



MEMORY, EDITED

Taking Liberties with History

ABBY SMITH RUMSEY

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For David and Izzy

Love of the fatherland is certainly a very beautiful thing,
but there is something better than that; it is the love of truth.
—Peter Chaadaev, “Apologia of a Madman”

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1 MAKING THE PAST MAKE SENSE

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

The twenty-first century has gotten off to a rocky start. In the United States, people expected that after they won the Cold War, peace would reign and liberal democracies would go global. At home, social and political tensions would lessen as freedom and equality would gain ground. It would all be worth the high price of having waged war and lived under threat of nuclear attack for over four decades. Yet, after the Soviet Union came apart in 1991, the peace dividend failed to materialize. Instead, there were new shocks at home and unforeseen threats from abroad. The Y2K scare passed without incident, but that near-miss was followed by a cascade of crises: 9/11, the Great Recession, the dangerous acceleration of climate change, rising wealth inequality, foreign and domestic terrorism. The election of Barack Obama was seen as progress. At the same time it spurred the growth of right-wing cadres in reaction. Then Donald Trump became president. So, it turned out this wasn't really the post-racial era after all. What happened to the arc of moral history that bends toward justice?

The shocks continued. In 2020, a novel coronavirus became pandemic and killed over a million Americans in two years. Racial tensions exploded yet again. Mass murders and hate crimes proliferated. Trump lost the presidential election and refused to leave office. On January 6, 2021, his armed supporters stormed the Capitol in an attempted coup. The long, proud tradition of America's peaceful transfer of power was shattered. The eyes of the world were fixed on the increasing internal threats to the great superpower.

On the morning of February 24, 2022, the world woke up to learn that Russia had invaded Ukraine in an attempt to annex the nation. It seemed a final blow to the promise of peace after the Iron Curtain was breached in 1989. The post–World War II global order became a memory, and the new one is up for grabs.¹ Amid high-pitched media coverage of weakening democracies, decreasing institutional trust, polarizing populations, and apocalyptic movements from Al Qaeda in the Middle East to QAnon in the United States, people are struggling to understand where this turbulence is coming from.

Two decades into the century, the United States is in a full-blown identity crisis. For all intents and purposes, Americans are so polarized they do not even acknowledge each other as fellow citizens.² The divisions are so dramatic that Americans no longer refer casually to a collective *we* but specify which people think *our* way and which *their* way. The American people proclaim the values of freedom and equality to be self-evident, but they don't agree on what these values mean. Is America still what Madeleine Albright called “the indispensable nation,” able to “see further than other countries into the future”?³ She said this confidently in 1998, before the nation was taken by surprise on September 11, 2001. Some experts had warned about Islamic terrorism, just as they warned about easy credit and mortgage-backed securities, growing alt-right militias, and Russian aggression. Despite this, neither the US government nor the media prepared the public for these crises. Perhaps it was because the idea of progress was so deeply ingrained that it was impossible to imagine regression—or if imagined, too unpopular for approval-ratings-sensitive administrations and media to report. The history taught in schools also inculcated in the US public an expectation of continued progress. This is not a history that serves people well in times of crises and reversed expectations. It is time for a new American history, one that meets the moment.

But which history? Looking in the rearview mirror, some Americans date the founding of the nation to Philadelphia in 1776. Others, looking in the same mirror, see deeper in time and argue that the arrival of enslaved Africans on the continent in 1619 is the true beginning. In these debates, the past is always prophetic. Accordingly, national origins have significance because they fix the character and destiny of a people. Therefore, either

Americans are born free and equal, which makes the nation a noble experiment in democracy and a model for the world, or they are born in sin, and the guilt of that ancestral crime passes from generation to generation, not fully acknowledged, not fully atoned for. These two versions of the American genesis are offered as an either/or proposition and deemed irreconcilable. This attitude is both a symptom of the polarization now paralyzing democratic governance and a primary cause. At least adherents of both ideas agree that a reckoning with the past is necessary before Americans can move on, wherever they're going.

