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Balancing History Books:
Some Comments on Current Memory Wars

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This essay explores the memory wars between the affirmative and critical views of the national past that have broken out in many countries during the past decades. It analyzes the scholarly attacks on the grand narrative of Western Civilization, inspired by postcolonial, gender and Holocaust approaches. It continues by pointing to the nationalist backlash against so-called cancel culture and critical race theory, typical of populist mythmaking. The reflection concludes with a call for a history of the present that will end the pointless polemics and lead to memory peace.

Keywords: Memory wars – Histotainment – Western Civilization – Critical turn – Nationalist backlash – Cancel culture – History of the present

Four hundred years after the arrival of the first enslaved people in America, the *New York Times Magazine* issued a *1619 Project* to highlight the pernicious role of racism in US history. The historical journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones posed the

question: “What would it mean to reframe our understanding of US history by considering 1619 as our country’s origin point, the birth of our defining contradictions, the seed of so much what made us unique?”¹ This rhetorical query was a conscious provocation that put slavery and racism into the center of the national narrative, thereby questioning the positive exceptionalism of America as “a city on the hill,” marked by democracy and prosperity. Stressing the long history of suffering among Black people not only added another dimension to the national story, but fundamentally reversed its thrust in a critical direction. Beginning with 1619 provided a new “origin story” that offered a historical justification for the Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality.

On January 18, 2021, two days before the end of his presidency, Donald Trump retaliated against this critique by presenting a manifest of patriotic education, called *The 1776 Report*. Produced by a special commission without a single historian, this document claimed to offer “the truth about America” as a conservative interpretation of the past that stressed the timeless values of the constitution. It celebrated American achievements, focusing on the role of white European settlers who founded an exemplary democracy that provided its citizens ample opportunity for economic success and was victorious during both World Wars. The purpose of this intervention was the affirmation of an “exact, honest, unifying, inspiring and ennobling” image of the past. In spite of some “mistakes, errors, contradictions and injustices,” American history was “rather a record of self-sacrifice, courage and nobility.”² Hence the report demanded a return to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

These contradictory manifestos are classic examples of the current memory wars in the US and elsewhere about the historical foundation of national identity. While the *1776 Report* reaffirmed a positive reading of the American past, the *1619 Project* presented a rather critical interpretation. The affirmative version still dominates many school curricula, museum exhibitions, monuments, commemorations, names of institutions and the like, reinforcing the conservatism of the Republican Party. In contrast, the critical approach is more prevalent in recent academic research, among journalists and in the reform movements that gather in the Democratic Party. Both sides of the dispute are highly emotional in insisting on

1 Nikole HANNAH-JONES – Caitlin ROPER – Ilena SILVERMAN – Jake SILVERSTEIN (eds.), *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, New York 2021.

2 <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo150341/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>.

their understanding of the past because they derive their antagonistic identities from an almost visceral attachment to their points of view. In many countries this clash between populism and liberalism centers on competing understandings of national history that have triggered a cultural civil war.³

In this ideological struggle about a “new nationalism,” professional historians often find themselves in the middle, courted for their expertise but also derided for their criticism. A whole new category of “eyewitnesses” competes with scholars by claiming superior knowledge by having actually experienced events of the past.⁴ When they speak as victims of repression or genocide, they claim a superior moral authority vis-à-vis historians who reconstruct the past on the basis of written sources. Often, they are supported by another novel group of “history entrepreneurs” who stage the past through manifestations in the public realm without much reference to academic debates.⁵ Using lavish media productions, these historical consultants, like the German Guido Knopp, reach a mass audience and shape images of the past which tend to be more entertaining than accurate, if the TV special on “Hitler’s women” is an example.⁶ Against such “histotainment,” critical voices have a hard time being heard. How should historians deal with the current memory wars?

