



POPULISM, TRAUMA, AND MEMORY: UNDERSTANDING ORBÁN'S USE OF HISTORY TO SOLIDIFY POLITICAL CONTROL

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DI WORKING PAPERS

2023/18

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ABSTRACT

The topics of nationalism and populism have been well-studied. However, current research has understudied the role of trauma and memory in understanding these areas. This paper analyzes how the terms traumatized nationalism and illiberal memory affect populist political power. To answer this question, we seek to differentiate the terms traumatized nationalism and illiberal memory while explaining their attributes for populists. We use Hungary's Orbán and how he has utilized these concepts to achieve political success as a case study. This study emphasizes the need for scholars to understand the impact of traumatized nationalism and illiberal memory on regimes and their implications.

KEYWORDS

Nationalism, populism, memory, Hungary, trauma

INTRODUCTION

The categorization of the current Hungarian leader, Viktor Orbán, would undoubtedly be populist. Orbán is anti-elitist, anti-pluralist, and seemingly always fighting for the 'general will' of the people (see Antal 2017; Adam 2017; Csehi 2019). Over the last 100 years in Hungary, numerous events have created a breeding ground for a national victim complex. Hungary has had its own 'century of humiliation' and, therefore, is in a similar position to China at the end of 1949. Like Mao's China, Orbán's Hungary was uniquely positioned in the late 2000s to create a new cultural narrative, one of strength and 'no more victimization'. Orbán rejected the global liberal memory and espoused illiberal memory. What powers His illiberal memory politics are powered by the conceptual phenomenon of traumatized nationalism.

Viktor Orbán's rise to power was a complex journey that was marked by evolving political ideologies and strategies. Emerging as a fiery anti-communist activist during Hungary's transition to democracy in the late 1980s, Orbán co-founded the Fidesz party and quickly rose through the ranks. By the early 2000s, he had become Prime Minister, although his first term was marked by economic challenges. It was during his second tenure in 2010 that Orbán transformed his image, embracing a nationalist and conservative rhetoric that resonated with a significant portion of the Hungarian population. His policies focused on curbing the influence of external institutions, strengthening a specific national identity, and taking a hardline stance on immigration. This shift led to tensions with the European Union over issues related to democratic backsliding and the rule of law.

Orbán's political trajectory raises a pertinent research question: To what extent does Orbán's brand of nationalism rely upon the dynamics of traumatized nationalism? Traumatized nationalism can be understood as a phenomenon in which a nation's historical traumas, whether real or perceived, shape its political attitudes and behaviors. Hungary's trauma of past geopolitical changes, including territorial losses and foreign domination, could be seen as underlying factors

driving the nation's embrace of Orbán's strongman leadership and the emphasis on preserving cultural and national homogeneity. Exploring the connections between Hungary's historical experiences and its political choices under Orbán's leadership can offer valuable insights into the intricate interplay between nationalism, trauma, and contemporary political landscapes. This leads us to ask a question: How does Orbán use the past and Hungarian national identity to create the conditions for populist political power?

To understand these dynamics within Hungary, we start by using Gellner's (2009:1) definition that nationalism "is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind." Research has placed the root of these sentiments in domestic turbulence caused by economic globalization (Kaldor 2004; Johnson and Barnes 2015), strong ethnic identities (Calhoun 1993), strong cultural ties (Leerssen 2006), religious practices (Brubaker 2011), war (van Evera 1994), social problems rooted in the spread of the internet (Eriksen 2007; Mihelj and Jimenez-Martinez, 2021), and the role of sexism and traditional gender roles within society (McClintock 1993; Peterson 1999; Thomson 2020). However, the nationalism literature is dominated by macro-structural argumentation (see also Mylonas and Tudor 2021). Nationalism is not only an elite-driven phenomenon but one that is also created and re-created by everyday people (Knott 2015; Bonikowski 2016; Kaufmann 2017). With friction between macro and micro-level explanations, there is a portion where 'everyday nationalist' sentiment meets an elite-driven process. We argue that these two processes intersect with the social traumas that countries have undergone. It is in these traumas that the mundane politics meet the macro-structural.

The mechanism that merges national social trauma with nationalism's elite-driven processes, we argue, is populism. An immediate hurdle in this mechanism is the contested definitions, meanings, and uses of populism within the literature. For clarity, we take a minimalist approach in which populism is focused on 'the people' and is situated as anti-corrupt elite and anti-pluralism (see Rooduijn 2014; Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). The root cause of populism has been argued to arise from economic and political

grievances (Noury and Roland 2020; Berman 2021), a malaise in one's life and social context (Spruyt, Keppens and Droogenbroeck 2016), and "collective emotions become[ing] mobilized through political communication" (Obradovic, Power and Sheehy-Skeffington 2020:125). However, populism does not affect or survive in every country, but only in those countries where a populist political identity exists (Melendez and Kaltwasser 2019). Csehi (2019) argues that Orbán is able to retain control through populism by continually restructuring who the 'corrupt elite' are. We build off of Csehi (2019) and Obradovic, Power and Sheehy-Skeffington (2020) to argue that Orbán recontextualizes Hungary's history in a way that preys on the country's historical traumas to drive populist support. Orbán, essentially, presents an alternative memory of what it means to be a Hungarian in reference to a very real and also imagined past.

