

History

The long read

The cult of memory: when history does more harm than good

It is a truism that we must remember the past or else be condemned to repeat it. But there are times when some things are best forgotten

David Rieff

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As a reporter in the Bosnian war, in 1993 I went to Belgrade to visit Vuk Drašković, the Serb nationalist politician and writer who was then leading the mass opposition against the Slobodan Milošević regime. Drašković had drawn liberal as well as ultra-nationalist support in Serbia for his cause. As I was leaving his office, one of Drašković's young aides pressed a folded bit of paper into my hand. It turned out to be blank except for a date: 1453 – the year Orthodox Constantinople fell to the Muslim Ottomans.

Friends of mine who had worked in the former Yugoslavia during the Croatian and Bosnian wars had similar experiences in Zagreb and Sarajevo, though the dates in question were different. It seemed as if the “sores of history”, as the Irish writer Hubert Butler once called them, remained unhealed more than half a millennium later – at least in the desperate, degraded atmosphere of that time and place.

And yet, while alert to the possibility that history can be abused, as it unquestionably was in the Balkans in the 1990s, most decent people still endorse George Santayana's celebrated dictum: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” The consequence of this is that remembrance as a species of morality has become one of the more unassailable pieties of the age. Today, most societies all but venerate the imperative to remember. We have been taught to believe that the remembering of the past and its corollary, the memorialising of collective historical memory, has become one of humanity's highest moral obligations.

But what if this is wrong, if not always, then at least part of the time? What if collective historical memory, as it is actually employed by communities and nations, has led far too often to war rather than peace, to rancour and resentment rather than reconciliation, and the determination to exact revenge for injuries both real and imagined, rather than to commit to the hard work of forgiveness?

This is what happened in the American south after 1865, where after the guns of the civil war fell silent, another form of battle raged over whose version of the conflict – the victorious Union or the defeated Confederacy – would prevail. As the recent debate in the US over the Confederate flag demonstrated, that battle over memory, though diminished, still goes on today. And just as collective historical memory blighted the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, today the same is true in Israel-Palestine, in Iraq and Syria, in the Hindu nationalist populism of India's Bharatiya Janata party, and among jihadis and Islamists both in the Muslim world and in the Muslim diaspora in western Europe, North America and Australia.

This is not to suggest that there is an easy solution. On the contrary, it is probable that the need of human beings for community, already compelling in times of peace and plenty, comes to feel like a psychic and moral necessity in troubled times. But at least let there be no turning a blind eye to the high price societies have paid and are continuing to pay for the solace of remembrance.

Collective historical memory is no respecter of the past. This is not simply a matter of inaccuracy, wilful or otherwise, of the type one encounters in the many contemporary television miniseries that attempt to re-create a past historical era – Showtime's *The Tudors*, say, or HBO's *Rome*. When states, political parties, and social groups appeal to collective historical memory, their motives are far from trivial. Until well into the second half of the 20th century, the goal of such appeals was almost invariably to foster national unity. It would be comforting to believe that damnable regimes have been more given to this practice than decent ones. But the reality is that such efforts to mobilise and manipulate collective memory or manufacture it have been made by regimes and political parties of virtually every type.

There have even been times when rival political movements have vied for "ownership" of a particular historical figure who is thought to incarnate the nation. A case in point was Joan of Arc in 19th-century France. For the right,

she was seen as the emblem of France's determination to repel foreign invaders, while for the largely anticlerical French left, she was a victim of the church that had condemned her to be burnt at the stake. Once the Roman Catholic church beatified her in 1909 (she was then canonised in 1920), the left could no longer credibly claim her as one of their own. Yet the "memory" of Joan of Arc continued to be contested. It became a rallying point for the right, first for the extreme conservative Catholic movement, the Action Française, and the Vichy government during the second world war, then, beginning in the late 1980s, for the French ultra-right party, the Front National. The FN commemorates Joan of Arc every 1 May, not coincidentally the date of the left's most important annual holiday.

