civil society do dedicate efforts of public memory to the Holocaust, such as the POLIN museum in Warsaw, PiS-led governments have been less than eager to incorporate these memories into its public discourse. A 2018 law introduced by PiS forbids people from acknowledging any Polish participating in crimes perpetrated by Nazi Germany (Bill 2022, 130). While this is not state-sponsored Holocaust denial, it shifts all blame away from the Polish nation, even if a minority of Poles were engaged in acts of human atrocity. Subjective attacks on free speech are problematic in a liberal democracy, such as the ability to imprison Poles for disagreeing with a politicized historical narrative.

Highlighting the immorality of imperial expansionism, the collective memory of the involved parties intertwines the experiences of both German and Soviet domination. Fascism and communism represent nothing more than a targeted attack against independent Poland or Hungary. Politically important narratives of collective memory during the mid-twentieth century are most visible in the party-affiliated museums in both nations. Fidesz members run the House of Terror Museum in Budapest, which is housed in a building previously occupied by the Arrow-Cross party and communist secret police, promoting a narrative of Nazi-Soviet sameness (Benazzo 2017, 203; Walker 2018). With PiS, history has become an explicit tool in the shaping of youth mindsets. Education, public monuments, and museums all portray the Second World War as being fought by Polish martyrs for freedom, with little care given to the accuracy of such narratives on a personal level. Heroism, over the accuracy or fairness to Jewish victims, is the predominant story told by PiS (Jaskulowski and Majewski 2023, 467; Darasz 2018, 135). By claiming that PiS are the only party willing to defend Poland from disparaging remarks about its past, PiS

politicians can claim legitimacy from national-minded voters, both young and old.

POST-COMMUNIST TRANSITION TO THE PRESENT

In the period of democratic politics stretching from the collapse of communism to the present day, a resurgence of national mythologies has become ingrained in the two parties in question: PiS and Fidesz. Both portray the transition to democracy as a flawed project that was incomplete in delivering national sovereignty to the people. PiS have a particular grievance with the fact that the communist leadership had a prominent role in the negotiations leading to democratization (Bill 2022, 127). Therefore, they argue that PiS must fix Poland and return it on a path towards its vision of independence. A by-product of this viewpoint, people see integration with the West and the EU as a potential evil, not unlike communism or Nazism (Lipiński and Szabo 2023, 351). To oppose the status quo, one tainted by the cosmopolitan West and the communist past, PiS has a moral obligation to undo the current state of political institutions (Średnicka 2018, 130). PiS judicial reforms are a particularly pressing example of the lengths to which politicians are willing to contest the status quo, breaking EU law and facing steep economic and aid consequences (Court of Justice of the European Union 2023). By claiming the courts were tainted by communist influences, reforms drastically changed the makeup of the supreme court, forcing pre-existing justices into retirement in addition to delegating future appointments to the then PiS Minister of Justice (Hoffman 2018, 1161-1162). To fail reforms is to betray the heart of the Polish nation and its destiny.

Fidesz in Hungary, both inspiring PiS and borrowing from their playbook in turn, similarly manipulates collective memory to justify its anti-democratic goals (Lipiński and Szabo 2023, 357-358). Claiming to pursue a truly Hungarian style of illiberal democracy, Orbán uses history to justify his conflicts with the EU and to silence opposition (Benazzo 2017, 199). For Fidesz, it is a moral prerogative to limit all foreign interference in Hungary. A primary example of this is the conspiratorial Stop-Soros legislation, which places limits on academic and civil society connected to George Soros and other foreign influences (Bill 2022, 123). Attacks on academic freedom were extended to the point that the Central European University, which is funded by significant donations from Soros, was expelled from Budapest for promoting liberal values contrary to Fidesz' liking (Tóth 2019, 394).

For Fidesz and PiS, collective memories of the past offer strong justification for combating opposition to their quest for power. By using notions of collective trauma, victimhood, and destiny, autocratic politicians can earn significant support for anti-democratic practices. With the ability to cherry-pick from the past and manipulate historical narratives, both parties have formed strong voter coalitions that have been continually competitive throughout the last decade. Opponents find it exceedingly challenging to counter these strategies, rooted in profound concepts of national emotions and morality. The most effective opposition occurs from a grass-roots level when contesting such parties. All top-down critiques, domestic or international, can be cast away as elitist and anti-national. Strong civic society and competing images of collective memory are required to limit the democratic success of illiberal parties such as Fidesz and PiS.

