Remembering to forget

Memory politics in Poland and Hungary

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Fidesz actively denies any Hungarian responsibility for WWII and the Holocaust, projecting itself as a healer of imperial wounds from a hundred years ago. In Poland, PiS goes even further by taking credit for all resistance towards both the Nazi and the Soviet regimes. In both cases, the abuse of history for national glorification revives the culture wars of the past.

The mass murders in New Zealand mosques in March have once again raised questions on how far narratives shaped by media frenzy or political campaigns affect or animate brutality and violence. The shootings were livestreamed on Facebook and accompanied by a ‘manifesto’ which referred to an ‘invasion’ of migrants and decried the ‘decaying culture’ of the white, western world. Across the globe in Britain, a spate of far-Right, racist incidents were reported in the days that followed [1].

Stories about ‘invading’ migrants, diminishing European culture, or high-level conspiracies to replace ageing indigenous populations with non-whites, recur regularly in populist discourse. They seem to resonate very well with voters and are often echoed by Donald Trump. Similar thinking has been reflected in the policies of Italy’s Minister of Interior, Matteo Salvini, and the leader of Poland’s Law and Justice Party, Jarosław Kaczyński, but perhaps particularly in the rhetoric and strategies of Hungary’s ever more notorious prime minister, Viktor Orbán. In the run up to the 2019 European parliamentary elections, all three politicians engaged in mooting the formation of an anti-immigrant bloc within the EU. [2]

Stories that kill

The question is what effect these words and political postures have on minds predisposed to extreme and criminal action. On 13 January in Poland, the mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz was fatally stabbed while addressing a charity event to raise funds for medical equipment. Flying in the face of government policy, Adamowicz had been an outspoken supporter of gay and minority rights and campaigned on behalf of immigrants. He was often a target of smear campaigns in Polish media. Immediately after the assault,
the killer, who was released from jail only weeks before, ranted against the centrist Civic Platform party, with which Adamowicz had been associated. The day the mayor’s death was announced, the far-right politician Grzegorz Braun described him on radio as a ‘traitor to the nation’. But the country went on to deliberate whether the violent tone of the country’s political debate could have impelled the attack, and thousands marched in rallies condemning hate speech and violence.

As Jan Kubik has pointed out, populism in east central Europe is far from homogenous. Poland’s ruling Law and Justice party still leads over its rivals, but the population is visibly split and oppositionists warn openly that democracy and freedom are on the line. [3] In Hungary, dissenters from all parties protested throughout the country last December and January. [4] Force was used to control demonstrators and police abuses were reported in the process. Although state media played down the scale of the events, social networks are widely accessed in Hungary and the protective paternalistic self-image of the government was certainly damaged. To patch things up since, Orbán again started to encourage Hungarian women to have more babies, and the anti-immigration push has been revived.

Signs of public opposition may surface from time to time, but it is chilling that on 15 March the exclusivist myths and narratives incessantly exploited by east central European politicians reverberated in the white supremacist manifesto published by the Christchurch mass killer. In addition, the weapons used in the mosque massacres, 180,000 km away, were scrawled with the names of historical European rulers and warlords who fought against Islamic countries. They included the 15th century Hungarian military leader János Hunyadi, revered at home for his campaigns of resistance against the Ottomans. [5]

**Existential fear and historical trauma**

The emotional underpinning of any shift to a far right or fascist way of thinking has been called a form of paranoia: fear of outsiders, loss of control, denigration or downgrading. Anyone, at any level, is susceptible. [6] And fear, as well as trauma, are historically very familiar to the populations of central Europe [7]. Over the past three hundred years, the region has seen invasions, partitions, occupations, death camps, uprisings, mass displacement, totalitarian rule of all kinds. The threads that bind communities have been torn and re-torn for centuries. Consecutive generations have seen their memories and sense of self assaulted, abused and sometimes pulverised. People have periodically risen up and, often hopelessly, fought – or fled.

For those who remained and survived, it was taken as read that a state could have its existence called into question at any time. If national anthems are any indication, then Dąbrowski’s Mazurka is a pledge to recover a country perishing under outside domination (‘Poland is not yet lost…’ it begins), while the Hungarian Himnusz is a mournful prayer acknowledging the effects of conflict, ill-fate and defeat, with a plea for relief from unrelenting suffering. In countries with collective memories of this kind, underlying suspicion of bigger, more powerful states should come as no surprise.