To understand the dynamic between nationalism and populism, we should understand that populism is not a host ideology (Mudde 2004), but that populism must combine with other ideologies to function effectively. Nationalism, then, becomes a host ideology that combines with populism neatly to describe the events occurring in Hungary today. While the two concepts are distinct, both can be complementary to one another (De Cleen 2017; Brubaker 2020). Populism needs an enemy to function (Mudde 2004). It can be hard to come by this constant enemy. Therefore, in times of peace, political leaders can rely on traumatized nationalism and illiberal memory to bolster support and maintain legitimacy because the past holds in time a permanent historical enemy compared to a changeable present one. The sentiment is no longer "how will we win against the present enemy or threat?" but "why were we so wronged?".

Previous research has not elucidated two distinct phenomena plaguing Hungary: namely, the concepts of illiberal memory and traumatized nationalism. Moreover, we believe that there is an intersection between traumatized nationalism and illiberal memory. The paper seeks to clearly delineate the two phenomena and how they complement one another, like nationalism and populism. While no country is immune to either of these phenomena, certain countries may experience these phenomena with more regularity and intensity. As a point of

clarification, we do not argue that these phenomena are exclusive to populist regimes or democracies. Understanding the place of illiberal memory and traumatized nationalism within different contexts is beyond the scope of this study, but future research should be dedicated to this endeavor. To explore these dynamics, this paper draws on the case study method as applied to Hungary and its leader, Viktor Orbán. We argue that Orbán calls on the past's trauma while burying the shameful parts to position the nation as the underdog and victim, essentially forming a narrative and strategy that is always anti-pluralist and, at its core, populist.

TRAUMATIZED NATIONALISM AND ILLIBERAL MEMORY

It is well-known in the populism literature that nationalism is used to gain political legitimacy. One type of nationalism that is being used with increasing frequency and is not discussed in the political science literature is traumatized nationalism. Traumatized nationalism originates in the communications discipline but has not formally been introduced in political science. In short, traumatized nationalism is the use of an emotionally or physically damaging experience resulting in nationalistic tendencies. The definition of traumatized nationalism was first used with China as the primary example (see Hartnett 2011). Hartnett (2011:424) posits that China's "Century of Humiliation" was the main catalyst that prompted the nation to adopt a victimization complex, thus leading to an age of "imperial imposed trauma". Hartnett (2011:413) argues that China uses the 'rhetoric of traumatized nationalism' from imperial victimization as a vehicle for political power. Currently, the literature on the 'rhetoric of traumatized nationalism' is in its infancy as not many theories have been constructed out of this concept. Currently, the singular explanation or effect of traumatized nationalism is the justification of aggressive military actions (Hartnett and Reckard 2017; Pierce 2014). Hartnett and Reckard (2017) posit that China invokes a claim over the South China Sea because of their history of trauma and grievances in the region. Pierce (2014) builds out to the US case example of how the rhetoric of traumatized nationalism excuses political elites from critically examining the war on terror. The non-critical examination of past national actions is a core feature of illiberal memory, specifically the rejection of critical examination of military and

aggressive actions. While the rhetoric of traumatized nationalism can justify a host of actions by the political leadership, the term needs to first be grounded in political science.

We seek to transfer the concept of 'rhetoric of traumatized nationalism' from the communications discipline by translating it to simply 'traumatized nationalism'. The reason for this is that, generally, we do not have to focus on 'the rhetoric [of]' a phenomenon within the field of political science outside of the political communication sub-field. The phenomenon itself should be considered worthy of exploration and definitional differentiation. Our paper looks not only at the rhetoric of traumatized nationalism but at the actions taken by political leaders, administrations, and political parties that attempt to justify intense nationalism or military aggression through the trauma experienced by the populace. While Hartnett (2011) is the originator of this concept, it is not clear whether this concept as defined solely as a rhetorical strategy by political elites is the only condition for the concept's use. For example, what kind of trauma is it necessary for a country to endure for this rhetorical strategy to be used? While the essence of this definition might encapsulate different events from country to country, it is necessary to state that any nation can experience traumatized nationalism.

Our conceptual definition of "traumatized nationalism" can occur to any group of people that identify as a nation; this includes country, organization, or people groups. Traumatized nationalism includes several core features, but not all need to be present to constitute traumatized nationalism:

1. Needs a traumatic event that has occurred (e.g., war, invasion, genocide, war crime)
2. The scope needs to be nationwide or severely localized traumatic events.
3. The traumatic event can be external or internal to the nation-state boundaries.
4. The traumatic event details can be falsified, but an event must occur. For example, a terrorist that kills five could be said to have killed dozens or hundreds. This can lead to manufactured trauma. Not all traumatic events

result in traumatized nationalism and are used for propaganda; this leads to a dormant effect of traumatized nationalism. This dormant state is dangerous and can generate potential energy in the popular zeitgeist.

5. Interstate conflict is a caveat of traumatized nationalism. We argue that while a nation can be traumatized by internal conflict, such as from terrorist groups, or ethnic or tribal conflict, traumatized nationalism is best used and cultivated against external state actors.

To anchor our understanding of trauma we build off of Resende and Budryte (2014) and Marsh (2023). Resende and Budryte (2014) show the underlying role of memory and trauma in theories of ontological security, social change, gender, religion, foreign policy, and natural disasters. Marsh (2023) builds on the concept of trauma in the development of a theory of post-traumatic political response and voter turnout. Essentially, trauma is the real or perceived experience of a severe violent event (Marsh 2023). Trauma can also occur in individuals who have not personally experienced the tragic event but have been exposed to said event through a strong connection to a place or through the media (Pfefferbaum et al. 2000).

