

# History: A Dangerous Weapon in Political Hands?

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CHLOE JANSSEN-LESTER, JUL 2 2012

*'...there has always been a past so what is more natural than that there should always be histories of it. But, of course, history is not a natural phenomenon at all, and there is nothing eternal about it'.[1]*

History, in its most literal translation, is that which is in the past. However, what is in the past does not always stay in the past. This essay will look at how the past, history, is used by political hands, and will assess whether this use of history can be termed 'dangerous'. Political hands are understood as agents with political agendas. Former Yugoslavia, and particularly the Srebrenica genocide, will be used as an instantiation of a more general assessment of the question at hand. In 1995, as part of the wider war in former Yugoslavia, the town of Srebrenica in Bosnia was attacked by Serbian forces and more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were systematically killed.[2] Through this, this essay will discuss whether history is a dangerous weapon in political hands.

'We cannot help situating ourselves in the continuum of our own life... we cannot help comparing the past and the present... we cannot help learning from it'.[3] All humans have the capacity for memory; 'all consciousness is mediated through it'.[4] Given the centrality of the past to our lives, it is unsurprising that history is used in, and to make sense of, the present. Importantly, the past is not limited to the confines of an individual's mind and experience, the past is public. As Jürgen Habermas has shown, it is *because* the past is in the public sphere that questions about the past, and more specifically how it should be treated, become political.[5] An example of how history is public, and therefore political, can be seen in what can be termed a 'memorial culture'. Paul Williams' book *Memorial Museums* 'emerged out of a desire to describe and analyse... a remarkable phenomenon...the seemingly unstoppable rise of memorial museums and sites'.[6] Williams addresses the Srebrenica Memorial and Cemetery in Potočari, Bosnia, where 1,300 Muslim men were killed and buried and are commemorated by yearly ceremonies.[7] Yet just ten miles away, in the village of Kravica, a counter-memorial of Srebrenica commemorates 'Serb victims of the civil war', despite Kravica witnessing the mass killings of Muslims and Serbs alike. [8] The Kravica memorial was opened just one day before official ceremonies marked the tenth anniversary of Srebrenica and was attended by religious and political leaders from the Republika Srpska.[9]

Memorial sites are public acknowledgements of the past. What makes these sites political is not purely that political hands commission their construction, but that these hands in fact construct the history behind what the sites commemorate. There is 'an inextinguishable relativity to every representation of the historical phenomena', and in the post-modern world the past is understood to reach us only 'through fictional devices which invest it with a range of highly selective and hierarchical readings which are always subservient to various powers and interests'.[10] Therefore, these sites express a 'rite of remembering in public' and are 'adjusted to a publically or politically approved narrative'.[11] In the case of Srebrenica, these two memorial sites have been adjusted by the political hands that construct and commission them, to convey a politically and publically approved narrative of genocide.

History is particularly dangerous when 'the creation and dissemination of narratives about the past rise out of and express identity politics'.[12] In political hands history has very real consequences for the present: it is significant that six days before 610 bodies were due to be buried in the Potočari Cemetery and Srebrenica's tenth anniversary marked by the attendance of 60,000, two bombs were found at the memorial centre.[13] However, by reversing this perspective history can be transformed from a passive vessel to an active resource, exposing its danger. It is not the past that has consequences on the present; it is the present that has consequences on the past. History is not

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invoked but constructed; it is not presented but re-presented, and used to give meaning to the present. If the present is unsatisfactory, the past can be looked to as a way of reconstructing the present.[14] But this past is reconstructed to satisfy the present.

