
CHAPTER 1 THE USES OF HISTORY

“Those who have employed the study of history, as they ought, for their instruction, for the regulation of their private manners, and the management of public affairs, must agree with me that it is the most pleasant school of wisdom.”

John Dryden

“When history was no longer an instrument of the [Russian Communist] Party, the Party was doomed to failure.”

David Remnick

In mid-August 1991, Colonel Aleksandr Tretetsky of the Soviet Army wondered whether to continue his gruesome task. The word out of Moscow several hundred miles away was that the overthrow of the Gorbachev regime by a hard line Communist faction was imminent and that “treasonable” projects like the one he was overseeing were to be immediately terminated

Some months earlier the government had assigned Tretetsky to manage the excavation of mass graves near the Katyn Forest in eastern Poland. The graves contained the remains of thousands of Polish army officers who, in the Russian version of things, had been murdered by the Nazis during their 1941 invasion of eastern Poland and Russia. Hints that the Russian secret police had really been responsible for the massacre had circulated for years, but in Russia such stories had been ruthlessly suppressed by the state. Information control was the centerpiece, perhaps the vital factor, in sustaining the long, seventy-year rule of communism in Russia. Press reports, film productions, and especially history textbooks had to clear censors in the Moscow bureaucracy. The result was that the Russian people received a cliché-ridden, doctored, party-line version of the past that systematically hid from view the criminal viciousness of earlier Soviet regimes. An entire nation, with few exceptions, believed in a vast fairy tale.

Things began to change in the mid-1980s, especially when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. Gorbachev was a true believer in the Communist system, yet at the same time it was he who took the Soviet Union onto a new path of *glasnost* (openness) that included leanings toward honesty concerning the historical record (Perhaps it is significant that both his grandfathers had suffered imprisonment during the Stalinist era). Gorbachev seemed to believe that the course of development of the socialist state would be advanced if it confessed to its earlier sins—a public cleansing that somehow might bring renewed public devotion to the original Marxist ideals. He therefore ordered the “blank spaces”—essentially those ugly episodes of the Communist past previously hidden by party slogans and lies—filled in. Now, as one writer put it, “the lion of history came roaring in.”¹

What followed went far beyond Gorbachev’s intent. The “return of history” shook the Soviet regime to its foundations and brought the eventual collapse of the Communist state. After the August 1991 coup by the Communist Party hard-

¹David Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 49

liners against Gorbachev failed, Colonel Tretetsky was able to resume the work of detailing the massacre, in the process confirming that it had indeed been a Soviet secret police operation. But this was but a small part of a much larger movement. Throughout the Soviet Union, historians, researchers, writers, and journalists, with the historical record now open to them, provided elaborate accounts of the perversity and horror of Communist crimes. Finally, the Soviet people were informed that since the Russian Revolution in 1917 literally millions of citizens had been systematically exterminated, and that millions more had been imprisoned without trial in Siberian labor camps. In time the “return of history” completely destroyed the Communists’ credibility, and with it their power to govern. David Remnick, in his dramatic account of the collapse of the Soviet Union writes:

[D]espite Gorbachev’s hesitation, the return of historical memory would be his most important decision, one that preceded all others, for without a full and ruthless assessment of the past—an admission of murder, repression, and bankruptcy—real change, much less democratic revolution, was impossible. The return of history to personal, intellectual, and political life was the start of the great reform of the twentieth century and, whether Gorbachev liked it or not, the collapse of the last empire on earth.”²

The foregoing is but one lucid example of how history can be influential in shaping human affairs. But history has other uses as well, giving each of us an informed perspective on the world around us. The twentieth century, with its rapid and far-reaching changes, has made the past seem irrelevant and uninteresting to many. Yet a moment of historical reflection will show us that in countless areas of life organic connections with the past have not been broken. The legacies and burdens of the past, the long-term continuities, are with us still. In fact, one could argue that precisely because change has been so rapid in our time, the need for good history has actually increased. There is much truth in the aphorism “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Without historical perspective we are in danger of falling into the mistaken and perhaps arrogant notion that the problems we face and the solutions we propose are unprecedented and bear no relationship to past human problems. Just one of the contributions history can make is to serve as a useful antidote to such narrow present-mindedness.

Even the rapid change we see around us should not hide the basic reality that all we do, all we think, indeed all we are is the cumulative result of past experiences. The future is an abstraction, the “present” but a fleeting moment, all else history. The past and judgments about the past are inescapable. Daily we speak and act according to some perception of past events; and though our knowledge of the past may be incomplete or fallacious, we are thinking historically. When we choose to enroll in a particular course because we like the teacher, when we vote Democratic or Republican on the basis of our assessment of each party’s record, when we decide not to go to a movie with someone who “isn’t our type,” we are making judgments based on our analysis of past experience. We are thinking historically.

Not only is it impossible to escape history, it would be catastrophic to try. Imagine for a moment what life would be like if you totally lost your memory. You would, in a very real sense, have no sense of belonging—no family, no friends, no home, no memories to guide your behavior, no identity. In short, you would no longer “be” you. Clearly, your sense of personal identity is not so much a function

²Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb*, 4

of what you are at the moment, but what you *have been* your entire life. The same can be said of society as a whole. A society's identity is the product of the myriad individuals, forces, and events that constitute its past. History, the study of the past, is society's collective memory. Without that collective memory, society would be as rootless and adrift as an individual with amnesia. Of the many legitimate reasons for studying history, this seems to us to be one of the most compelling. Individually and collectively *what we are* is the product of *what we have been*. In the words of philosopher George Santayana, "A country without a memory is a country of madmen."

