FOREWORD

# Historical Remembrance in the Twenty-First Century

*By*
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The role of remembrance in public life has expanded radically over the past century. In part this is due to the democratization of warfare. Before 1914, the vast majority of those who served, were injured, or died in war were volunteers or mercenaries. After 1914, conscript armies fought wars and left bereaved parents, widows, and orphans behind in numbers that were never before registered. Inevitably, this meant that the history of warfare and family history came to be bound together. War memorials proliferated in villages and towns throughout Europe and beyond, largely to preserve the names of the fallen. The overwhelming majority of these sites list names alphabetically and not by rank. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D. C., consciously designed to follow the First World War model, does it another way, by recording the names of the dead by the date they died. The result is the same: the sixty thousand American dead of the Vietnam War are symbolically interred in the Mall in Washington, and every name counts; every name is equal to every other name.

Naming is the way democracies have honored war dead since 1914. Australian memorials since the First World War have named those who served as well as those who died. But since enlistment was voluntary in the Great War, this kind of naming was intended to shame those passersby who had not enlisted (Inglis 1998).

After the Second World War, the business of naming the victims of war became much more difficult. In part this was a problem of scale. In

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St. Petersburg, the war cemetery honoring victims of the city's one-thousand-day siege is arrayed in 186 giant mass graves. Names vanished, but the city survived. In Hiroshima, both names and the city were obliterated. In Paris, an infant deported from the Drancy transit camp to Auschwitz was not named but was listed as the child with an earring.[1] Efforts to retrieve the names of Holocaust victims are ongoing. Thanks to the effort of Serge Klarsfeld, Parisian schools have plaques with the names of schoolchildren from the district who were deported and murdered during the Nazi occupation.

Here is the nub of the matter: when the number of civilian victims approximately equaled or exceeded the number of soldiers who died in war, previous commemorative forms, rooted in older traditions of military honor, had to be changed. It is much more difficult to design a monument to the unknown civilian than to the unknown soldier. Soldiers are said to die for a reason: love of country or fellow soldiers or simply for doing their duty. But what meaning can we ascribe to the deportation and murder of a French infant known only by her earring? Commemorating that single death (among millions) cannot be done in any conventional (or perhaps any unconventional) manner. Where there is no meaning, there is no commemoration.

There is also no history. Here is one of the key reasons for the renegotiation of the space occupied by history and memory over the past sixty years: both the act of producing history and the act of remembrance are gestures toward finding meaning in the past. The patterns we choose to give shape to traces of the past fade away or fall apart when we claim that major events, or deaths, or lives have no meaning. To be sure, this sense of disorientation is selective. Winning the war against Hitler and the Japanese had meaning. Breaking through the encircling German forces surrounding Leningrad had meaning. But within these larger events, there were massive, terrifying phenomena—the names of Hiroshima and Auschwitz among them—which in their unadorned nihilism threaten the notion that narratives of the past had "meaning" in any conventional sense of the term.

The efflorescence of historical writing about wars and the victims of war is one facet of this insistent reaffirmation of geometry, of logic, and of causality in an increasingly violent world. In the 1940s and 1950s, what Charles Maier (2000) termed "the age of territoriality" was still intact, and indeed fortified by the war, and this urgent effort to reconfirm the "meaning" of history took place in separately configured national cultural spaces. There were overlaps to be sure. The French (alongside the Belgians and the Dutch) had the myth of the Resistance to write into their history, thereby occluding the complex phenomenon of collaboration and the role of local officials in the deportation of Jews to their deaths (Lagrou 2000). The Germans could put the "catastrophe" in parentheses and align their history with that of the West just as they aligned their foreign policy with their cold war allies. The strength of Marxism in British, French, and Italian historiography mirrored the heroic image of the Red Army and the communist resistance as essential agents of victory in the Second World War.

These efforts to restore "meaning" to European history came apart by the 1970s. National boundaries were by then encapsulated in a thriving European

community, with its own judiciary, the decisions of which over time came to be written into the legal framework of each constituent member of the European Union. After 1968 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, much of the political and intellectual capital accumulated by communist parties and their followers became debased. Marxism as a theory of society—how power operates—and as a theory of history—how societies change—began to fall apart. Capitalism was in trouble, too. In 1973, the cheap energy strategy of the Western powers came unhinged after the Arab-Israeli war, creating real strains in the middle-of-the-road parties that had governed since the 1950s. Massive inflation produced industrial unrest, which in turn fueled a political backlash of which Margaret Thatcher's conservatism was the most salient product. With the superpowers' global strategy of mutually assured destruction, the heart of Europe was the bull's eye to which thousands of missiles pointed. The cost of this staggering arms race ultimately bankrupted the Soviet Union, though a good case can be made that its governing structures had already begun to collapse in 1986. What greater evidence is there of both criminal negligence and evil than the Chernobyl catastrophe, when officials in the Ukraine publicly denied the emergency while sending their families away from contaminated areas? In a tragic version of an old song of Tom Lehrer's, "Pollution," millions were left to drink the milk and water and breathe the air. We still do not know the full genetic price paid for Chernobyl or the criminal manner in which it was handled.