The effort to inculcate a "collective memory" – to suggest that just as Joan of Arc incarnated France's struggle against the English foreign invaders of her time, so too does today's Front National, this time against Muslims and other immigrants – represents a gross distortion of history. Yet the right's manipulation of Joan of Arc is no more inaccurate than the determined efforts of the social democratic Scottish National party to appropriate the figure of William Wallace, the late-12th-century nobleman who was an early leader of medieval Scotland's wars of independence, for its own ideological and electoral ends.

Marine Le Pen delivers a speech at the Front National's annual celebration of Joan of Arc in Paris. Photograph: Franck Prevel/Getty Images

If anything, the William Wallace that the SNP held out as a model for Scottish voters bears even less resemblance to the historical figure than does the Joan of Arc touted by the Front National. We probably have Hollywood to thank for this: the SNP capitalised on Mel Gibson's preposterous biopic of Wallace, *Braveheart*, using the launch of the film in Scotland in 1995 to jump-start a massive recruitment drive for the party. Volunteers handed out leaflets to filmgoers as they left cinemas all over Scotland that read, in part: "You've seen the movie – Now face the reality ... Today, it's not just bravehearts who choose independence, it's also wise heads." The juxtaposition was patently absurd, and yet the SNP's then vice-president, Paul Henderson Scott, seemed to have no problem drafting into his party's cause a figure about whom, apart from his

military campaign of 1297–98 and the ghastly details of his public execution by the English in 1305, virtually nothing is known. “In modern terms,” Scott told an interviewer, “the desires of civic nationalism are exactly the same [as those of Wallace].”

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I am not prescribing moral amnesia here. To be wholly without memory would be to be without a world. Nor am I arguing against the determination for a group to memorialise its dead or demand acknowledgment of its sufferings. To do so would be to counsel a kind of moral and psychological self-mutilation of tragic proportions. On the other hand, too much forgetting is hardly the only risk. There is also too much remembering, and in the early 21st century, when people throughout the world are, in the words of the historian [Tzvetan Todorov](#), “obsessed by a new cult, that of memory”, the latter seems to have become a far greater risk than the former.

Hyperthymesia is a rare medical condition that has been defined as being marked by “unusual autobiographical remembering”. The medical journal *Neurocase: The Neural Basis of Cognition* identifies its two main characteristics: first that a person spends “an abnormally large amount of time thinking about his or her personal past”, and second that the person “has an extraordinary capacity to recall specific events from [his or her] personal past”.

To the sceptical eye, the contemporary elevation of remembrance and the deprecation of forgetting, these can come to seem like nothing so much as hyperthymesia writ large. Remembrance, however important a role it may play in the life of groups, and whatever moral and ethical demands it responds to, carries risks that at times also have an existential character. During wars or social and political crises, the danger is not what the American historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi called the “terror of forgetting”, but rather the terror of remembering too well, too vividly.

These are the cases in which it is possible that whereas forgetting does an injustice to the past, remembering does an injustice to the present. On such occasions, when collective memory condemns communities to feel the pain of their historical wounds and the bitterness of their historical grievances it is not the duty to remember but a duty to forget that should be honoured.

In these situations, at least, is it possible to state with confidence which is worse, remembering or forgetting? There can be no categorical answer. But given humanity's tendency towards aggression, then it is at least possible that forgetting, for all the sacrifices it imposes, may be the only safe response – and as such should be a cause for a measure of relief, rather than consternation. There are many historical examples of such forgetting taking place far sooner than might reasonably have been expected. As an illustration, when General Charles de Gaulle had his historic change of heart and decided that France would have to accede to Algerian independence, one of his advisers is said to have protested, exclaiming: “So much blood has been shed.” To which De Gaulle answered: “Nothing dries quicker than blood.”

To put the dilemma even more bluntly, remembrance may be the ally of justice, but it is no reliable friend to peace, whereas forgetting can be. An example of this is the so-called *pacto del olvido* (pact of forgetting) between the right and the left that, while never formalised, was essential to the political settlement that restored democracy in [Spain](#) in the 1970s after the death of the dictator General Franco. The democratic transition came on the wings both of rewriting and of forgetting. The myriad avenues and boulevards that had been named after Franco himself or his prominent subordinates following the fascists' victory in 1939 were renamed. But instead of replacing them with the names of Republican heroes and martyrs, the Spanish leaders chose to use names from the royal past.