The Western Standard

As a starting point, it may do well to recall that the emergence of professional scholarship in the 19th century was intimately tied to projects of nation building, whether they defended established countries or argued for the foundation of new ones. Leopold von Ranke’s “critical method” did emphasize working from primary sources rather than citing established clerical or secular authorities. Moreover, the seminar as locus of intellectual discovery, the monograph as form of scholarly communication and the footnote as way of documenting the origin of sources provided an arsenal of academic methods that claimed to be producing “scientific” knowl-

3 Niels F. MAY – Thomas MAISSEN (eds.), *National History and New Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century*, New York 2021.

4 Martin SABROW, *Zeitgeschichte schreiben: Von der Verständigung über die Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart*, Göttingen 2014.

5 Frank BÖSCH – Stefanie EISENHUTH – Hanno HOCHMUTH – Irmgard ZÜNDORF (eds.), *Public Historians: Zeithistorische Interventionen nach 1945*, Göttingen 2021.

6 Guido KNOPP, *Hitler’s Women*, New York 2003.

edge of the past. No doubt working with the Venetian relations and the papal records provided a more solid foundation than drawing on monastic chronicles or enlightenment philosophizing. But Ranke himself was a partisan of his Prussian fatherland and his liberal successors, like Johann Gustav Droysen, were deeply involved in the German national cause.⁷ Hence source criticism and nationalism went hand in hand.

The combination of academic historiography and nationalist politics produced a whole range of political commitments. In Britain, the Whig historians promoted a view that joined the story of the rise of liberty to the growth of industry and the expansion of empire in order to legitimize the dominance of the United Kingdom. In France, the laicistic republican scholars battled with Bonapartists and Catholics for dominance in the public realm. In Germany and Italy, historical narratives of the *risorgimento* celebrated the foundation of their national states through a mixture of dynastic and popular initiatives. In the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman landed empires, historians clamored for the establishment of independent states for subject nationalities like Poles, Czechs, or South Slavs. Where dynastic states morphed into nations, historians tended to “naturalize” the process and where ethnic groups were denied statehood, scholars were some of the most effective propagandists for national independence.⁸

During the First World War, the Entente countries developed a master narrative of Western Civilization that attached their national stories to a broader, moral justification of the fighting. Historians of the Central Powers like Dietrich Schäfer argued for the superiority of a special German path, called *Sonderweg*, due to its cultural creativity, scientific inventiveness, social solidarity and military prowess.⁹ In contrast to this nationalist focus, the Western Civilization narration embraced the Anglo-American, French, and Italian allies as different manifestations of the same liberal democratic values of the Enlightenment, even if autocratic Tsarist Russia hardly fit the claim. The advantage of this view was that it proved inclusive because it was based on shared principles such as the rule of law, free speech, open trade and the like. Somewhat ironically, the American historian Chester V. Easum explained the purpose of Western Civilization as convincing farm-

7 Georg G. IGGERS, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, Middletown, CT. 1983.

8 Stefan BERGER – Mark DONOVAN – Kevin PASSMORE (eds.), *Writing National Histories: Western Europe Since 1800*, London 2002.

9 Dietrich SCHÄFER, *Deutsche Geschichte*, Jena 1918, 6th ed., and Helga GREBING, *Der „deutsche Sonderweg“ in Europa 1806–1945: Eine Kritik*, Stuttgart 1986.

boys from Iowa why they had to die at Chateau Thierry. Victory in the war seemed to prove the superiority of this view, subjecting the losing Empires to the charge of war crimes.¹⁰

The Second World War reinforced the credibility of the master narrative of Western Civilization since the Nazi crimes were so egregious as to be undeniable. During the 1920s German historians had sought to overturn paragraph 231 of the Versailles Treaty with monographs and a journal on the *Kriegsschuldfrage*. At the same time, they developed an ethnic history in order to claim German minorities or formerly German territories (*Volksboden* or *Kulturboden*). But with a few exceptions, the racist imperialism of German scholars like my uncle Franz Petri failed to attract other nations. The domestic dictatorship, the unleashing of another world war, and the merciless genocide not only discredited the German case abroad but also within through the Nuremberg Trials.¹¹ While some members of the Grand Alliance also committed war crimes, the Fascist mass murder was so much more detestable that it validated the historical vision of Western Civilization as the global standard for postwar values and institutions like the UN.