While memory can hold and retain trauma, memory itself is incredibly unreliable. Within the field of psychology, we see that memory can be falsified. For example, in the landmark “Car Crash Experiment,” Loftus and Palmer (1974) demonstrated how worded questions can significantly influence people’s memory and perception of an event. Participants who were asked about a car accident using more intense verbs estimated higher speeds than those who were asked using milder verbs. Additionally, the study found that leading questions could lead to false memories, as participants were more likely to report seeing non-existent details when prompted with suggestive language. This research highlighted the malleability of memory and the potential for inaccurate recollections due to the influence of question-wording. This has implications for political and national narratives. The second example is the “hot air balloon experiment,” where participants were presented with a fabricated story of being in a hot air balloon during their childhood and a false photograph depicting the event. When the experiment concluded, nearly 50 per cent of the participants created complete or

partial false memories of their childhood in a hot air balloon (Wade et al. 2002). Lastly, in another landmark study by Bridge and Paller, Paul (2012) finds that “[e]very time you remember an event from the past, your brain networks change in ways that can alter the later recall of the event. Thus, the next time you remember it, you might recall not the original event but what you remembered the previous time”. This study does not even account for negative memories of particularly traumatic memories. Strange and Takarangi (2015) find that people tend to remember more trauma than they experienced. When applied to traumatic national memories, this can be why traumatic memories are amplified over time, skewed, or falsified. These psychological phenomena can make any country susceptible to traumatized nationalism.

THE ROLE OF TRAUMA IN HUNGARY'S PAST

Hungary's geopolitical situation over the past 100 years becomes a useful case to analyze the dynamics of traumatized nationalism because of the prolonged periods of being both the oppressor and the oppressed. First, the most important and salient example of traumatized nationalism for Hungary is the Treaty of Trianon and the reduction of the land from the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The event permeates today and is the catalyst for much of Hungary's behavior over the last 100 years. This trauma source prompted Hungary to join the Axis powers in 1940 when Hungary was determined to reclaim its lost territory (Menyhert 2017). Compared to Germany's loss of 13 per cent of its land, Hungary lost 70 per cent, a loss that is still felt today. Germany's post-war and modern borders are not that much different, while Hungary's have not changed in the last 100 years. It is no secret that Hungarians are bitter about this fact, and feel slighted by the international community, particularly European international organizations. This is something that Orbán brings up routinely in the annual “National Unity Day” and “Independent Hungary Day” speeches.

Besides the loss of land and isolation of ethnic Hungarians in Romania, the great Austro-Hungarian Empire fell. This cultural motif still permeates the cultural

zeitgeist today. As the Treaty of Trianon is a sore spot for modern-day Hungarians, Orbán calls upon it to invoke a sense of traumatized nationalism. This trauma-infused nostalgia is seen across popular culture in current political parties' rhetoric, such as Fidesz and Mi Hazánk. The manifestations appear in varying ways, conditions, and circumstances. For example, Orbán posted on Facebook a globe with a greater Hungary demarcated (Holroyd 2020), and he wore a scarf to a soccer match displaying the greater Hungary map (BBC 2023). Here, Orbán is trying to recreate a historical legacy of greater Hungary and how the land was stolen from them after WWI. This preys upon a victimization complex and justifies their actions in WWII and, synergistically, justifies a future reorientation towards further aggression towards the EU and the international community if they tried to regain this land. This is emblematic of populism's need for an enemy (Mueller 2016).

After WWII, around 200,000 Hungarians died in Soviet Union labor camps because of Hungary's participation as an Axis power (Stark 2000). This information was not brought to light until after the regime change in 1989, and like many nations there are long periods of time between genocides, mass casualties, and acknowledgment. This is not to say that Hungary is unique in not having trauma recognized for generations, but it does highlight that hidden trauma can bring out repressed feelings, cause a securitization problem, and explain how Orbán rose so quickly in a liberal democracy.

Hungarians today feel as if they were mistreated by the Soviets, compounding the stress of being under Soviet Occupation for 30 years. However, paradoxically, there is considerable nostalgia for this period under the Kádár regime in Hungary. Many factors influenced life in 1950s Hungary, such as the distribution of wealth, social mobility, regional disparities, and the informal economy. According to the national statistics office (KSH), between 1956 and 1989 real GDP tripled in Hungary (KSH 2023). This dramatic rise in quality of life is reflected in current polling done by Hungarian think tank Policy Solutions, where 54 per cent of the people surveyed said that the majority of Hungarians had a better life under the Kádár regime (Bíró-Nagy and Laki 2020). While the raw numbers are valuable, what is additionally essential is the feeling in people's minds about that economic

time period. Hawkins et al. (2017:268-9) find that the causal driver here is one of the “materialist conceptions of political representation.” In short, populist parties are a response to an unresponsive system. Golden periods in people’s minds can be paradoxical by “finding refuge in the past” (Lendvai 2017:6). It is here that we begin to find solutions to understand the paradox between the de-Germanification of Hungary under Soviet oppression and a period where a majority of Hungarians view it as a better time. A very real trauma is being selectively remembered in a way that turns tragedy into admiration. Orbán has achieved this by rising to power by fighting against the Kádarian system, but has, once in power, emulated the social structure he critiqued (Bonotti, 2019).