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In the 1970s, a new factor altered the way history and memory have been configured. Although video cassette technology had been developed in the 1950s and 1960s, it became part of household furniture in many countries by the 1970s. The Philips Company marketed its VCR in 1970; Betamax appeared in 1975; and by 1980, video cassette players were within the reach of millions of families. This technology revolutionized the preservation of the voices of historical actors, from the most modest to the most prominent. The archive on which history rested suddenly expanded radically. Twenty years later, the World Wide Web expanded that visual archive of the past even more radically. In those two

decades, the materials from which historians construct their narratives became more digital than documentary. At the same time, the word "documentary" took on a new meaning, referring to a whole branch of nonfiction television history.

This revolution in the role of visual evidence in historical writing accounts in large part for the ways in which history and memory have intersected in the past generation. The problems remained the same: how to construct narratives in an age of globalized violence. But the means and resources available to do so changed, and did so in a way that brought to the fore the single human voice.

That voice could be anyone's, and as such, the individual's power of recollection provided evidence of a variety and durability historians had never before had at their disposal. What did these voices offer? Was it memory, in the sense of the individual retrieval of personally encountered events? Or was it history, in the sense of narratives backed up by the authority of direct experience? The answer was both, and in every new interview of the victims of war or revolution or repression, from Vietnam to Chile to Palestine, the space between history and memory was reconfigured. That space is what I term "historical remembrance."[2]

"Historical remembrance" describes a host of ways in which we try to give meaning to our violent past. Its practices overlap with liturgical remembrance, in that sacred matters and issues are touched on time and again. It shares many characteristics with family remembrance, the calendar of our domestic lives. But historical remembrance has one particular feature the other two do not always have. Acts of remembrance are informed by what professional historians and public historians write and broadcast. And the writing of history is informed by the "memory boom" of the past forty years. Anyone with eyes to see knows that there has been an efflorescence of memory artifacts about history in film, sculpture, museums, exhibitions, plays, novels, and cartoon strips, as well as on thousands of Internet sites. There are judicial records now available online and in video cassette format that provide easily accessible evidence drawn from war crimes trials and post–civil war tribunals of many kinds. We historians are being carried along on a fast-moving stream of memory studies, which we did not create and do not control.

Whenever we collectively mark a date in the calendar of when important events occurred, we engage in historical remembrance. Our meditations at a war memorial or a village square form one part of this activity. When we come together in public to exchange our reflections on the past stimulated by a film or a play or a novel or a visit to a museum, we enter this area between history and memory. I have had the privilege of helping to create a museum of the First World War at Péronne, on the river Somme in northern France. We call the museum L'Historial de la Grande Guerre. The term "*Historial*" is a neologism, drawing from the intersection of a memorial to the soldiers who died and the history of the Battle of the Somme, which was fought there ninety years ago.

The *Historial* has flourished because families and school parties have adopted it. Surrounded by hundreds of French, British, and German war cemeteries, the museum shows the way practices of historical remembrance overlap with family narratives and sacred stories.

This kind of public history is still not welcomed by many within the historical profession. There are multiple reasons for this hostility. In part, the financing of museums, exhibitions, and television documentaries puts pressure on historians to present the past in ways pleasing to patrons. Political pressures appear when national museums touch on sensitive subjects open to criticism by participants in historical events or by politicians with an axe to grind. When American air force veterans saw the outline of an exhibition on the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, they demanded and were assured changes in the historians' narrative would be made (Bird and Lifschultz 1998; Boyer 1996). The treatment of Aborigines in the Australian National Museum in Canberra was similarly rewritten when nonhistorians protested its initial interpretation.[3] Canadian historians backtracked when their account of the strategic bombing campaign in the Second World War came under harsh scrutiny by some veterans' groups (Oliver 2007). George Orwell wrote that history is a discipline that stops people (usually but not only those in power) from lying about the past. If independence of interpretation can be so easily compromised, some argue, then history is reduced to propaganda.

Or it is reduced to memory (Nora 2000). This notion that survivors' memories matter more than historians' judgments is deeply problematic. It reflects the proprietary nature of the past, the sense that some people "own" it. Forty years ago, I appeared at a conference at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst to open part of a library in honor of Harold Macmillan, who attended. Another First World War soldier (and novelist), Charles Carrington, took me aside and suggested I choose another subject. Better not write about the First World War, he said, because only *we* know. Those who had been there *were* history; their memories were oracular; and we historians dealt with them critically at our peril. Holocaust survivors have said the same thing. Here configuring history as touching on the sacred destroys the enterprise altogether. It is evident why some historians prefer to stay inside the academy. If the mission of turning myths about the past into documented narrative is limited in this way, then history vanishes entirely.