In 1946, the Hungarian political scientist István Bibó argued that such regional insecurity was, and would continue to be, accompanied by anxiety that freedom itself might
threaten national integrity and lead to (entirely plausible) political ‘annihilation’. In his pamphlet ‘The Miseries of East European Small States’, Bibó wrote that existential fear and historical traumas, mostly related to action taken by external powers, ‘was a decisive factor in making democracy waver in these countries’. [8] The populist trends in Poland and Hungary today suggest that, in many ways, Bibó was right. The memories of lives lost, brutality, persecution and resistance, of fractured groups and relationships, are bound to undermine any effort to create a reasonable, discursive polity in which everyone is given a chance to have their say.

And yet, surely, it has been a while now since these things happened. If in the Balkans the memory of inter-ethnic conflict and war remains comparatively raw, central Europe has seen no major, violent political trauma in the last generation. Nonetheless, a sense of victimisation and inflicted pain still persists. If anything, historical grievances seem to be more acute and clearly articulated than they have been for decades.

Suffering collectivities ‘do not exist simply as material networks. They must be imagined into being,’ the social theorist Jeffrey Alexander writes. ‘The lives lost and pains experienced are individual facts; shared trauma depends on collective processes of cultural interpretation.’ [9] In other words, transforming personal tragedy and injury into a collective account is not only about experience and memory. It needs construction and creative representation. If the story is in part spontaneously generated, it is also partly ‘invented’. It depends heavily on identifying heroes and villains, on public acts of remembrance, speeches, demonstrations, articles, films and so on. [10] The narrative that underpins all this cultural work helps build and support a moral code, offers a guide for behaviour and teaches who deserves loyalty and who should be suspected and feared.

Behind all this are the meaning makers, ‘the collective agents of the trauma process’: people Alexander terms ‘carrier groups’. [11] They may be elites, or they can be denigrated, even revolutionary factions. They might be both. The point is that they are heard – because through them people perceive their own plight, or that of their immediate predecessors. Carrier groups create context. Their narratives reflect arguments about what caused the trauma, who was to blame, and what should happen now. [12] But above all they are about anchoring ways of thinking that will assure a future for the community and especially for its rising elites.

Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party and Jarosław Kaczyński’s Law and Justice have each used and elaborated narratives to strengthen their constituencies, exploiting interpretations of past events to support their actions in the here and now. Both parties disseminate a narrative that portrays their history as a series of disasters imposed by external powers that have recurrently victimised their country and its people. [13] In the Hungarian case, the story goes back to the Ottomans, but focusses on the Trianon Treaty which concluded World War I in the region by instigating the loss of two thirds of Hungary’s former territory. The narrative outlines what should be viewed as the real history of the Hungarian state and people, and what should not. The Nazi and communist years are emphatically excluded. In the Polish case, attention is also on the last hundred years and especially on historical ‘falsifications’ that allegedly distort Poland’s role in the European story. The current narrative specifies who should or should not be held to accountable for atrocities committed on Polish soil during and after World War II; outlines those who should be approved and recognized and those who must be rejected and forgotten. Once
again, the emphasis is on framing the chronicle of a ‘true’, ‘authentic’ Polish state and excising the years when the country was under external administration and control – whether Nazi or Soviet.

The shadow of Trianon

The Treaty of Trianon was imposed on Hungary in 1920, following its defeat as part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in the First World War. Large portions of its territory were detached and designated to other countries (to Romania, Ukraine, the newly formed Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) which created an enduring perception at home that Hungary had been uniquely ill-treated. Between 1920 and 1944, a propaganda campaign around the interwar governor Miklós Horthy sought to alleviate the humiliation, presenting him as a heroic military saviour seeking to bring restitution after the injustices of the settlement. The myth was popular and served as a means to legitimate Horthy’s interwar regime, as well as a justification for alliances with Hitler and Mussolini which provided partial restoration of pre-World War I borders. Meanwhile, responsibility for Trianon was laid at the feet of Jews, socialists and liberal or progressive democratic politicians, a group dubbed the ‘urbanites’, seen as having a broadly west European identity, and associated with Budapest and other big cities. By way of contrast to them, the narrative presented rural people and the inhabitants of small towns as ‘true’, authentic Hungarians, with a unique Magyar identity, and – very importantly – as victims. [14]

The practical relevance of Trianon in people’s lives today is very questionable, and its contemporary effects are now also debated by historians. [15] Yet the settlement continues to affect public discourse on nationality and democracy. It lay behind the introduction of a law in 2011, which offers citizenship to Hungarian speaking descendants of nationals who lived in the country before 1920. The losses of Trianon are also now remembered annually on National Unity Day. In state media, school curricula, public ceremonies or commemorations, and in a form of national Christianity closely identified with the current regime, Orbán and Fidesz are being presented as representatives and redeemers of ‘true’ Hungarians – the victimised rural Magyars of the Horthy era – seeking, like Horthy, to bring a restitution to national loss. [16]

