

# Does Presentism Work? An Evaluation of the Memory Politics of Fidesz

Written by Eszter Solyom

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As the notion of collective memory has become more and more accepted in recent years, memory studies have gained prominence. Scholars have tried to create frameworks to analyse how collective memory forms national and group identity, teaches moral codes and norms or reproduces power relations. Undoubtedly, states play an important role in disseminating narratives of the past and shaping collective memory by using, among others, educational syllabi, museums, media outlets, national holidays, and political discourse. However, political elites often have their “official” or dominant narratives challenged by so called counter-memories of marginalised groups.

This essay will provide an overview of the concept of collective memory and the theory of the top-down notion of memory formation called presentism. Some prominent criticisms of presentism will be explored before applying its theoretical background to a case study which examines the presentist notions of memory formation in the politics of Hungary’s ruling party Fidesz. There will be specific attention to Fidesz’s attempts at likening Nazism to communism, rehabilitating the Horthy regime and shifting responsibility of the deportation and murder of Hungarian Jews to Germany, self-victimising Hungary. Using this case study, the essay will evaluate whether the conscious politics of memory constitute an effective instrument for today’s politicians in upholding their power. This essay will also argue that Fidesz has been successful in utilizing this instrument to their advantage.

### Theoretical Background

#### *The concept of collective memory*

To understand the idea of presentism, one must be familiar with the concept of collective memory. This term, attributed to Maurice Halbwachs, and developed by subsequent scholars, refers to an understanding of memory as a socially forged process (Bentley, 2016: 51). Collective memory exists within social frames, “implicit or explicit structure(s) of shared concerns, values, experiences, narratives.” (Assmann, 2008: 51-52). Social frames are groups that individuals identify with and refer to as “we” – such as the family, the nation, the religious community or the generation. These groups have their own past, including their history, rites, values, which constitute their collective memory – a shared narrative that binds individuals together – which often exceeds the lifespan of their individual members. This past is not remembered, but rather memorized: if the individual wants to become part of the community (the “we”), they have to internalize this collective memory through learning and rites of participation (Ibid., 52). Similarly, Zerubavel (1996: 289) argues that much of what we remember, we did not experience directly: consider a story about a great-great-grandmother who we never personally knew or a historic event that we learned about from the news, for example. We do so as members of social groups, which Zerubavel calls mnemonic communities.

Much of the criticism of the concept of collective memory arises from the understanding of memory as an individual’s process of recalling past events; therefore, the idea that groups or institutions can “remember” seems unscientific and misleading. Sontag (2003: 85) argues that “all memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person” and that societies or social groups do not “remember” but rather prescribe what members ought to think of a past event or what to consider important; in a way, what is termed collective memory is just another phrase for ideology.

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But scholars of memory studies are not arguing that memory formation is an individual process – rather, that individual memories can be shared with others. As Assmann (2008: 50) puts it:

Once they are verbalized in the form of a narrative or represented by visual image, the individual's memories become part of an intersubjective symbolic system and are, strictly speaking, no longer a purely exclusive and unalienable property. By encoding them in the common medium of language, they can be exchanged, shared (...).

This way, collective memory can include events of the past that none of the current group members experienced first-hand. How are then these memories passed on to new group members? They are “transported across time” through media, museums, public representations and oral traditions (Bentley, 2016: 52), as well as libraries, archives, monuments, education, arts, ceremonies and commemorative dates (Assmann, 2008: 56).

## *The theory of presentism*

As we have seen, a variety of groups – or social frames – have their own collective memory. However, it is only in certain, larger-scale frames, such as the nation-state, that this shared narrative influences power relations and political struggles. States or governments have access to a multitude of tools and mechanisms that help them disseminate perceptions of the past, such as school curricula, national holidays, public museums, statues, media outlets, or political rhetoric. This notion that political elites use the tools available to them to shape representations of the past for political expediency is called the presentist approach to collective memory (Bentley, 2016: 55-56).