With the Cold War, the anti-fascist narratives split at Congresses of Historical Sciences into a Marxist version in the East and a liberal-democratic alternative in the West. The former, represented by the Soviet Union, focused on the class struggle, reinforcing the labor movement and calling for social revolution at home and anti-imperialism abroad.¹² The latter, championed by the United States, pushed for democratic self-government internally and for economic development internationally. Scholarly congresses became arenas in which these two versions struggled for primacy with speeches and offices shared between both. While the socialist model initially attracted many intellectuals, it eventually became clear in 1953, 1956 and 1968 that “real existing socialism” had turned into a leftist dictatorship. By rehabilitating the former fascist enemies, the Western Civilization version started out in a somewhat dubious vein, but with the new social movements eventually

10 John M. HEADLEY, *The Problem with Multiculturalism: The Uniqueness and Universality of Western Civilization*, New Brunswick 2012; Niall FERGUSON, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, New York 2002.

11 Willi OBERKROME, *Volksgeschichte: Methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1918–1945*, Göttingen 1993.

12 Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED (ed.), *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, Berlin 1965, 8 vols.

developed into a free and prosperous direction.¹³ Due to the “peaceful revolution” it achieved dominance in 1989/90, at least in Europe.

The Critical Turn

Just when it seemed that national histories and the Western Civilization narrative had triumphed, a series of unanticipated criticisms threw their legitimacy into question. On the national level, different political ideologies provided contending views between Left and Right. For instance, in France liberal historians like Henry Rousso intensely debated with nationalists the legacy of the Vichy government or the so-called police action in Algeria which was in reality a colonial war.¹⁴ On the international level clashing stories about ideological outlooks and territorial claims created conflicts that were only rarely resolved through efforts at textbook revision. At the same time advocates of decolonization questioned triumphalist presentations of imperialism, distancing themselves from the master narratives that curiously combined nationalism with imperialism. With the East-West clashes of the Cold War, both the affirmation of the nation and the celebration of Western Civilization were pushed into the defensive.

One of the most trenchant critiques was the accusation that the Western Civilization narrative was a white male justification for domination over other races. Postcolonial critics argued that the purportedly universal values of the West were in practice not extended to non-white groups and justified slavery in spite of a rhetoric of equality. Therefore, they claimed that the notion of Western Civilization was a construct that legitimized imperialist control by the West European colonial countries. Inspired by Jean Francois Lyotard, a whole literature deconstructed the narratives of the masters and shifted attention to subaltern stories in order to fashion an anti-imperialist literature from below that intended to give the previously mute enslaved peoples a voice of their own. Similarly, Edward Said's critique of Western knowledge as “orientalism” revealed the cultural bias of so-called scien-

13 See for instance, Comité international des sciences historiques (ed.), *XV^e Congrès international des sciences historiques*, Bucharest 1980, 3 vols.; and Karl Dietrich ERDMANN, *Zur Geschichte der internationalen Historikerkongresse*, *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 36, 1985, pp. 535–553.

14 Henry ROUSSO, *Vichy: L'événement, la mémoire, l'histoire*, Paris 2001 and idem, *La dernière catastrophe: L'histoire, le présent, le contemporain*, Paris 2012.

tific knowledge as a tool of white domination. Other critics like Dipesh Chakrabarty denounced the notion of Western Civilization as a provincial Eurocentrism.¹⁵

Another fundamental attack on established national and western narratives came from feminists who criticized such histories as constructions of male paternalism. Of course, pioneering scholars like Louise Tilly were correct in pointing out that the dominant narratives simply left half of the population out, ignoring the “private realm” of women’s history by concentrating on such public male preoccupations as war and government.¹⁶ Feminist historians like Joan Scott and Lynn Hunt also resorted to French postmodernism to argue that historical knowledge was a male construct, which implicitly justified paternalist domination. This gender approach not only probed the construction of femininity but also inspired an analysis of maleness and with the perspective of intersectionality opened a new history of sexuality that explored realms beyond binary identities.¹⁷ Seen from a gender direction, national history and even Western Civilization could no longer be portrayed in a heroic fashion.