Anti-Semitism has been a problem for many years in Hungary but looking specifically at the Kádár period we see that a puzzle has manifested itself. In 1956 Kádár’s job was to consolidate power. Consolidation of power meant folding the Communist Party and Soviet interests into one while quelling the Hungarian nationalists, particularly the Hungarian fascist nationalists. Doing this was very difficult as the Russian Jewish presence and Communist movements were intertwined and most likely led to the rise of anti-Jewish and anti-Soviet resentments (Pastor 1979). In addition, many Jewish members of society rose to high positions of power in the government, party, and social life under Kádár (Garai 2008). Here, anti-Semitic rhetoricians are emboldened today by the loss of nationhood by the Hungarian people, thus making Hungarians nostalgic for the Horthy period (1920-1944) where ethnic Hungarians had more ‘control’ over their national circumstances than they have had for the last 100 years. This feeling of control is explicitly due to the winning of the First and Second Vienna awards. Orbán’s own language has reflected this sentiment in the promotion of a Hungarians’ Hungary. His anti-migrant rhetoric has often been used to also stoke hatred against the large Roma population within the country (Escritt 2015). Orbán has gone as far as to be openly against Hungarians having children with non-Hungarians (Noack 2022). In short, there is a very real *perceived* grievance in Hungary against non-Hungarians.

Over the past 100 years, Hungary has experienced many real and imaginary traumas that fuel dormant nationalist attitudes today. However, there should be nothing too surprising about the fact that historical traumas and grievances lead to support for these ideologies. After experiencing traumatic events, survivors have significantly increased trust with their in-groups and massively decreased levels of trust with outgroups and these effects persist for decades (Cheng, Tani, and Torgler 2023). Our focus here is less on understanding how these dormant attitudes of nationalism arise and more on how these attitudes get weaponized into support for nationalist and populist leaders. It becomes important, then, to understand how a populist activates these attitudes in their favor.

ILLIBERAL MEMORY

Illiberal memory has been analyzed primarily within democratic or hybrid regimes such as Hungary, Germany, the US, and Japan (Rosenfeld 2023). While this paper does not seek to draw a line in the sand and state that illiberal memory politics applies only to democracies or hybrid regimes, it does appear that this phenomenon seems more appropriate to attach to these regime types. While traumatized nationalism permeates all types of regimes, it typically depends on what the illiberal memory is used for, such as being used by populists to gain legitimacy. Rosenfeld (2023) conceptualizes the dynamic of illiberal memory as a conflict between different social memories. At its core, illiberal memory “seeks normality”, “rejects guilt”, and “embraces victimhood” (Rosenfeld 2023). During real or perceived national crises, illiberal memory projects the notion of an imagined time when things were better and easier. In doing so, nations downplay periods of their history where they were the oppressors while simultaneously heightening similar periods under oppression. By re-orienting a country’s history and collective memory in such a way, it opens avenues for populist leaders to prey upon latent nationalist tendencies within the population.

What separates illiberal memory from traumatized nationalism is that the latter induces latent nationalistic tendencies resulting from a traumatic event while the former leverages that trauma for political purposes. The two concepts are interrelated but are separate entities, which is where we deviate from Pierce

(2014). Pierce (2014) argues, essentially, that an event only becomes nationally traumatic if it is made traumatic by the political elite. We disagree here insofar as an event, such as war or a major terrorist event, is traumatic because of the nature of the event. The 'rally round the flag' effect demonstrates this differentiation. When a crisis occurs, it is not that political leaders induce nationalism in a post-event environment but that the trauma of the crisis creates nationalistic tendencies, which political leaders can utilize to boost support (see Godefroidt 2023). Merging the two concepts obfuscates the roles of political elites and national trauma.

To prevent further confusion, we are also separating ourselves from the theoretical threads of 'victimhood' nationalism. Victimhood nationalism relies on three pillars. First, there is the "the centrality of cultural trauma narratives in making national identity tangible for the masses" (Debs 2013:636). Secondly, there is "the politicized narration of collective trauma" (Lerner 2020:64). Lastly, there is "the projection of alleged victimhood into the past and the future, while the present is portrayed as a regenerating fateful choice between humiliation and a promised golden age" (Al-Ghazzi 2021:45). Essentially, the populist leader produces a narrative that citizens are able to *buy* if they choose. We argue that this connection between the populist leader and the citizen is much deeper. We argue that the populist leader produces an illiberal societal memory of events to try and supplant the liberal memory. What our conceptualization affords us is the theoretical leverage to understand how populist leaders weaponize history to achieve political power. Simply relying on a cultural narrative does not allow us to differentiate between a populist and a non-populist's rhetoric around a traumatic event. Our conceptualization does not center around simply a new narrative of such an event, but a purposeful effort to change the social memory of those events. For example, those who believed in former US President Donald Trump's lie that the 2020 election was fraudulent did not believe so out of political convenience but held it as a sincere belief (Graham and Yair 2023). They did not hold on to Trump's history for political purposes but as a genuine recollection of the events of the 2020 election. An illiberal memory, at its core, is the weaponization of history for the populist's goals.