This has been reflected in political gestures toward Hungarian communities in Slovakia, Romania or Ukraine, as well in Orbán’s defiantly wayward attitude to the EU. It has also transformed the pantheon of Hungary’s national heroes. Over the last few years, parts of central Budapest have been reinstated to a pre-World War II appearance, while figures associated with progressive, socialist or communist ideology have had their monuments removed. The disappeared include Mihály Károlyi, the first head of the short-lived 1918 republic; philosopher György Lukács, remembered as the face of western–as opposed to Soviet–Marxism; and Imre Nagy, the pro-reform communist prime-minister associated with the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising, whose statue was transferred away from Martyrs’ Square in December 2018. Nagy was executed by the communist authorities in 1958, but this has not prevented recent allegations that he was a ‘communist traitor and a criminal who tossed his nation to the wolves. There are reportedly plans to replace his memorial with a monument to the ‘national martyrs’ of the communist regime of 1919. This will be a replica of the memorial originally erected in 1934, under Horthy. A museum known as the House of Terror has also been established in the former headquarters of the Nazi and
later the communist police as a reminder of the extent of Nazi and Soviet crimes.

The years dating from the Nazi occupation, including nearly 45 years of communist rule are being cut away from the Hungarian story. [17] It does not diminish the crimes committed under these regimes to suggest that the study and interpretation of history must necessarily be impoverished in consequence. How did people live? What choices did they have to make? What of the 1956 revolution, or of half a million Jews deported in 1944-1945, many of them to Auschwitz-Birkenau? And what of Horthy’s arguable legacy of defeat, occupation and culpability for Jewish persecution?

In Budapest’s Freedom Square today, a giant bronze eagle of Germany descends on the Archangel Gabriel, a symbol of Hungary. The memorial was intended for the 70th anniversary of the Jewish deportations and unveiled in 2014, with nothing to indicate any special tribute to the country’s Jewish population or to communicate regret for complicity in the deportations. At the entrance to the Calvinist Church nearby, stands a bust of Horthy, whose rule is now unequivocally included in the history of Hungary’s self-determination. [18]

All this may be a distraction from underlying issues– corruption, for example–but, as Michael Toomey has noted, it also lays the ground for a ‘myth’ about Orbán. In it he appears as a national healer and deliverer from economic and political instability, who dares challenge the external enemy while seeking redemption from the trauma of a century ago. More significantly perhaps, the story also pits the state and ‘true’ Hungarians – the clean-thinking rural Magyars, as opposed to sophisticated, cosmopolitan, globally minded ‘urbanites’ – against internal and external enemies. In practice it serves to vilify critical journalists, while NGOs and opposition movements are subject to smear campaigns and deprived of resources. In the meantime, as Toomey points out, the narrative of national resistance against internationalist pressure sets us the regime’s critics in the EU to inadvertently fulfil Fidesz’s myths, and so reinforces the party’s grip on Hungarian society. [19]

Defenders of Christendom

The migration crisis of 2015 provided an opportunity for Fidesz to style itself as a party defending national culture against external attempts to relegate ethnic Hungarians to a minority position in their own land. The continuing sense of threat has been fed by officially sanctioned stories about secret plans in Brussels to flood the country with migrants, in a pact with Hungarian born US philanthropist George Soros. In 2017 a study by Ipsos showed that 67 per cent of Hungarians thought their country’s borders should be closed to refugees indefinitely. [20]

A sense of geographical vulnerability, of being a through road, along with an elaborated, perceived threat of unfamiliar-looking faces streaming into Europe may lie at the core of continuing illiberalism in east central Europe, as Ivan Krastev has pointed out. [21] To many, the arrival in droves of people from different continents and cultures seems radical, destabilising and terrifying. Orbán’s message of unchanging exceptionality–‘We are who we are, and we shall be who we are’ [22]–meets with a desire to protect cultural security in the face of incomprehensible and fast-moving global change. Equally, and to the delight of Fidesz supporters, it puts Hungary at the forefront of ‘defending’ Europe’s
Christian culture against an influx of people from non-Christian, often Islamic, traditions.