Scholars have often understood this perspective of history as deriving from a sense of loss. The reappropriation of that which is lost is implemented to make sense of the present, and provide a means to move forward. One study of this has been undertaken by Zala Volčič with her concept 'Yugo-nostalgia'; an attempt by former Yugoslav communities to re-create a shared cultural memory by invoking a romanticised unified past.[15] The political agents who promote it mobilise and commodify a sense of longing for the lost past as a means of consumption. Thus the driving force behind Yugo-nostalgia, as Volčič understands it, is capitalism. [16]

The use of history for specific political gains in former Yugoslavia history is determined by Volčič to be dangerous. Conversely, Dubravka Ugresic has described Yugo-nostalgia as a 'vital, productive tool in the emotional reconstruction and preservation of histories', an essential resource for citizens to negotiate difficult historical transitions.[17] In contrast, Paul Miller shares Volčič's disdain for financial-driven appropriation of history which he believes has produced the 'cult of commemoration' that surrounds Srebrenica victims.[18] Miller describes the aforementioned burial ceremony at Potočari as a kind of 'genocide tourism, a kind of morbid pornography'.[19] Whether the use of history is understood to be productive or destructive, it is clear is that the past is being used, advertently and inadvertently, by political hands; 'the past is constituted in narrative, always representation, always construction'.[20]

History, because of the authority with which it is bestowed, is of particular utility for political agents. Invoking the past is a way of evidencing the circumstances of the present. Nationalism, and the discourse associated with it, has long been recognised as doing just this. Benedict Anderson's now infamous concept of 'imagined communities' has illustrated how nationalist societies, and the political hands which install them, use the power of the past to summon change in the present. The community is imagined because 'regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship':[21]

This is your country, these are your houses, your fields and gardens, your memories... You should stay here... Otherwise you would shame your ancestors and disappoint your descendants. But I do not suggest you stay here suffering and enduring a situation with which you are not satisfied. On the contrary! It should be changed...[22]

Community is *imagined*; 'all profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives'.[23] The past provides this imagination with authority: an authority derived from inadequacy. Scholars are awarding increasing attention to the growing anxiety attached to the disappearance of memory, and subsequent attempts to 'preserve as "memory" things that are in the course of becoming "history"'. [24] Miller has attributed this as one reason behind the immediate establishment of a cult of commemoration for Srebrenica; concerned that 'the ways in which a surfeit of memory about Srebrenica could become hardened and politicised into dogma about the past, well before that past can truly be understood in all its historical complexity'. [25] The power of history as an authority that can inform the present is very much rooted in the self-perpetuating inadequacies of history; the potential to apply history to any situation or ideology, and the impossibility of all of memory to become history, allow only certain narratives to become dominant. At the heart of this crisis, where danger is most apparent, lies the question of who owns history: the reality is that those who own the means to present or *re-present* history, own history. And the hands that own this means are political. In Cambodia, Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes is a presentation of the Cambodian government's narrative of the Cambodian genocide. 'Reification and remembrance are accommodated within the space of the museum – but not because of a lack in specific 'historical' information or curatorial impetus. It is instead the tangible and intangible consequences of the violence of Democratic Kampuchea that can only be inadequately expressed, and are therefore unavoidably political'. [26]

History, in its most literal translation, is that which is in the past. However, what is in the past does not always stay in the past. This past is translated into the language of the present. This translation requires a translator, one with the tools to make this translation dominant; the tool is simply the power to represent, the power to be heard. But often,

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the reason the translator has the power to represent the past, and make their translation dominant, is not because they have translated the past accurately, but because the past is inadequate and lends itself to mistranslation. This propensity toward manipulation may be deemed 'dangerous', but just as all historical truth is subjective, so is all danger. Thus to term anything 'dangerous', as this essay has done, must recognise that sometimes one person's danger is another person's protection. One person's capitalism is another person's communism. This essay has largely focused its gaze upon very extreme examples of historical conflict, and these cases may not serve to prove that *all* history is dangerous in political hands. But what this essay does show is exactly that the past can be manipulated. By selecting specifically extreme historical cases to use as evidence for argument about how history is used in the present, this essay is guilty of that which it aims to elucidate. The idea that the past can be manipulated to suit present aims. And it may be the case that history is particularly dangerous in political hands.

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[16] Volčič, 'Yugo-Nostalgia', pp.21-25.

[17]*Ibid.*, p.27.

[18] Miller, 'Contested Memories', p.318.

[19]*Ibid.*

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