Lastly, we need to make clear the difference between the liberal and illiberal memory. Rosenfeld (2023:823) defines the definition of liberal memory as one of national self-critique, guilt, and the non-innocence of the past. While an illiberal memory seeks to normalize the past, a liberal memory attempts to “non-normalize” the past. The contrast between the two can be seen in how Germany and Hungary socially remember their history. Germany has made overt attempts at reconciling with their past actions and atrocities, while Hungary has not (Rosenfeld 2023). A potential reason for this is that Hungary is most likely experiencing a combination of an illiberal memory preying upon very real national trauma. Hungary, similar to other nations, feels like it does not have to reconcile with its past as Hungarians believe that they were wronged by a single nation or the international community. The rejection of guilt is a key feature of illiberal memory (Rosenfeld 2023). In contrast to the condition of rejecting guilt, traumatized nationalism seeks to draw on the trauma as a source of strength and justification.

This begs the question of how a populist leader spreads this memory throughout society. At first glance, we could argue that populist leaders constrict, through policy, what can be socially remembered. For example, Orbán’s attack on and tightening control of education in Hungary has been attributed to increased authoritarianism (Kreko and Enyedi 2018), a form of repression (Donmez and Duman 2021), or as a bludgeon against liberal democratic ideas (Corbett and Gordon 2018). While these things are certainly true, that would only be a partial explanation. An attack on education mostly affects the remembrance of *future* generations and not necessarily the *present* generation. We argue that for an illiberal memory to take hold within a society populist leaders spread this memory through cultural institutions and the production and reproduction of new cultural narratives. With the expansion of the Prime Minister’s Office under Orbán, several cultural institutions have flourished such as monument restoration and commemoration, as well as the “Hungarian film industry and patriotic and military education” (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021:690).

Whether Hungarian voters will always have an unlimited populist appetite is up for debate. However, we do see that this appetite extends not just to populist rhetoric but also to fascist ideologies and racialized periods of the past, creating a dangerous geopolitical situation that is likely to get worse by potentially implanting populist and fascist ideologies into the core of Hungarian politics. The fusing, prolonging, and embedding of ethnonationalist policies not just in the name of state security but in the name of selective memory of historical trauma is also becoming the new normal in other countries such as Italy, Germany, and the US.

THE NATIONALISM AND POPULISM OF ORBÁN'S HISTORY

In this section, we go over two examples of how Orbán is purposefully reshaping Hungary's history and thus its memory of it. The two specific examples chosen are Hungarian architecture and its film industry. The reason is that both are incredibly innocuous but powerful "everyday" cultural images that shape our perceptions of reality (Horton 1987; Lee 2022). We demonstrate in this section that Orbán's illiberal memory is more than simply spreading a new narrative of history; instead, it is actively attempting to transform the memory of Hungarian society.

FASCIST ARCHITECTURE

People and societies have a fascinating relationship with monuments, creating attachments and meaning from them. Monuments are a pertinent example of memory, place, and power (Forest and Johnson 2019). Thus, there is an inherent political dimension related to the study of monuments (Bradley 2012). There are two avenues concerning monuments from the political dimension: the construction of new monuments and the deconstruction of old monuments. We see this attachment and calamity with the de-monumentalization efforts and protests in the US in 2017 (Elias, McCandless and Chordiya 2019) and in Chile in 2019 (Badilla and Aguilera 2021). In the case of the US Confederate monuments, some were constructed during periods of racial strife (Elias McCandless and Chordiya 2019). Evans (2021) neatly describes the factors of commemoration such

as political culture, timing of the commemoration, and the power of the agents of memory. In this case, people's attachment to historical events becomes intertwined with historical legacies and social changes. These legacies can easily be manipulated for political gain. This brings an intersection in a new phenomenon, which is the commemoration, restoration, and building of new fascist monuments, statues, and symbols that are fused with traumatized nationalism.

According to Forward (2023), an independent newspaper agency, there are approximately 1652 instances of streets and statues honoring Nazi collaborators in 30 countries across five continents. Similar to how the construction of Confederate monuments occurred in periods of racial or political strife, Nazi memorials also have been constructed in the same way, with a majority appearing in the last 20 years (Golinkin 2021). Hungary, a country of 10 million people and a relatively small size compared to Western European states, has as many Nazi monuments as Germany and Italy. While this study does not seek to delve into all of the intricacies of all of the monuments, we can glean some framing from looking at when some of these monuments and statues were constructed or commemorated under Orbán. At the moment, there are 131 Nazi monuments in Hungary compared to Germany's 169. Looking at other countries, we can see that Hungary, per capita, has some of the most Nazi collaborator memorials. Of the 131, 113 are of Albert Wass. This is over 85 per cent of the memorials in Hungary. Of the memorials, there are plaques, memorials, busts, stones, statues, names of streets, squares, and libraries. The remaining 17 are of Miklos Horthy, the leader of Hungary from 1920-1944.

In the case of Hungary, new monuments and statues have been erected for the past 10 years alongside dozens of others already in the country. One of the more famous ones that have been marred with controversy is the 2014 monument that has been defended by Orbán (Euractiv 2014). The monument depicts all Hungarians as Archangel Gabriel, victims of German aggression, which is represented by the Eagle. This minimizes Jewish deaths in the Holocaust and Hungary's role in it. It is not that every moment of World War II needs to be a memorial to the Holocaust, but this monument constructs a narrative that

Hungary was the real victim of Nazi Germany and a pure historical fiction to reduce Hungary's role in genocide. By doing this, Orbán and the party capitalize on Hungary's victimization, creating a new artificial enemy, which populists need in order to thrive, whilst performing perfectly crafted Holocaust denial.