According to presentism, the past is malleable and dictated by powerful political actors. A similar point is made by Edward Said (2000: 179) when analysing Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) book *The Invention of Tradition* (which debunks supposedly age-old traditions such as the Scottish kilt or Bastille Day as inventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century social and political elite in an attempt to create a stronger national identity): “the invention of tradition is a method for using collective memory selectively by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way”. Said (2000: 179) also argues that collective memory is formed in a top-down, presentist notion by stating that “the processes of memory are frequently, if not always, manipulated and intervened in for sometimes urgent purposes of the present”.

Manipulating narratives of the past to legitimize and uphold one's power is hardly a new phenomenon. As Plumb (1969: 30-31) points out, ruling classes taking ownership of the past was a widespread phenomenon throughout history. Kings, high priests and aristocrats utilized their historians to trace their roots to important historical figures in an attempt to underpin their special status, not unlike the Sumerians who linked their kings to gods. Today, while maintaining power remains important, political actors may have a multitude of reasons to offer narratives of the past, such as legitimising institutions, strengthening community identity and social cohesion, creating and upholding hierarchies of power, and providing a moral code for society (Bentley, 2016: 55). Nevertheless, according to the presentist theory of collective memory, the authority to narrate the past is monopolised by political elites, whose self interest is served by the narratives.

## *Critiques of the theory of presentism*

Several scholars have challenged the presentist model of collective memory, pointing out the limits of the malleability of the past. The following section will summarize some of the key arguments against presentism.

Firstly, one might argue that the sheer existence of opposing narratives negates the idea of presentism. As Foucault (1978:95) has famously said, “where there is power, there is resistance”. The statement stands true when it comes to collective memory: the nation-state is not a homogenous group, and its members have complex, multiple identities. Religious, ethnic or local communities often have their own collective memories that contradict the “official” narratives offered by political elites, which are sometimes referred to as counter-memories (Foucault, 1980). In questions of how to remember a particular historical figure or event, what to commemorate, or what events to include in a calendar for example, mnemonic battles are fought between (or within) mnemonic communities (Zerubavel, 1996: 295). While Zerubavel argues that mnemonic battles highlight the social aspect of memory, we can see that

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their existence also critiques the top-down, presentist notion of it.

The second prominent critique of presentism is the inability of elites to select pasts to be remembered. According to the presentist theory, past events are chosen to be remembered (for example, through school curriculum or museums) and commemorated (via national holidays) by political actors for specific purposes. Acts of heroism, national triumph and victory, and similarly glorious events of the past lend themselves to strengthening national identity or evoking pride and patriotism. However, it would be difficult to find a country, or indeed a community, whose historical past involves no “unpleasant” or “undesirable” events, and often political elites have no control over whether or not these events will be remembered. At times, even if they try to sugar-coat it, states have to address issues of the past that they would rather not deal with (Bentley, 2016: 60). Bloody Sunday is a fitting example for when a state was forced to address an atrocious event of the past: pressure from the counter-memory of the families of those murdered by British soldiers on January 30th, 1972, and the increasing need for reconciliation in Northern Ireland, led to the establishment of the Saville Inquiry and, consequently, David Cameron’s apology (Edwards and Luckie, 2014).

Similar to the inability to select the past to be remembered is the inability of political elites to will amnesia. Authorities of democratic societies can enforce cultural constraints, such as taboos and prohibitions (Olick and Levy, 1997: 924), block access to archives, and vilify critical historians (Bentley, 2017: 60) while authoritarian regimes have different methods at their disposal, such as censorship and banning of books and publications (Evans, 2003: 6), and in extreme cases using propaganda to make the unwanted vanish from photographs, and thereby from the dominant narrative (Bentley, 2017:60). However, taboos and silencing do not equal forgetting, especially when the memory in question is within the lifespan of the mnemonic community. Counter-memories and folk memories can endure and be reproduced within marginalised communities.