A final criticism of the conventional historical narratives came from Holocaust scholars who analyzed racial persecution, ethnic cleansing and mass murder. During the first decades after 1945 it was the Second World War which stood in the center of research since its death toll of 55 million was staggering. But over time pioneers like Raul Hilberg focused on the destruction of European Jewry, employing the neologism of “Holocaust” since the eradication of an entire presumed race was even more shocking than the mass killing during the fighting.¹⁸ Initially focused on the suffering of Jews, the Holocaust gradually became an exemplar of genocide in general that suggested comparison with other efforts to achieve “permanent security.” As a metanarrative of its own, it suggested absolute evil and raised embarrassing questions of perpetrators and accomplices such as those posed by Jan

15 Gary K. BROWNING, *Lyotard and the End of Grand Narratives*, Cardiff 2000; Edward M. SAID, *Orientalism*, New York 1979; Dipesh CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton 2009, new ed.

16 Louise A. TILLY – Joan W. SCOTT, *Women, Work, and Family*, New York 1978.

17 Judith BUTLER – Joan W. SCOTT (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York 1992; and Karen HAGEMANN – Jean H. QUATEERT (eds.), *Gendering Modern German History: Themes, Debates, Revisions*, New York 2007.

18 Raul HILBERG, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New York 1985; Christopher BROWNING, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York 1992.

Gross in Poland.¹⁹ Eventually the Holocaust became a new global standard of human rights by which histories would be judged.

Disagreements arose, because proponents of these critical views of the past insisted on changing historical references by deleting objectionable items and remembering those of their victims. In Nuremberg and Berlin anti-Semitic or imperialist street names like that of the historian Heinrich von Treitschke or Togostrasse were expunged, only to be replaced by the name of a female socialist resistance member. In the US a presidential commission scrutinized all military installations like Fort Bragg in order to get rid of Southern generals who had been traitors to the US. Beloved names of schools, university buildings or cultural institutions were changed if it turned out that their donors or founders had been racists. Statues like Robert E. Lee in Richmond, the capital of the confederacy, were toppled since their glorification of confederate independence was no longer acceptable. Finally, the critics' pressure for repairing past wrongs led to calls for reparation like Harvard's hundred-million-dollar pledge.²⁰

Nationalist Backlash

In the general public these critical actions, denounced as “cancel culture,” provoked an angry backlash that supported right-wing politics. Such a rewritten history was neither the comforting national past of schoolbooks, heritage museums, admired statues or holiday celebrations. Nor was it the uplifting sense of Enlightenment progress into a more humane future, presented in the inspiring story of Western Civilization. Instead, the academic critiques of past imperialism, paternalism and racism opened a widening gulf between scholarship and popular memories. While the critics tended to stem from the new social movements and demanded reforms, their nationalist opponents usually appealed to white replacement fears that tried to preserve the status quo. This politicization of public memory culture has triggered endless conflicts about the flying of flags, such as the banner of the confe-

19 Jan GROSS, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton 2001; and Dirk MOSES, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, Cambridge 2021.

20 Katherine MANGAN, 'Disturbing and Even Shocking': Harvard to Spend \$100 Million to Atone for 'Immoral' Ties to Slavery, Chronicle of Higher Education, April 26, 2022.

deracy, the inscription on monuments and the like.²¹ At issue in these memory wars is the historical legitimation of current politics.