**The Polish way**

In 2017, the sociologist Maciej Gdula interviewed supporters of the Law and Justice party from provincial towns in Poland and found that they harboured deep contempt for migrants whom they regarded as costly to the state and cowardly for having left their families behind. In turn, those polled felt despised by better educated Polish elites with ‘European’ values. For many of them, the image of Poland as the bulwark protecting Europe from an uncontrolled surge of refugees offered a sorely needed sense of pride and purpose. Like Hungarians under Fidesz, they felt cast in the role of saviours of European civilisation. [23]

It is hard to know how far new generations in Poland have been affected by diminishing and humiliating outside narratives: the fact that for centuries German and Russian writing depicted Poland as backward-looking, unenlightened and deserving of invasion; that Hitler considered Poles a Slavic subrace to be enslaved or annihilated; that, in Stalinist Poland, the historical narrative labelled people who sought to defend their land and tradition as traitors and fascists; or that western reporting often underestimated the dull, colourless torment of daily life under communist regimes.

The desire to redress the balance of the story may help explain the puzzle of illiberal populism in a country which had the fastest-growing economy in Europe between 2007 and 2017, and enjoys considerable social mobility. Gdula’s research shows that political attitudes in Poland are not determined by how social groups benefited from the transition to capitalism. [24] It is true that Law and Justice helped raise the incomes of working class families through a generous child benefit system [25], but the party’s base also includes many who feel satisfied with their share in the country’s rising prosperity.

So perhaps, once again, it is the narrative that appeals: the tale that the authentic voice of the nation has spoken; that self-assertion abroad is possible; that interference by outsiders will no longer be tolerated; that the Polish experience of victimization was exclusive and no one else can ever understand; that, at last, history can be told as it was felt, the Polish way; and that as the country comes into its own as an independent European state, it does not need enforced guidance from the West or anyone else.

**Memory Codes**

But how far is the story spontaneously generated? Since its victory in 2015, Law and Justice has been pursuing a strategy of re-education and memory politics, marked by its consistency. [26] In September 2017, the Polish Institute of Remembrance, which researches and prosecutes Nazi and Soviet crimes against the nation, commissioned a four-minute computer animation titled ‘The Unconquered’ which presents an interpreted, potted history of Poland since 1939. The English version is dramatically narrated by Sean Bean of ‘Game of Thrones’. The storyline focusses on the wartime underground state and winds up with brief references to the papal visit in 1979, workers’ strikes, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Solidarity trade union does not feature, nor does its first leader, Nobel Prize Laureate and president, Lech Walesa. [27]
While Fidesz depicts itself as the heir to the Horthy regime, Law and Justice paints itself as a successor to the anti-Nazi wartime resistance and the anti-communist opposition in Poland. According to Jarosław Kaczyński, the country is right now shaking off the oligarchic grip of previous regimes and its status as a puppet state serving the interests of foreign powers. His party’s programme incorporates a section on identity and historical policy with the emphasis on the importance of investigating historical crimes against the Polish nation, fostering patriotism and strengthening national distinctiveness. Law and Justice has also initiated a campaign to ‘recover memory’ and honour heroism which includes commemorating underground partisans (often dubbed the ‘cursed soldiers’) who resisted Soviet domination in Stalinist Poland until the mid-1950s. Many were executed by the regime, but some groups of fighters were reportedly also responsible for crimes against Belorussians and Jews returning to Poland after the war. Nevertheless, since 2011, there has been a national holiday in their honour. Fascist movements have participated in remembrance events. [28]

In line with the campaign to overwrite memory, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a list of ‘wrong memory codes’ in 2016: misleading expressions used by foreign or communist historians that distorted the role Poland played in World War II. There was concern that phrases like ‘Polish death camps’ were being loosely and inaccurately used. It needed to be globally reiterated that during the German occupation in World War II, concentration camps were planned, set up, overseen and administered by Nazi forces; that 100,000 non-Jewish Poles were put to death in Auschwitz alone; and that, of the six million Polish citizens killed in World War II, half were Polish Jews and the other half ethnic Poles. All of which is historically recognized.

In February 2018, a law was passed penalising with a prison sentence of up to three years anyone publicly accusing ‘the Polish nation, or the Polish state, of being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich’. The legislation caused an outcry abroad. The international concern about the curtailment of free speech, historical revisionism, anti-Semitism or possible Holocaust denial forced the government to partially retreat four months later. In a ‘correction’ introduced in June, the offence became not criminal but civil.

Nevertheless, crimes or atrocities committed between 1939 and 1989 are not recognized as ‘Polish’: they are pictured as foreign, induced acts of illegitimate foreign regimes, regardless of individual decision and choice. In February 2018, prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki said that Poland did not exist in 1968 when the communist authorities expelled thousands of Jews from the country. ‘True Poles’ were not implicated. Law and Justice had previously declared an intention to demand reparations from Germany for losses incurred during World War II which could run into hundreds of billions of dollars.