Finally, not as much a criticism of the concept, but a limitation of presentism, is that while governments and authorities have many tools to control collective memory, it is clear that the past is not endlessly malleable. Lacking an Orwellian Ministry of Truth to instantaneously edit the past (Orwell, 1949), political elites have to remain credible and offer narratives which are plausible.

Having summarized the concept of presentism and offered some criticisms of it, now this essay will evaluate this model of collective memory formation through a case study below.

## Case study

I chose the politics of Fidesz, the ruling party of Hungary, as the subject of the case study for this essay because it is a fitting example to observe presentism in action. Hungarian history is full of defining events embedded into the collective memory and national identity of Hungarians, such as the experience of successive external oppression throughout history (consider the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburgs, the Nazi occupation or the socialist period), the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 or the Revolution of 1956. Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz understands how this history can be exploited to grant themselves legitimacy and has the tools to do so, practicing a conscious politics of memory centred around the historical subjugation of the Hungarian nation and positioning Fidesz as the safeguards of Hungarian sovereignty. Furthermore, the recent political landscape contains both shifting representations of the past and mnemonic battles between the “official” and counter narratives, making this case study suitable to evaluate the concept of presentism.

Since coming to power first in 1998, Viktor Orbán and Fidesz portrayed themselves as staunch anti-communists. It was not uncommon to equate Nazi dictatorship with communist rule in post-socialist states (Neumayer, 2015: 353), and Fidesz embraced this strategy as well, primarily by establishing the House of Terror Museum, in a building that was used both by the national socialist Arrow Cross Party and the communist secret police (Benazzo, 2017: 203). According to the museum’s website, it intends to commemorate those “tortured and killed in this building” by the “two cruellest systems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (House of Terror Museum, 2019), thus equating Nazism and communism under the banner of totalitarianism. This anti-communist approach works hand in hand with Fidesz’s glorification of Admiral Miklós Horthy and his interwar rule. According to Egrý (2017, cited by Benazzo, 2017: 204), being the last

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sovereign Hungarian regime before the Soviet takeover, Horthy's interwar rule is a "point of continuity" for the present government to connect their rule to. For this reason, it is instrumental for Fidesz to rehabilitate Horthy, portraying his regime in a positive light as a patriotic, only mildly authoritarian rule. The government had many instruments to do this, in line with the theory of presentism: prominent figures of the interwar period were introduced into school curricula or public spaces were renamed after them, and urban landscape including Kossuth Square was restored to its pre-WWII state (Benazzo, 2017: 203-205).

However, to rehabilitate it, Fidesz had to tackle some problematic aspects of the Horthy regime – namely, its anti-Semitism and its role in carrying out the Holocaust in Hungary. Some might argue that the Hungarian state refused to hand over Hungarian Jews to the German Reich during the Second World War, but on the other hand, anti-Semitic laws were passed before WWII, Hungarian troops killed Jews and thousands of male Jews were conscripted for fatigue duty. Furthermore, Miklós Horthy remained in power after German troops occupied Hungary on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1944 and started the deportation of more than 400 000 Jews with the help of Hungarian perpetrators. Although Horthy did save some of the Jewish community when he ordered the deportations to stop in July, some argue that he had the power to do so earlier, and that it was in vain as he was forced to resign and the Arrow Cross Party took over, which continued the deportations and murder of Hungarian Jews (Kovács and Mindler-Steiner, 2015: 53-54).