Inspired by populist politics, a nationalist history has arisen on the continent during the last decades that has rejected larger frameworks like European integration. It is understandable that the countries liberated from Soviet dominance turned to their own national past in order to consolidate their recovered statehood. But the impulse became problematic when the presentation served to support ideological preconceptions such as the House of Terror in Budapest which downplayed the collaboration with the Nazis so as to emphasize repression under Communism.²² In Germany it took an international outcry for the exhibition in the new museum on “Flight and Expulsion” to moderate its message of German suffering by adding “reconciliation” to its message.²³ Similarly problematic was the use of institutions such as the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw which initially served to legitimize Polish claims to the Western territories.²⁴ National pride is understandable, but institutionalizing nationalist politics projects past conflicts into the future.

More dangerous yet is the political use of history in order to unleash war such as Putin’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine. Going back to the Slavophiles, the Russian dictator seems to believe in the concept of a “russki mir”, a Russian world, that he sees as beleaguered from the West and betrayed with the fall of communism. No doubt, the search for a usable past in Moscow is difficult, since the Tsar lost World War One and Joseph Stalin, though militarily more successful, was a bloody dictator who left deep scars. But instead of following the initiative of the civil society group Memorial in order to confront earlier crimes, Putin has swept them under the rug because a self-critical approach would hinder his project of restoring greater Russia by collecting ethnic Russians with military force and fake plebiscites.²⁵ The restriction of archival access and the censorship of pub-

21 Aja ROMANO, *Why we can't stop fighting about cancel culture: Is cancel culture a mob mentality, or a long overdue way of speaking truth to power?*, Vox, August 25, 2020.

22 <https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en>.

23 <https://www.flucht-vertreibung-versoehnung.de/en/home>.

24 John CONNELLY, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe*, Princeton 2020; and Michal KOPEČEK, *In Search of 'National Memory': The Politics of History, Nostalgia and the Historiography of Communism in the Czech Republic and East Central Europe*, in: idem (ed.), *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe After 1989*, Budapest 2008.

25 Peter ELTSOV, *The Long Telegram 2.0: A Neo-Kennanite Approach to Russia*, Lanham, MD 2020.

lished opinion show that history is only allowed if it serves nationalist self-aggrandizement, putting professional scholars into a bind.

If Trumpist America is any indication, the populist backlash is both defensive and aggressive. Rejecting what they denounce as “critical race theory,” right-wing journalists play on a whole series of historical resentments. Some traditionalists seek to preserve a white, male and Christian notion of Western Civilization against newer offerings like global or world history. At the same time, they defend an American exceptionalism as the first and only true democracy – even if nationalists in other countries claim the same uniqueness for their own nation. This popular reading of the past reasserts a distinctive identification with one’s own national community that ignores most of the blemishes of its historical record.²⁶ In the US populist history also draws upon a misreading of the second amendment as personal license for carrying weapons that supports a gun-culture which kills hundreds of victims every year. Another ideological driver is the campaign against abortion that draws on a misinterpretation of scripture and has just induced the Supreme Court to suspend women’s choice.

The rightwing backlash against a critical history is the result of a systematic campaign to reshape public opinion. Ever since Barry Goldwater’s defeat the Right realized that it was losing the battle for public opinion, since the Left had many justified grievances that resonated in the media. As a result, wealthy foundations like the Koch brothers began to fund the minority of traditionalist scholars. The American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institution at Stanford started to provide conservative interpretations of controversial issues to challenge the leftist critics. A whole bevy of rightwing media such as talk radio or Fox Television news spread populist messages often based on conspiracy theories. Appealing to Catholic or evangelical Christians, these opinion makers of the Right like Steve Bannon attacked liberal interpretations in textbooks, using legislation to prohibit objectionable content such as gay movements or Civil rights battles. In Florida governor Ron DeSantis has denounced social studies texts in order to expunge “critical race theory.” Similar struggles are taking place in other countries as well.²⁷

26 Bret STEPHENS, *This Is the Other Way that History Ends*, The New York Times, August 31, 2022. Cf. David HUGHES, *Unmaking an Exception: A Critical Genealogy of US Exceptionalism*, Review of International Studies, October 9, 2014.