Orbán is able to capitalize because, while Hungary was part of the Axis powers, they were eventually invaded by Germany in 1944 and suffered many casualties. Orbán is leaning on the historical narrative that Horthy was not complicit in the killing of 'all' Jews in the country. This is factually incorrect because a majority of Jews in Hungary were killed under Horthy. Orbán whitewashes the acts of Nazism or minimizes Horthy's role in acts directed by Nazi Germany to give Hungarians the feeling that Horthy was not complicit despite conclusive evidence to the contrary. Therefore, Orbán's rhetoric that 'all' Hungarians suffered again is changing the narrative that Hungary was never a true Axis power and was not complicit in the Holocaust. This is not true because Horthy, under the direction of Hitler, invaded Yugoslavia and was already complicit in killing tens of thousands of Jews in neighboring countries, in what some scholars called "murder tourism". More than this, any worship or act of reverence can be problematic as it can lead to justification. However, it is more than just fascist ideology; it is the ideology of a leader who will do anything to protect the nation. While there is relative peace and stabilization now, that could not always be the case. War starts all the time, and the people want to know and understand their options in picking a leader who will, at all costs, protect the nation. That creates a fervent need above all that foreign and international aims come second and that national needs come first.

FILM INDUSTRY

While Hollywood does work with US governmental agencies on occasion, such as the Department of Defense, it does not receive large amounts of funding for projects that are still privately funded. On the other hand, the government of Hungary funds many film projects exclusively through the National Film Institute, and funding has quadrupled since 2013 (Budapest Reporter 2023). While this is

not automatically a negative, this funding design takes away a sense of agency from the directors and does, in a sense, make these films a pseudo-type of government-sponsored films. Reframing Hungarian history through popular culture is part of Orbán's plans to change the national narrative, and he has gone on record stating that "[w]e must embed the political system into the cultural era" (Karasz 2019: n.p.). In discussing the film industry's financial state Tamás Lajos, producer of 2018's *Eternal Winter*, stated that producing historical Hungarian films is a "national matter" (Kaszás 2019). In recent years, the National Film Institute has been selectively funding films that put forward a Hungarian nationalist agenda, specifically those that weave narratives about Hungary's "heroic" past (Vourlias 2022).

There are several examples of the Hungarian government either mostly or entirely funding the film industry. *Fateless* (2004) is an autobiographical film about a teenage boy who is sent to Auschwitz. The Hungarian government paid for half of the film, and at 13 million USD, it was the most expensive Hungarian movie ever made (Riding 2006). To put this in perspective, it has been nearly 20 years since the production of *Fateless*, and the only movie to surpass it is the upcoming *Now or Never* historical drama that is set to come out in 2024 at a budget of 17 million USD (Budapest Reporter 2023). The most salient example is the critically acclaimed 2015 film *Son of Saul*, which is a historical drama that follows a Hungarian *Sonderkommando* in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in 1944. It was nominated for dozens of film awards and was the first Hungarian film to win the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film. Viktor Orbán praised the film as a "unique Hungarian success." In addition, he congratulated the director, cast, and film producer via a Facebook post (Budapest Business Journal 2016). Over 75 per cent of the budget (1.5 million dollars) was supported by the Hungarian National Film Foundation (Donadio 2015). In short, historical films are a priority for Orbán as he seeks to lean on the past and portray Hungarians as the victims.

Greif (2005:3-7) describes the term *Sonderkommando* as referring to "a small group of prisoners (mainly Jews) who were detailed to the crematorium in the Auschwitz main camp". These prisoners' main jobs included stoking the furnaces,

cremating the corpses, cleaning the gas chambers, and loading bodies onto carts for burial in the pits. The *Sonderkommandos* were not agents of the SS and were killed periodically and replaced by other *Sonderkommandos* (Friedlander 2008, Shirer 2011). Here, we do not seek to minimize the suffering of the *Sonderkommandos* but seek to understand how their memory is weaponized by Orbán by qualifying their roles as traumatic for the nation.

The last example is the 2018 film *Eternal Winter*. *Eternal Winter* is a historical drama that follows a Hungarian woman who is taken to a forced labor camp in Ukraine in 1944 by the Soviets. After WWII 600,000 Hungarians were taken to forced labor camps in the Soviet Union, where around 200,000 died (Stark 2000). In some ways, Hungary has been at the forefront of popularizing important historical and nuanced issues through film. For example, both *Son of Saul* and *Eternal Winter* described two groups and victims of crimes that had gone undiscussed. The Jewish *Sonderkommandos* and the Hungarians that were taken to forced Soviet labor camps were not a well-known group of victims before they were popularized through said films.

It is important to acknowledge the difference between traumatized nationalism and illiberal memory. As social scientists, we are strongly against the minimizing of historical events and deaths, which illiberal memory politics can sometimes extenuate. Here, it is important to know when the films are trying to absolve guilt versus just trying to portray a victimized group of people. Simply calling these films part of the regime's illiberal memory is minimizing and can feed traumatized nationalism even further. Giving validation to the film, victimized groups of people, and the nation provides a chance for acceptance and a time for national healing, as opposed to just painting the film and the creators as puppets of the regime. We can see this nuance within many of the WWII area films of Hungary, including 2017's *1945*, which follows a small Hungarian town under Soviet occupation in the immediate aftermath of WWII. The film invokes the trauma and fear underneath Soviet rule, the very real role of Hungarians in perpetuating the Holocaust, and the cultural narratives of trying to absolve that guilt. Stating that

these films are only Hungarian propaganda undermines the important social commentary contained within them.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ORBÁN'S HISTORY