The *pacto del olvido* was meant to placate Franco's loyalists at a time when the right's willingness even to acquiesce to the transition was anything but assured. From the start, the pact had many detractors, not just on the left. And even a substantial number of those who did not oppose it in principle thought that it would not succeed unless accompanied by a South African or Argentine-style [truth commission](#). But it eventually fell to a magistrate to try to

initiate through judicial procedures what the politicians continued to steadfastly refuse to contemplate. In 2008, Judge Baltasar Garzón opened an investigation into the deaths of the 114,000 people estimated to have been murdered by the fascist side both during the civil war itself and in the subsequent decades of Franco's rule. Garzón also demanded that 19 mass grave sites be opened and the bodies exhumed.

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Garzón's efforts were immensely controversial in Spain, not only because many Spaniards were still convinced that the *pacto del olvido* had worked, but also because the country's 1977 Amnesty Law holds that murders and atrocities committed by either side during the civil war that could be categorised as having had what the statute calls "political intention" were sheltered from prosecution. Garzón denied that he had exceeded his authority. "Any amnesty law," he argued, "that seeks to whitewash a crime against humanity is invalid in law". His many supporters in Spain, the most ardent of whom belonged to the [Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory](#), agreed and did a great deal to sway Spanish public opinion in favour of what he was trying to do. And even though, in the end, higher courts not only overruled Garzón but went on to suspend him from the judiciary (in 2014 he became one of the lead attorneys representing the founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange), his supporters have never wavered in their conviction that Garzón's actions represented the only ethically licit response. This was summed up by the rhetorical question that has appeared intermittently on the [association's website](#): "Why have the authors of the constitution left my uncle in a ditch?"

The general tendency among human rights activists, including members of the judiciary such as Garzón, has been to present law and morality as inseparable, at least in cases when the matter under consideration is clearly within the jurisdiction of a court. And because most of them assume that justice is the essential prerequisite for lasting peace, they tend to downplay the risk of any negative political and social consequences flowing from their actions. But in

the event that such consequences do occur, their stance has generally been that it is the politicians' responsibility, and not theirs, to sort them out.

It would be dishonest to focus on the times when remembrance may not be helpful to peace and reconciliation or may have outlived its usefulness, without acknowledging the many instances in which forgetting, too, may have limited use. This is a point that the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory made repeatedly in its campaign in support of what Garzón was trying to do. From an analytical point of view, furthermore, the group made a valid point when it argued that “the Amnesty law was key to moving from an atrocious dictatorship to democracy, and for years benefited from wide popular support. But in this decade [the 2000s], the victims turned to a government of the left so that there will no longer be impunity for the crimes against humanity [committed during the civil war and under the Franco dictatorship].”

The Association was also probably right when it claimed that 21st-century Spain no longer needs the *pacto del olvido*, just as when the documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* finally aired on French television it soon became clear that France had changed sufficiently that the truth about what had happened during the Nazi occupation caused no grievous harm to the country's moral or historical ecology.

The places to which this has applied in the very recent past or applies now are glaringly obvious: the Balkans, Israel-Palestine (and much of the rest of the Middle East), Northern Ireland. In other places, it is less a question of “forgetfulness now” as of the realisation that at some point in the future, whether that moment comes relatively quickly or is deferred, the victories, defeats, wounds and grudges being commemorated would be better let go. That list would include, for starters, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Ukraine. It would also include the United States and the memory of the attacks of September 11, 2001. For even if Americans are not yet ready to face this reality, the so-called global war on terror will end one day, just as the second world war did, and sooner or later 9/11 will have no more resonance than Pearl Harbor does today.

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Even the work of mourning, essential as it is, must eventually end if life is to go on. Perhaps some memories are seen as too precious for human beings to give up. For societies, especially societies and groups that either feel themselves to be under existential threat or want to impose their own religion, or values, or territorial demands on their neighbours, the possibility may be still more remote. Consider, for example, the use Isis, al-Qaida and other jihadi groups, and, for that matter, many Islamic clerics, from Indonesia to the suburbs of Paris, have made of the words “crusade” and “crusader”.