To downsize Horthy's role in the persecution of the Hungarian Jewish community, Fidesz had to deny the government's responsibility in implementing anti-Jewish policies and shift perceptions of the complicity of the Hungarian state. An important part of this attempt was the erection of a monument in July 2014, dedicated to "all victims of the German occupation", depicting Hungary as Archangel Gabriel being attacked by a German imperial eagle. According to critics, this monument suppresses the role of Hungarians in deporting over 400 000 Jews and externalises responsibility for the Holocaust. Furthermore, it falsely paints Hungarians as passive victims of Nazis, equal to those sent to death camps (Kovács and Mindler-Steiner, 2015: 58). The erection of the monument was followed by protests from opposition politicians and the Hungarian Jewish community alike, with Democratic Coalition (DK) leader Ferenc Gyurcsány saying that Orbán was "falsifying the Holocaust" and "confusing the murderer and the victim" (Euractiv, 2014). Furthermore, the monument already faced international backlash before it was even unveiled, with 30 US congressmen urging Orbán to cancel construction in an open letter (Sokol, 2014). These protests ensuing the erection of the monument bear the characteristics of a mnemonic battle as introduced by Zerubavel (1996: 295): the counter-memory of a marginalised community fights against the narrative enforced by the political elite on how a certain past should be remembered and commemorated. The controversy around the monument is a significant rupture on Fidesz's otherwise uncontested politics of memory.

Having presented a case study of Fidesz's memory politics, let us evaluate the presentist model of collective memory. As this essay has discussed, Fidesz's politics uses a presentist approach to create and control collective memory through the use of museums, school syllabi, renaming of public spaces, restoration of urban landscape to pre-Second World War state, and the erection of monuments amongst others. The limitations of presentism – namely, the existence of resisting counter memories, the limits to the past's malleability and the inability to select pasts to remember and will amnesia – certainly apply to this case as well. Hungary's role in the Holocaust is an unpleasant past and, if given the power, surely political elites would rather mandate collective amnesia than be challenged by the counter-memory of the Hungarian Jewish community and opposition politicians. For a lack of such power, they have to deal with the tricky task of negotiating narratives during mnemonic battles. Maybe for some, Fidesz reached the limits of the malleability of the past, and the offered narrative – that Hungarians were victims, never perpetrators of the Holocaust – is too untrue to be acceptable.

However, I would be cautious to claim that Fidesz's politics of memory failed because some of their narratives were challenged. To measure the "success" of past narratives offered by political elites, we should return to a very simple understanding of presentism by Olick and Robbins (1998: 128): groups using the past for present purposes. This understanding does not require everyone to internalize the "official" narrative of political elites, neither does it mean that the dominant narrative has to go uncontested. According to Ungváry (2015, cited by Benazzo, 2017: 212), "From the outset Fidesz's national memory policy was based on the necessity to serve the needs of the far-right voters and meet the demands of the moderate right as well". In this reading, Fidesz constructed its memory politics for the purposes of lending themselves legitimacy and serving not the national community, but its electorate. This far-

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or moderate right electorate not only believes it is plausible, but is satisfied by the narrative that Nazism and Communism are the same evils, and that Hungary and Hungarian people bear no responsibility for the deportation of Jews. Regardless of the controversies, protests and backlash, the Monument for all victims of the German occupation still stands, and Viktor Orbán remains in power. Fidesz won both the 2014 and 2018 parliamentary elections with a landslide victory. Clearly, their politics of memory and their attempts at controlling past narratives were successful in serving their present purposes. Therefore, when evaluating a presentist model of collective memory, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of who the narratives offered by political elites are intended for.

## Conclusion

This essay has attempted to summarize some of the important theoretical background of memory studies. First, I offered an overview of the concept of collective memory and the theory of presentism. Then, criticisms of the top-down notion of collective memory were discussed, exploring limits to states' ability to dictate narratives. Whether or not presentist control over collective memory and narratives of the past is a viable approach for political elites to cultivate their power has been critically discussed through a case study. From a wider politics of memory (which, although extremely interesting, could not be tackled in its entirety within this essay) Fidesz's attempts at equating Nazism with communism under the banner of totalitarianism, shifting narratives regarding the evaluation of Miklós Horthy's interwar regime, and the self-victimization of Hungary as passive sufferers of the Holocaust were chosen as case study for this essay. By critically evaluating the mnemonic battles over "official" narratives and the success of Fidesz, it was found that a narrative of the past does not have to be unanimously accepted by a nation for the political elites' goals to be met. Fidesz set out to offer a version of collective memory that satisfies its right-wing voters in order to remain in power, which they have successfully achieved.

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