Our argument thus far has been that Orbán has used cultural institutions and narratives to propagate an illiberal social memory based on Hungarian national trauma. However, populist leaders are like any leader in that they rely on numerous tools to retain power. We are not trying to argue that these cultural levers are the only tools that Orbán uses, but that these cultural mechanisms are an effective portion of Orbán's toolkit. Unlike economic mechanisms which rely on improving *objective* well-being (e.g., wages, employment levels, and economic growth), the illiberal memory relies on boosting political support through the *perception* of improvement regardless of whether improvement occurs or not. Because populism always requires an enemy to attack, cultural narratives become a cost-effective way for the populist to produce and reproduce a social enemy. Orbán, in his 2022 CPAC speech in Dallas, Texas provided an insight into how this mechanism works by stating that, “[p]olitics, my Friends, are not enough – this war is a culture war. We have to revitalize our churches, our families, our universities, and our community institutions. Hungary is an old, proud but David-sized nation standing alone against the Woke Globalist Goliath” (Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister 2022:n.p.). Orbán recontextualizes the narrative of Hungary's history by positing that the harms done by and against Hungary were done by “the enemy” and not by whom Orbán supports. He rests this entire narrative on a cultural foundation, a reconstructed memory of the past and present to fit that narrative. The improvement, then, is simply fighting against this enemy by constructing a type of Hungarian identity and values. The cost-effectiveness comes not through real change (even if real change does occur), but at minimum that there is a *feeling* of improvement.

We can see this dynamic by looking at the Hungarian people and their relationship to Orbán's illiberal history. The defining characteristic of Hungary's 2022 election was the war in Ukraine. Orbán centered the choice as being between a pro-NATO “warmonger” who threatened to drag Hungary into the war and someone who wanted to keep Hungarians safe (DW 2022). Despite Orbán's gerrymandering

efforts and granting a lack of media coverage to opposition parties, the opposition parties did not question the accuracy of the count of the votes when Orbán won 53 per cent (Campbell 2022). It should not be surprising that Orbán received 53 per cent of the vote when 57 per cent of Hungarians are supportive of Orbán even with a 15-year record high inflation (Campbell 2022; Clancy 2022). The cultural mechanisms that Orbán utilizes are incredibly potent. During the same election, Hungary held a referendum opposing the government's anti-LGBTQ education policies in schools. While there were not enough votes cast to meet the necessary threshold for the referendum to take effect, 92 per cent of the votes cast were in *support* of the government's position (Spike 2022). Even though 43 per cent of Hungarians are dissatisfied with Orbán they are nearly unanimously in favor of his more illiberal culture war. By leaning on the rhetoric of securing the safety of Hungarians and selective interpretation of Hungarian values, Orbán is able to secure broad support for himself and his policies.

Hungary, however, is not alone in utilizing a selective memory of the past to produce support for its populist leader. We can see similarities within Erdogan's Turkey. During Turkey's 2023 election, Erdogan faced not only historically poor economic conditions but also criticism for poor disaster response to a major earthquake that injured and killed almost 100,000 people; however, he still won the presidential election. While it is certainly true that aspects of that election were unfair such as censoring criticism on Twitter (Kohlenberg 2023), that is not the complete answer for Erdogan's victory. The Turkish electorate, even while acknowledging the worsening situation in their country, believed in Erdogan's push away from Western secular values and towards a "lost" Islamic tradition and that secured their vote (Fraser 2023). Erdogan's attempt to produce an illiberal Turkish memory has taken a similar approach to Orbán. Erdogan in 2018 began to prioritize funding for schools that promoted Islamic values over Western secularism (Butler 2018), he paid homage to Islamic nationalist leader Menderes before the 2023 election, and he officially converted the Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020 (Zaks 2023). The purpose is to supplant the memory that Turkey is Islamic to fight against the secular Westerners in a similar way to a traditional Christian Hungary fighting against the woke globalists.

We argue that the reason why Orbán's tactics of changing the historical memory is an effective tool is through basic emotional processes. The psychological literature has rooted nationalist attitudes in authoritarian personalities, specifically those relating to the need for control and social hierarchies (see Duckitt et al. 2002; Osborne, Milojev and Sibley 2017). These attitudes are then activated when groups have a perceived threat to either their sense of control or social status (Duckitt 2006, Pauwels and Heylen 2020). For this to be the case, one would have to argue that nearly two-thirds of Hungary are authoritarians, by nature, just for supporting Orbán, or that nearly every Hungarian has a high level of authoritarian personality for supporting Orbán's policies. This may be the case, but we would put forth a potential counter-claim that does not resort to calling an entire country latent autocrats. Our claim rests on the emotional feeling of pride and this feeling, regardless of personality type, leads individuals to enables the populist's illiberal memory to supplant the more liberal memory.

National pride has been empirically shown to be associated with nationalism (see Dekkers, Malova and Hoogendoorn 2003; Lubbers and Coenders 2017; Huddy, Del Ponte and Davies 2021). However, we argue that it is more than just the *feeling* of attachment to one's nation and that it involves deep underlying processes of pride that the national pride literature has under-analyzed. Pride is an essential function for how individuals operate and navigate their surroundings (see Lea and Webley 1997). Pride is also an important function in the generation of an individual's action. When an individual feels pride in how an action was performed, they find utility in that action regardless of its consequences (Frey, Benz and Stutzer 2004). Pride is not just a bottom-up phenomenon or a latent attitude within the population but can be induced from the top-down to achieve behavioral changes (Williams and DeStano 2008; Rela 2023). Conceptualizing pride as a dormant attitude rather than as an active and deeply emotional process obscures populist leaders' attempts to stoke national pride by revising history for their own purposes.