27 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/16/us/florida-textbooks-african-american-history.html>; Konrad H. JARAUSCH, *National Pride versus Critical History: American Memory Wars*, in: N. F. May – T. Maissen, *National History*, pp. 288–301.

Exemplary conflicts

A few examples may help illustrate the dimensions of public memory conflicts. One notorious case involved the Neue Wache in Berlin. Designed by the architect Karl Schinkel in the neo-classical style in 1816, this building located Unter den Linden first served as guardhouse for Prussian soldiers. After the First World War it was converted into a war memorial, and under the Nazis it became a center of nationalist commemoration with the tomb of an unknown soldier. In East Germany the New Guardhouse was rededicated as a memorial to the “Victims of War and Fascism,” serving the SED’s antifascist message. After the Peaceful Revolution Chancellor Helmut Kohl insisted on a new dedication to the “Victims of War and Repression,” pillorying the Communist dictatorship, but failing to mention Nazi aggression and tyranny. At the same time, he added a sculpture by Käthe Kollwitz that represented a mother with her dead son as a secular pieta. The rededication and the statue created an intellectual outcry, but in the long run the public accepted the new version.²⁸

Among the many memory conflicts which involved American identity, one of the most acrimonious was the Enola Gay controversy. The confrontation swirled around the restored airplane that had dropped the atomic bomb over Hiroshima in Japan during World War Two. When it was put on exhibition in the Air and Space Museum, it bore a critical legend, since the younger generation of revisionist historians criticized the decision that inaugurated the age of nuclear warfare, even if it helped hasten the end of the war. Incensed by the inscription, the Air Force Veterans Association protested that the critical explanation impugned the honor of the United States. While professional historians defended the critique, the veterans threatened to cut off the funding for the Smithsonian Museum and lobbied Congress to remove it. After a heated debate between military historians and politicians, the Senate voted 98 to 2 in favor of deleting the offensive text.²⁹ The outcome was a typical defeat of academic scholars by an emotionalized public.

Another case of a conflict between progressive scholars and conservative politicians involved the World War Two Museum in Gdansk. Founded in 2008 by the Tusk government and housed in a dramatic postmodern building, the exhibi-

28 Harold MARCUSE, *The National Memorial to the Victims of War and Tyranny: From Conflict to Consensus*, <https://marcuse.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/present/neuwach.htm>.

29 Konrad H. JARAUSCH, “*The Truth about America.*” *Ein Kampf um die Seele der Vereinigten Staaten*, in: F. Bösch et al., *Public Historians*, pp. 52–62.

tion was directed by Pawel Machcewicz who was supported by an international board of academic advisors. The institution was located in the port city because the nationalities conflict between the German majority and Polish minority had triggered the outbreak of the Second World War. While recognizing “the enormity of the German terror inflicted on the Poles,” the museum dared to present the everyday perspective of suffering all over Europe. When the Law and Justice Party took over the government, it rejected this balanced presentation as insufficiently heroic, fired the founding director and replaced the advisory board with rightwing scholars, using the merger with a local initiative at the Westerplatte as a pretext. Ignoring international protests, the conservative government insisted on turning the revised exhibition into an instrument of nationalist propaganda.³⁰

Yet more drastic was the suppression of Memorial, a “historical, educational, human-rights and charitable society” by the Putin dictatorship in Russia. Created by dissidents and lead by Andrei Sakharov, this NGO set out to document human rights violations in Soviet Russia. Though Khrushchev had already denounced Stalin’s crimes, the Communist Party and many Russians had been suppressing the memory of the Gulag with its millions of victims. When the repression softened with perestroika in the late 1980s, it was possible for dissidents to discuss and document the many crimes under Stalinism, thereby giving victims a chance to be remembered. This effort to create historical memory outside of the official institutions also sought to support human rights in the present, thereby making Memorial a beacon of freedom in a repressive society. To counter such criticism, the Putin government issued a “foreign agent” law in 2012, accusing Memorial of “distorting history” and spying for the West.³¹ Over time prosecutors harassed the organization until they closed it down altogether in April 2022.