As the Cambridge social historian Paul Connerton has pointed out: “Medieval Muslim historians did not share with the medieval European Christians the sense of witnessing a great struggle between Islam and Christendom for control of the Holy Land.” Connerton added that the words “crusade” and “crusader” never appear in the Muslim chronicles and other historical writing of the time; instead they use the terms “Franks” or “infidels”. But according to Connerton, beginning some time in the 19th century “an expanding body of Arabic historical writing has taken the Crusades as its theme,” with the term becoming “a code word for the malign intentions of the western powers ... culminating in the foundation of the state of Israel”. On Connerton’s reading, at least, one of the effects of each of the Arab-Israeli wars has been to galvanise further studies of the Crusades.

The crusaders as proto-Zionists! It may not be history, but it offers a textbook case of the deployment of political collective memory in the service of large-scale solidarity. The fact that virtually nothing in the contemporaneous Arab writing about the Crusades supports the Arab world’s collective memory of those griefs is neither here nor there. The myth fills a need, and subsequently can be manufactured convincingly enough to captivate and inspire those to whom it is directed. Think of it as the transformation of the wound into the weapon.

Some memories are seen as too precious to give up. Especially for societies that feel under existential threat

Less than two months after the September 11 attacks, Osama bin Laden recorded a speech in which he described the US invasion of Afghanistan that was only then just beginning as linked to “a long series of crusader wars against the Islamic world”. These had not only happened in the immediate post–first-world-war period in which, as he described it, “the whole Islamic world fell under the crusader banner – under the British, French, and Italian governments”. For Bin Laden, these efforts at conquest had taken place without respite throughout the 20th century and included Russia’s wars in Chechnya and the actions of “the crusader Australian forces [who landed] on Indonesian shores ... to separate East Timor, which is part of the Islamic world”.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries in the Islamic world have been a graveyard of many forms of rationality, but most notably of scepticism. And in the context of piety and resentment now running rampant in the Ummah, it seems inconceivable that at least a large number, though of course not all, of those who watched Bin Laden’s speech on social media found themselves “remembering” this crusader “past”, in which a parade of figures from Balian of Ibelin (c1143–1193), the great Christian knight of the Kingdom of Jerusalem to John Howard, the Australian prime minister who ordered Australia’s intervention in East Timor in 1999, all fuse together to become leaders of the same millennium-old crusade to subjugate the Islamic world.

That this is a manipulation of history of the grossest kind and is in fact an antihistorical exercise of the contemporary political imagination should be obvious. But that Bin Laden’s understanding is accepted as history throughout the Islamic world should be equally clear.

The critic Leon Wieseltier once warned that nationalist politics grounded in collective memory can “destroy the empirical attitude that is necessary for the responsible use of power”. It is an insight that events in the Middle East – that proving ground for the *irresponsible* use of power – seem to confirm every day. To take only one example, when Israeli forces encircled Beirut in 1982, Israel’s then prime minister, Menachem Begin, announced that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) had the “Nazis surrounded in their bunker”, even though it was Yasser Arafat and Fatah that were trapped in the Lebanese

capital. It was a paradigmatic example of what happens when collective memory born of trauma finds political and, above all, military expression.

Israel offers a florid illustration of how disastrously collective memory can deform a society. The settler movement routinely appeals to a version of biblical history that is as great a distortion of that history as the Islamist fantasy about the supposed continuities between the medieval kingdom of Jerusalem and the modern state of Israel. At the entrance to the settler outpost of Givat Assaf on the West Bank, a placard reads: “We have come back home.” In an interview, Benny Gal, one of the settlement’s leaders, insisted: “On this exact spot, 3,800 years ago, the land of [Israel](#) was promised to the Hebrew people.” Shani Simkovitz, the head of the settlement movement’s Gush Etzion Foundation, echoed Gal’s claim: “More than 3,000 years ago, our fathers gave us a land, which is not Rome, it is not New York, but this: the Jewish land.”

Even when it is secular, mainstream Zionist collective memory is often as mystical and as much of a manipulation of history as these views. Consider the simultaneous mythologising and politicisation of archaeology in Israel that has now reached the point where scholarship and state-building have come to seem like two sides of the same coin. Writing in 1981, the Israeli intellectual Amos Elon observed that Israeli archaeologists were “not merely digging for knowledge and objects, but for the reassurance of roots, which they find in the ancient Israelite remains scattered throughout the country”. He added: “The student of nationalism and archaeology will be tempted to take note of the apparent cathartic effects of both disciplines.”