Witnesses provide challenges for historians in other ways, too. There is a strong body of literature that questions the truth value of eyewitness testimony. Especially under pressures of combat or domestic violence, the accuracy of statements made by those who were there is suspect (Dulong 1998). There are the risks of the normal "sins" of memory—misattribution, suggestibility, and bias (Schacter 2002). And then there is time itself, which erodes and rearranges the collage of fragments that we call memory. When survivors remember, they provide evidence about the present as much as the past; they present *their* truth, not *the* truth. Here is an observation most historians take for granted, but when they enter the public domain, other rules may apply. Some truths are "better" than others; some serve political purposes. Here again, the academy is a safer place to operate. Those who retreat in this manner reinforce the notion that history is inside and memory outside of what professionals do.

The insider/outsider divide helps us understand the history/memory divide in Europe in other ways. In France, those who teach history at the level of *lycée* or

university are *fonctionnaires*, paid employees of the state, who pass examinations to get their jobs. They are the carriers of history, bringing it to the young as a key element in the education of citizens. Commemoration is what others do; history is purer than that. It is objective, cold, and rational; whereas memory is subjective, warm, and emotional (Maier 1993, 2001). The historical discipline is precisely that; it has rules as to how to pose a problem, how to answer it, and how and where to make that answer public. History is a way of thinking; memory is a way of feeling. All this is true, but not entirely so. The reasons historians choose a subject are frequently personal and subjective. The art of writing is, in the hands of masters like Antoine Prost and Pierre Nora, filled with passion and literary echoes. We weave into our narratives the conversations we have had in our lives. This is the key to the linguistic turn, which is simply the commonsense view that there are no facts outside the language in which they are expressed. Positivism is dead, buried long ago, but its traces can be seen every time a French historian denies that history and memory overlap in the language historians use. My sense is that the social position of historians within a state system lies behind the strict distinction they erect between history and memory. When historians work in the private sector, as in large parts of the American university system, they have less need to insist on the pristine purity of history, as opposed to memory, which is what amateurs (or the rest of us) have.

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There is a danger in the nationalization of history in this manner. When historians are *fonctionnaires*, they risk being told by other public employees—elected ones—how to do their job. In July 2005, French politicians passed a resolution stating that teachers at state schools must emphasize the positive role France played in its dealings with its overseas holdings, especially in North Africa. This differs from legislative statements, largely rhetorical, denominating the murder of Armenians in Turkey in 1915 as genocide. Such statements are acts of solidarity, not pedagogy. Still, on occasion, when Holocaust deniers receive higher degrees in French universities, public authorities take action.

Here we come to the heart of the problem. Since the 1970s, what Annette Wieviorka (1998) has termed "the age of the witness" has affected the way history

is taught and written. Witnesses are everywhere. They testify in courts. They speak in national commissions. They agitate, and when they are able to get an audience, they can help protect endangered populations. Rigoberta Menchu Tum won the Nobel Peace Prize for speaking out on behalf of Guatemalan Indians. They tell us what human rights are by describing the inhuman treatment they have endured and have seen. They are living documents, people who carry in their memories the tragic history of their people.

What happens when they get it wrong? Rigoberta Menchu (1999) told stories of atrocities that, when investigated, turned out to be generic rather than factual. Her brother was not burned alive in the town square, as she wrote, but other people were in other towns and at other times. Does this matter? Historians have to say yes, but when they do, they are subject to severe criticism, this time from the "witnesses" themselves or their supporters.

What is the way out of this adversarial universe? Surely the time has come to recognize that there is a field of force between history and memory, a site of interaction, overlap, contestation, and dissonance. Calling this field "historical remembrance" is simply one way of recognizing the obvious. But sometimes stating the obvious can serve a very useful purpose. In Guatemala, the Catholic Church has set up a "historical memory" project. The balance is right; memory is essential to history, especially the history of the violation of human rights, so rarely documented by the perpetrators. But history is essential to memory too, in that the testimony of witnesses needs to be treated with critical respect, precisely as we treat all other traces of the past.

I have spent much of my life studying the First World War, a conflict that produced an avalanche of war memoirs. In a sense, the memory boom of the twentieth century came out of the Great War and prepared the ground for the emergence of other voices, other commemorative acts, following later wars and atrocities. The soldiers who wrote of the Great War told stories that came out of their lives. They wrote with the authority of direct experience. But no one in the large and still growing historical profession specializing in this field believes that their memoirs tell the unvarnished truth. Many of the authors themselves state this precisely. Robert Graves said that only those who lied about the war actually told the truth. Memory plays tricks on us, and those tricks are very revealing. In a period when a new human rights regime is emerging in Europe and (in a checkered way) in other parts of the world, and when witnesses are coming forward in increasing numbers, the best service historians can offer is to go beyond conceptual apartheid and explore the creative space between history and memory. Writing the history of the contemporary world is an act of historical remembrance, one kind of signifying practice among many others. The sooner we realize this simple truth, the better.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Caroline Piketty of the Archives Nationales in Paris for this information.
2. For a fuller account of my interpretation, see Winter (2006).
3. For one view, see Windschuttle (2001).

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