A counterexample which showed that it was possible to work together on a shared conception of the European past was the creation of the “House of European History” in Brussels. Proposed by the head of the European parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering in 2007, this institution intended to tell the European story to the public. Excluding only the rightwing proponents of Brexit and other Europhobes,

30 Rafal WNUK – Pawel MACHCEWICZ – Oliwia GALKA-OLEJKO – Lukas JASINAKI, *Museum of the Second World War: Catalogue of the Permanent Exhibition*, Gdansk 2016; Jörg HACKMANN, *Defending the “Good Name” of the Polish Nation: Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015–18*, *Journal of Genocide Research* 20, 2018, pp. 587–606.

31 Cathy MERRIDALE, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia*, London 2000; and Rachel DENBER, *In Closing Memorial, Russia Heralds a New, Grimmer Era of Repression*, Human Rights Watch, December 30, 2021.

the Committee of Experts, composed of a dozen different countries, included a wide range of political views from conservatives to Greens. Rejecting a mere addition of national histories, it focused “on the common experience between the Urals and the Atlantic.” Composed of historians and museum specialists, the founding group agreed not to present a teleological story, to include Eastern Europe and to follow the German example “with its renunciation of national pride.” Its conceptual compromises were then turned over to museum practitioners who designed a stunning exhibition for the redesigned Eastman Building.³² Attracting thousands of visitors, the House of European History is a successful case of creating a democratic public history.

Towards Memory Peace

To escape the vicious cycle of memory wars that pits countries, groups and ideologies against each other, historians need to make a conscious effort at self-reflexiveness. Instead of acting as partisans of a single creed, scholars should be aware that views of the past are constructed and that they have a personal stake in its interpretation. Though they claim to be proud patriots, they ought to abandon nationalism if they want to live together peacefully with other countries in the future. While the advance of Western civilization may be an inspiring story, it is also toxic with racism, imperialism, paternalism and the like. Even a “politically engaged critical history” runs some risk of presentism that neglects the otherness of earlier times.³³ In trying to derive lessons from the past for the future scholars have to make conscious choices about the values which they want to read into the record. Surely the disasters of the first half of the twentieth century have been appalling enough to suggest a concerted effort to avoid their repetition.³⁴ As the Yugoslav or Ukrainian wars show, peace cannot be taken for granted but it rather requires a resolve to end memory wars.

32 Andrea MORK – Perikles CHRISTODOULOU (eds.), *Creating the House of European History*, Luxembourg 2018.

33 James H. SWEET, *Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present*, Perspectives on History, August 17, 2022; Joan W. SCOTT, *History Is Always About Politics: What the recent debates over presentism get wrong*, The Chronicle of Higher Education, August 24, 2022.

34 Konrad H. JARAUSCH – Michael GEYER, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories*, Princeton 2003.

In order to make their voice heard in the clamor of public debate, historians have to rely on their professional training and employ rational arguments. Even if gaining media attention demands shouting loudly, exaggerating claims, scandalizing opponents and the like, scholars need to speak in a moderate key, *sotto voce* as it were. In contrast to journalists and historians their interventions can make constructive contributions only if they appeal to reason rather than to emotion. They need to rely upon their tradecraft of source criticism, literature review and interpretative debate, to “sift and winnow” the sources in order to get at “what actually happened.” While the goal of objective truth has been shattered by deconstruction, different approximations to it are still possible and professional training is one way to get closer to the past.³⁵ During the last decades the analytical arsenal has expanded so much that there are now many competing methods available for the scholar. Instead of being carried away by emotion, historians ought to reconcile their divergent opinions about the past by respectful debate.