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the use of the ruins of the fortress of Masada, which were excavated in the early 1960s by Yigael Yadin, the retired IDF chief of staff turned archaeologist. It was at Masada that the Jewish Zealots who had risen in revolt against Roman rule in the year AD70 made their last stand and where they eventually committed mass suicide. Soon after Yadin’s excavations had been completed, soldiers in the Israeli military’s armoured corps began to be brought to the site for their passing out parades. There, along with the standard ceremonies that accompany the end of basic training in any army, the graduates would chant: “Masada will never

fall again.” As Elon pointed out, such “historical” evocations were in reality completely ahistorical. “The zealots of Masada,” he wrote, “would no doubt have opposed modern Israel’s westernised and secular character, just as they opposed the Romanised Jews of their time”.

In 1963, Yadin addressed an IDF armoured corps graduation ceremony: “When Napoleon stood among his troops next to the pyramids of Egypt, he declared: ‘Four thousand years of history look down upon you.’ But what would he not have given to be able to say to his men: ‘Four thousand years of your own history look down upon you.’”

Four thousand years of history. How can an empirical attitude, necessary for the responsible exercise of power, compete with that? If history teaches us anything, it is that in politics as in war, human beings are not suited to ambivalence; they respond to loyalty and certainty. And just as the 19th-century historian Ernest Renan argued, to the extent these can be strengthened by collective remembrance, it is of no importance whether the memories in question are historically accurate.

Yosef Yerushalmi thought that the fundamental problem with the modern age was that without some form of commanding authority, or moral law, people no longer knew what needed to be remembered and what could safely be forgotten. But if Yerushalmi’s fears were warranted, and any real continuity between past, present and future has been replaced by collective memories of the past that are no more real than the invented traditions, then surely the time has come to scrutinise our inherited pieties about both remembrance and forgetting.

A good place to start might be the Edict of Nantes, issued by Henri IV in 1598 to bring to an end to the wars of religion in France. Henri quite simply forbade all his subjects, Catholic and Protestant alike, to remember. “The memory of all things that took place on one side or the other from March 1585 [forward] ...” the edict decreed, “and in all of the preceding troubles, will remain extinguished, and treated as something that did not take place.” Would it have worked? Could such bitterness really have been assuaged by royal fiat? Since Henri was assassinated in 1610 by a Catholic fanatic opposed to the edict,

which itself was eventually repealed, we can never know. But is it not conceivable that were our societies to expend even a fraction of the energy on forgetting that they now do on remembering, then peace in some of the worst places in the world might actually be a step closer?

As a reporter during the Bosnian war, which was in large measure a slaughter fuelled by collective memory, or, more precisely, by the inability to forget, I used to carry with me increasingly creased and faded copies of two poems, *The End and the Beginning* and *Reality Demands*, by Wisława Szymborska. In both, that most humane and antidogmatic of poets, who once said that her favourite phrase had become “I don’t know”, certainly understood the moral imperative of forgetting. Born in 1923, she had lived through Poland’s agonies under Germans and Russians alike. For her, as for the majority of her generation, the soil of her nation’s countryside and the paving stones of its cities were drenched in blood, suffused with memories of the most tragic, unbearable, and destructive character. And yet, in *Reality Demands*, Szymborska wrote:

Reality demands

we also state the following:

life goes on.

It does so near Cannae and Borodino,

At Kosovo Polje and Guernica.

What Szymborska articulates is the ethical imperative of forgetting so that life can go on – as it must. And she is right to do so. For everything must end, including the work of mourning. Otherwise the blood never dries, the end of a great love becomes the end of love itself, and, as they used to say in Ireland, long after the quarrel has stopped making any sense, the memory of the grudge endures.

[In Praise of Forgetting](#) by David Rieff will be published by Yale University Press next week

*Reality Demands from *Miracle Fair*, by Wisława Szymborska, translated by Joanna Trzeciak. Copyright © 2001 by Joanna Trzeciak*