1 A consequence of the First World War's concluding peace process, the Treaty of Trianon saw Hungarian territory reduced by approximately two-thirds. While the lost territories were home to significant non-Hungarian populations, the treaty placed millions of Hungarians outside of their national borders. Often referred to in English as Greater Hungary, the call for a return to pre-Trianon borders is an enduring feature of Hungarian nationalist politics. The formerly Hungarian lands are presently divided between Austria, Croatia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Ukraine, a cause of reoccurring political disputes.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Revised Edition*. London: Verso.
- Bill, Stanley. 2022. "Counter-Elite Populism and Civil Society in Poland: PiS's Strategies of Elite Replacement." *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 36, no.1: 118-140.
- Communications Directorate Press and Information Unit. 2023 "Press Release No 89/23: Rule of Law: The Polish Justice Reform of December 2019 Infringes EU Law." *Court of Justice of the European Union*. <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2023-06/cp230089en.pdf>.
- Darasz, Jan. 2018. "The History Men." In *Poland's Memory Wars: Essays on Illiberalism: 1st Edition*, edited by Jo Harper, Budapest and New York: Central European University Press: 131-159.
- Duda, Andrezj. 2023. "Poland's Security Comes First. Address by the President of the Republic of Poland." *President.Pl*. <https://www.president.pl/news/polands-security-comes-first-address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-poland.73360>.
- Feischmidt, Margit. 2020. "Memory-Politics and Neonationalism: Trianon as Mythomoteur." *Nationalities Papers* 48, no.1: 130-43.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2023. *Liberalism and its Discontents*. London: Profile Books Ltd.
- Hoffman, Michael. 2018. "[PiS]Sing Off the Courts: The PiS Party's Effect on Judicial Independence in Poland." *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 51, no. 4: 1154-1191.
- Jasiewicz, Krzysztof. 1997. "Poland: Walesa's Legacy to the Presidency." In *Postcommunist Presidents*, edited by Ray Taras, 130-167. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Jaskulowski, Krzysztof, and Piotr Majewski. 2023. "Populist in Form, Nationalist in Content? Law and Justice, Nationalism and Memory Politics." *European Politics & Society* 24, no.4: 461-76.
- Lipiński, Artur, and Gabriella Szabo. 2023. "Heroisation and Victimisation: Populism, Commemorative Narratives and National Days in Hungary and Poland." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 31, no. 2: 254-362.
- Suski, Marek. 2023. "Marek Suski: Jarosław Kaczyński w Centrum Decyzyjnym - Siła Narodu Będzie Większa." *Wydarzenia*. <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art38651311-marek-suski-jaroslaw-kaczynski-w-centrum-decyzyjnym-sila-narodu-bedzie-wieksza>.
- Michnik, Adam. 1985. *Letters From Prison and Other Essays*. Berkley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press. See esp. chap. "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors."
- Schmidtke, Oliver. 2023. "Competing Historical Narratives: Memory Politics, Identity, and Democracy in Germany and Poland." *Social Sciences* 12, no. 7: 1-16.
- Średnicka, Joanna. 2018. "The New Romantics." In *Poland's Memory Wars: Essays on Illiberalism: 1st Edition*, edited by Jo Harper, 119-130. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press.
- Stachura, Peter D. 2004. *Poland 1918-1945. An Interpretive and Documentary History of the Second Republic*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Świda, Monika. 2012. "The Historical Figures of the Republic in the Process of Reconstitution of the National Imagery: Sidónio Pais and Józef Piłsudski." *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Jagellonicae Cracoviensis* 7, no. 4: 153-167.
- Toomey, Michael. 2018. "History, Nationalism and Democracy: Myth and Narrative in Viktor Orbán's 'Illiberal Hungary.'" *New Perspectives* 26, no. 1: 87-108.
- Tóth, János. 2019. "To Save Your Country, Flag Your Teacher: Anonymous Reporting of Liberal Indoctrination as Academic Witch-Hunt in Orbán's Hungary." *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 15, no. 3: 391-399.
- "Trianon - Zenés történelmi játék 2018." 2018. Channel named Dr. Vass Zoltán, YouTube video, 1:59:38. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvGMxqtJXs0>.
- Walker, Shaun. 2018. "Hungarian Nationalist Rock Opera to Retell 1920s Grievances." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/22/hungarian-nationalist-rock-opera-to-retell-1920s-grievances>.
- Zamojski, Adam. 2008. *Warsaw 1920: Lenin's Failed Conquest of Europe*. London: William Collins.