One way of reducing memory wars is the recourse to international perspectives in order to break out of nationalist narratives. Comparing accounts makes it possible to challenge chauvinistic presentations by invoking different visions of the same events, depending upon whether they are experienced by perpetrators, bystanders or victims. Instead of claiming that there is only one true version, a plural approach assumes that there will be different accounts that need to be checked against each other in order to recover the complexity of the past. It is therefore not the fixation of a particular interpretation like the Armenian genocide by law, but rather an open discussion that will illuminate controversial aspects of history. In post-war Germany the global community kept a close watch on representations of mass murder in order to prevent any tendency of Holocaust denial.³⁶ Similarly, it was the pressure of international scholarship that finally forced Russia to admit the Katyn murders by the Red Army.

By striving for mutual understanding, historians can contribute to international reconciliation and help heal the many wounds of the past. Instead of continuing domestic conflicts or international clashes with academic weapons, scholars have the chance to reduce hostility between prior antagonists. This goal requires admitting past abuses that have left deep scars in order to understand that conflict is rarely one-sided and that appeals to prior wrongs only perpetuate further

35 Llyod KRAMER, *The Continuing Political Struggle to Construct, Control and Challenge Historical Memories*, *History and Theory* 60, 2021, pp. 150–162.

36 Philipp STELZEL, *History after Hitler: A Transatlantic Enterprise*, Philadelphia 2019.

violence in the future. The joint Franco-German and Polish-German school-book negotiations are a case in point, since they have moved closer to a common understanding of a problematic past.³⁷ Another encouraging example is the city museum in Wrocław which represents both the German past of the metropolis and its new Polish character in a fair manner when charting the transition from one to another identity.³⁸ Only the development of a self-critical view of the past can ultimately rebalance the history books and thereby advance memory peace.

37 Georg-Eckert-Institut, Leibniz-Institut für internationale Schulbuchforschung, <http://www.gwi.de/en/institute.html>; Cf. Daniela R. P. WEINER, *Tendentious Texts: Holocaust Representations and Nation-Rebuilding in East German, Italian, and West German Schoolbooks, 1949–1989* (Diss., Chapel Hill, 2016).

38 <https://whichmuseum.com/museum/city-of-wroclaw-museum-wroclaw-6976>. Cf. Gregor THUM, *Uprooted: How Breslau Became Wrocław During the Century of Expulsions*, Princeton 2011.

Bilancování historických knih. Několik poznámek k současným pamětovým válkám

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Tento článek se zabývá současným sporem o otroctví v USA a zkoumá pamětové války (*memory wars*) mezi afirmativním a kritickým pohledem na národní dějiny, které v poslední době propukly v mnoha zemích. Analýza odhaluje rostoucí propast mezi racionální akademickou vědou o minulosti a emotivním veřejným vzpomínáním na předchozí vývoj. Úvaha začíná pohledem na vzestup narativu západní civilizace jako globálního standardu, překonávajícího německou představu výlučné nacionalistické cesty (*Sonderweg*), vrcholící během obou světových válek. Pokračuje kritickým obratem ve vědeckém bádání, inspirovaným postkoloniálním, feministickým a holocaustovým hnutím, které se pokusilo přeorientovat konvenční oslavné vyprávění do podoby sebekritického pohledu na minulost.

Stat' se dále zabývá nacionalistickým odporem proti takové kritice, která obviňuje nedávno vydané vědecké práce z prosazování údajné kultury popírání (*cancel culture*), stejně jako kritické rasové teorie, a to s cílem obhájit tradiční pozitivní chápání národního rozvoje. Na rozdíl od levicové reformní agendy kritického obratu nacionalistická interpretace hájí sebeuspokojivou verzi minulosti, kterou požaduje populistická politika s cílem udržet nadvládu bílé rasy.

Několik příkladů, jako je spor o Neue Wache v Berlíně, spor o Enola Gay ve Washingtonu, zápas o Muzeum druhé světové války v Gdaňsku a potlačení Memorialu v Rusku, se snaží ilustrovat rozsah tohoto ideologického konfliktu. S odkazem na Dům evropských dějin v Bruselu jako na pozitivní příklad článek končí výzvou k sebereflexi dějin současnosti, jež by přispěla k domácí reformě a k mezinárodnímu porozumění.