Illiberal memory activates political support for the populist leader through the emotional pathway of pride. When Orbán is restructuring history through

monuments of Nazi or Nazi-adjacent figures, he is not simply trying to white-wash the past. He is, in effect, telling the Hungarian population that, even in Hungary's worst moments, we can take pride in them and a sense of accomplishment. Orbán's influence on a heroic Hungarian past in the film industry is his attempt to persuade individuals that the Hungarians are a proud people and that we, too, should take pride. To be clear, we are not saying that pride is inherently wrong, but that Orbán, and other populist leaders, have weaponized the emotion of pride for their own purposes. While we do not bring empirical evidence to bear on the issue of Hungary, specifically Graham and Yair's (2023) finding relating to Trump and the sincere belief in his election lies do provide a basis for our theoretical argument.

However, there is ground upon which we can ameliorate the latent personality portions of previous research and the active emotional processes by looking at Orbán's success of "strategic securitization" (Sükösd 2022). Orbán, as a populist, has augmented foreign policy through the defense of popular sovereignty (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). An increase in militarization aligns with Hartnett's first assumption that "traumatized nationalism" feeds internationally aggressive behavior. The civilian-society dynamics of securitization are at the forefront of this issue. The Hungarian Defence Force is a volunteer reserve component of Hungary's military that is used to make the armed forces of Hungary and the Hungarian population more amenable to one another (Ujházy 2022). This is done, we would argue, to make the Hungarian population more comfortable with Orbán's increased militarization. Why? Hungary's military expenditures have tripled in the last seven years and will expand even more in 2023 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023). The Orbán government has committed to a spending spree for its military-industrial complex, with a budget ballooning to 4.5 billion USD, and has hit the 2 per cent mark required by NATO (Gosselin-Malo 2023). On top of this, there are 40,000 active military personnel in Hungary, and while it has remained relatively stable, volunteer reserves have skyrocketed to 10,000 as of 2020 (World Bank 2023). According to the National Security Committee chairman, Szilárd Németh, "this is a success...from a number of 17 reservists in 2010" (Hungary Today 2020:n.p.). To try to reach 20,000 by 2026,

implementing the Zrínyi 2026 scheme, has been a critical expansion of the Orbán government. This has occurred because of an increase in pride, and security via the Hungarian military (Pákozdi and Bárdos 2022). However, that is not to say that there are no financial incentives (see Krebs and Ralston 2020), but that the securitization fear pushed by Orbán resonates with these enlistees as each suffers from a sense of national trauma, in line with the personality research of induced nationalism rooted in a threat response.

CONCLUSION

This analysis focuses on how Orbán uses the geopolitical past in order to create the conditions for populism. By calling on the nations' trauma, while absolving the shameful parts, a narrative and strategy is formed that at its heart is populist. The sub-features of this analysis detail the current atmosphere of the nation's narrative of minority groups, historical legacies, fascism, pop culture, and personalism and how all exhibit a cause-and-effect response to populism. We have argued that the populist uses real and perceived historical trauma through cultural machinations to garner support for himself and his policies. These cultural mechanisms rely on basic psychological processes of producing and reproducing a sense of pride while also stoking fear. By providing a base sense of pride within the general population, it increases support for the populist in this context even when it is a source of shame on the international stage.

We would like to acknowledge that these conditions are not static, but fluid. There is an ebb and flow of populist energy, and it differs between countries. For example, Hungary's populist energy was constrained as they could not call upon a past figure to rally behind or against because options were limited as past recent figures were either pro-fascist (Horthy) or already dead because of the purges (1944-1955). This ten-year period was not an easy time to be nationalistic. This also shows that while periods of nationalism are important to measure and consider, periods of anti-nationalism or dormant nationalism are equally important to measure and learn from.

Future research should hone in on the emotional basis of nationalistic support, especially on how re-interpretations of events increase or decrease support for populist leaders. Future quantitative research should focus on the competing effects of liberal and illiberal memory narratives on emotional processes and support for political leaders. Future qualitative research should focus on the role of trauma and memory and how they intertwine within societies to produce nationalistic and populist outcomes. Lastly, both research programs should also think about the ramifications of such interactions and potential pathways to combat these effects.

Hungary, a country nestled in the heart of Central Europe, bears a complex relationship with its history, intertwining trauma and cultural narratives that shape its domestic and geopolitical landscape. The echoes of past traumas, including periods of foreign occupation and ideological struggles, continue to reverberate through the collective memory of its people. These historical wounds have been instrumentalized by political actors to foster a sense of national identity, often centered around a narrative of resilience and pride. However, this interplay between trauma and narrative has also posed challenges, as it can lead to a distorted view of history and an “us against them” mentality in both domestic and international contexts. Navigating these dynamics requires a delicate approach that acknowledges the pain of the past while fostering open dialogue and critical reflection. By encouraging historical education that emphasizes multiple perspectives and by fostering spaces for open discourse, Hungary can address its traumas without veering into illiberalism. This would entail a commitment to democratic values, human rights, and the understanding that acknowledging past trauma need not preclude collaboration, understanding, and a shared vision of a more inclusive and interconnected future.

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2023



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