History and the Formation of Public Policy

Comments on the uses of history are not just rationalizations that historians come up with to make themselves feel important. History often has been used by high government officials to guide their deliberations on public policy. One good example is the Swine Flu panic of 1976.

In 1976, during the brief administration of President Gerald Ford, the Federal government launched a massive influenza immunization program. Public health officials feared a reappearance of the deadly "swine flu," a virus responsible for a worldwide epidemic in 1918. More people died of the swine flu, or "Spanish Flu" as those in 1918 called it, than had been killed in the four bloody years of World War I (1914-1918). To avoid a similar disaster, the U.S. government appropriated millions of dollars to vaccinate Americans against the disease.

The dreaded killer never arrived. There was no massive outbreak of the swine flu. As for the immunization program, government and public health officials increasingly saw it as a mistake. Because of that perception, in 1977 Joseph Califano, Jr., secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, decided to review what had happened in order to prevent similar fiascoes in the future. "He sought," says a HEW publication, "lessons for the future useful to a man in his position."

Where did Califano turn for his lessons? To history. HEW commissioned two scholars, Richard Neustadt and Harvey Fineberg of Harvard University, to write a report on the swine flu affair. Neustadt and Fineberg, neither of them historians, decided that writing a history of the episode was the most effective way to give Secretary Califano the information and perspective he wanted. The authors wrote in the foreword of their book: "[W]e know no better way to draw most lessons than to tell the applicable portions of the story. . . . [U]nderstanding is imparted best by a selective narrative. This calls for a reconstruction of events, which we have undertaken by combining press accounts, hearings, official files, and interviews with participants. . . ." In other words, history was the most useful vehicle for identifying the "lessons" of a public policy gone wrong.

Source: Richard E. Neustadt and Harvey V. Fineberg, M. D., *The Swine Flu Affair* (Washington, D. C.: Dept. of HEW, 1978), 1-3. In 1983 Vintage republished the report with additional material by the authors under the title *The Epidemic That Never Was*. Neustadt, along with Ernest R. May, is also the author of *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (The Free Press, 1986).

EXERCISES

Our discussion of the uses of history emphasized the relationship between the past and the present, and the role history plays in defining our own identity. These concepts are summarized below, along with a variety of other reasons why the study of history is a rewarding venture.

- A. History provides us a sense of our own identity.** This has already been discussed above, but a bit of elaboration may be useful. Each of us is born into a nation, but also into a region, into a culture, into an ethnic group, into a social class, into a family. Each of them can or does influence us in a number of ways. Thus, the life experiences and values of an African American born into a poor rural family in the South are apt to differ greatly from those of a white middle-class Californian. The study of history helps us to get our bearings in such respects—in other words it allows us to achieve a social as well as a personal identity.
- B. History helps us better understand the present.** The cliché is true that to understand the present one must understand the past. History, of course, cannot provide clear answers to today's problems (past and present events never exactly parallel each other), but a knowledge of relevant historical background is essential for a balanced and in-depth understanding of many current world situations.
- C. History—good history—is a corrective for misleading analogies and “lessons” of the past.** Many who believe the proposition that history is relevant to an understanding of the present often go too far in their claims. Nothing is easier to abuse than the historical analogy or parallel. Time and again politicians, journalists, and sloppy historians can be heard declaring that “history proves” this or “history shows” that. But the historical record is so rich and varied that one can find examples that seem to support any position or opinion. History in this sense is much like the Bible. If one reads selectively, Biblical passages can be found to support a variety of strange and peculiar notions. Good history, on the other hand, can expose the *inapplicability* of many inaccurate, misleading analogies.
- D. History enables us to understand the tendencies of humankind, of social institutions, and all aspects of the human condition.** Given the vast range of its inquiry, history is the best “school” for study of the many dimensions of human behavior: heroism and degradation, altruism and avarice, martyrdom and evil excess, freedom and tyranny—all these are part of the record and part of the story that history tells.
- E. History can help one develop tolerance and open-mindedness.** Most of us have a tendency to regard our own cultural styles and values as right and proper. Studying the past is like going to a foreign country—they do things differently there. Returning from such a visit to the past, we have, perhaps, rid ourselves of some of our inherent cultural provincialism.
- F. History provides the basic background for many other disciplines.** Historical knowledge is extremely valuable in the pursuit of other disciplines—literature, art, religion, political science, sociology, and economics. Further, with regard to the last three, it is fair to argue that the social sciences “are in fact *daughter* disciplines [to history], for they arose, each of them, out of historical investigation, having long formed part of avowed historical writing”³

³Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, rev ed (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), 218

- G. History can be entertainment.** This may seem trivial, but it certainly must be counted as one of the central “uses” of history. Much written history is also good literature, and the stories historians relate are often far more engaging and entertaining than those we find in works of fiction.
- H. The careful study of history teaches many critical skills.** This is this book’s central message. Later on we discuss the skills of examining, evaluating, and interpreting evidence, and presenting one’s findings in a coherent and systematic way. Such analytical and communication skills are highly usable in other academic pursuits—and in almost any career you choose.