The power of the carrier

Narratives have practical as well as political implications, which affect the structures of authority—as carriers know so well. They can bring money, votes and control. The measures Law and Justice has taken to consolidate its power base are very similar to those introduced in Hungary. They include putting loyalists at the head of public media to tell the official story; stirring up xenophobic thought patterns; refusing the EU mandated quota of non-European refugees; chipping away the integrity of jurisdiction; giving the
government power over the appointment of new judges and retiring older ones. [29] 
Senior military officers have been replaced and a new civil service law introduced, 
making it easier to purge the bureaucracy. There has been some institutional resistance, 
true, and Kaczyński’s efforts to legitimize his power at the expense of constitutional 
checks have had only partial success. But clearly, as Madeleine Albright has pointed out, 
the stakes here are due process, fair elections, and the integrity of democratic 
institutions.

Meanwhile, petty hatred, stereotyping and ‘othering’ in state and social media mean that 
marginalized groups such as Roma are presented as deviant and uncivilized, while Jewish 
global powers are said to be swamping small European nations with migrants from alien cultures.

In the right circumstances, fearmongering is a sure vote winner, and the anxiety about 
how xenophobia may be exploited in forthcoming elections is entirely justified[46]. [30] 
The shadow of the New Zealand atrocity, and others that have preceded or may follow it, 
cannot be erased. In Poland and Hungary, there is little sign of understanding between the 
dominant narrative and that of outsiders. This mood has long-running implications not just for Jewish minorities, but for Muslims, Roma and others, who have dared to move.

Footnotes

1. See for example: ‘Teenager stabbed in far-Right terrorist attack’, The Daily Telegraph, 
18 March 2019.

2. See for example: ‘Poland, Italy forge populist alliance ahead of European Parliament 
elections’ In DW 08. January 2019; ‘Viktor Orbán calls for anti-migration politicians to 
take over EU’ in Guardian January 10. 2019; ‘Hungarian leader says Europe is now 
‘under invasion’ by migrants’ In Guardian 15 March 2019; ‘How Matteo Salvini pulled Italy to the far right’ In Guardian 9 August 2018; ‘Immigrants pay for Poland’s fiery 
rhetoric’ in Financial Times; ‘Orbán opens EU elections campaign, vows defence of 
“Christian’ Europe”’ In Euractiv 11 February 2019


4. Protests in December 2018 and January 2019 were held against changes to labour 
code (which allows employers to demand up to 400 hours of overtime per year and extends 
accounting periods to three years) and an anti-democratic jurisdiction reform. 
This allows administrative courts to rule in politically sensitive cases e.g. electoral or 
public procurement complaints. The minister of justice is entitled to appoint members of 
these courts. Dániel Hegedüs, ‘Hungary’s Sudden Protests Punch a Hole in Orbán’s 
Legitimization Narrative’


11. Alexander, p. 16.


17. The preamble to the 2011 Constitution confirms this: ‘We date the restoration of our country’s self-determination, lost on 19th of March 1944, from the 2nd of May 1990 when the first freely elected body of popular representation was formed.’ Toomey, ‘History, Nationalism and Democracy: Myth and Narrative in Viktor Orbán’s “Illiberal Hungary”’ p. 62.

18. Most recently Orbán described him as an ‘exceptional statesman’. Ibid., p. 67.


21. Equally, departures from the region have been a crucial agent of change. Ethnically homogenous societies may sense they are lagging behind and feel a need for a reassuring political narrative to ‘raise their spirits’. Ibid.


23. In 2016, when asked by the EU to take 6500 refugees from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, the country refused on the grounds that accepting them, Jarosław Kaczyński said, ‘would completely change our culture and radically lower the level of safety in our country.’ Elisabeth Zerofsky, ‘Is Poland retreating from democracy?’, *New
24. Krastev, ‘Eastern Europe’s Illiberal Revolution’

25. Paul Mason, ‘Poland is rewriting history’ in New Statesman 13 June 2018

26. Mateusz Mazzini, ‘Poland’s right-wing government is rewriting history—with itself as hero’ The Washington Post 27 February 2018

27. Since alleged evidence emerged that Walesa collaborated with the communist secret services, his name has been largely deleted from the public sphere.


30. ‘EU warned to take “last chance or face a “populist nightmare”, The Guardian, 6 March 2019, p.25

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