The present moment raises the critical question: Does a nation need a shared past to have a shared future?

This book addresses the question by examining the price paid when the answer has to be *yes*. Harmonizing views of the past seldom creates a shared vision for the future. Nor is it desirable. The twentieth century spawned utopian experiments in creating a more perfect world in which one and only one future was available to people. In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Communist China, and Cambodia (Kampuchea), there was a single vision of the good society, and how to build it was predetermined by the laws of history. What's characterized today as the history wars in the United States is a battle about who owns the future. Neither tale of US genesis can be correct because neither takes into account the nature of historical change and the starring roles that chance and contingency play.⁴ When we discount the power of chance events and underestimate our ability to adapt to adversity, history is reduced to a fairytale and humans to perpetual childhood. The philosopher Leszek Kołakowski said that "we learn history not in order to know how to behave or how to succeed, but to know who we are."⁵ The value of history, then, is neither to predict the future nor to teach lessons about how to live; it is to gain a truer sense of ourselves and of the world.

It is not a shared past that nations need, but a shared sense of reality. Especially in a nation of immigrants that nurtures a pluralism of values and beliefs as essential to true freedom, a pluralism of facts courts disaster. In this book, we will look at the consequences of regimes that treat history not as an archive of self-knowledge but as mere prologue to the future. Such regimes weave information—true or false—into a fabric of fables with the

power to control the mind and soul of the population. We will see what happens when generations grow up ignorant of their true history, therefore not knowing who they are.

By necessity, narratives are selective in their recitation of events. Fiction has the license to ignore or depart from the facts of the case in an effort to get at a deeper truth. Not history. Imagine meeting a stranger at a party and, to break the ice, you ask where they come from. The stranger you chat up may exaggerate some details and leave out others that reflect badly on them. But little harm is done because experience tells us this is common. We may even have done it ourselves on occasion and so are prepared to discount small departures from the facts. People seldom intentionally embroider facts designed to deceive. Besides, nowadays it's easy to google a person and check the veracity of what they say.

Here's the rub: search engines and social media platforms don't test the truth of their search results. In 2016, it became starkly evident that the internet can be easily used by bad actors to deliberately circulate stories they know to be untrue, especially about the American past and present—all to seize control of the future. The bizarre barrage of fake facts and elaborate conspiracies surprised many people. It shouldn't have. The real surprise is how many people believed these stories, defended them, and identified those who didn't believe them not as misguided fellow citizens, but as enemies.

This nefarious way of doing politics is all too familiar to me. I am a historian of Russia.

In 1982–1983, I was a Fulbright fellow in Moscow and Leningrad, where I conducted archival research for my doctoral dissertation. Despite the fact that my topic was the ruling elite of the late seventeenth century, I was still denied access to many files I requested. Sometimes I was told they didn't exist. I knew better because a Russian colleague was working on them. This was a fact I couldn't mention without getting him in trouble. That said, the logic of denial was impeccable. The way the Soviets constructed their history, there was absolutely nothing in the Russian past that was truly past. Their historical record was carefully edited to be a narrative leading in a predetermined fashion to the end of class struggle and the ultimate triumph of the proletariat. I knew this going into the archives. The denials were infuriating

but not surprising. What I had not fully grasped were the everyday consequences of imposing that narrative on hundreds of millions of people.

That epiphany happened one day when my Soviet roommate, who was from the closed military city of Vladivostok on the Pacific, returned from a four-hour scour of food markets across Leningrad and showed me her prize purchase: a kilo of butter. Butter was a scarce commodity, even in well-provisioned cities such as Leningrad, Moscow, and Vladivostok. She beamed with the pride of someone who had just won the lottery, and she had every right to gloat. She asked me how often butter was available in our markets. I answered, “Always.” (I had just read *The International Herald-Tribune’s* story about Midwestern dairy farmers dumping tons of cheese to protest the farm subsidy bill just passed in Congress, but I spared her that news.) *Always* was so far from what she could even imagine that she had to take a beat. Then, pulling herself up in all her dignified skepticism, she said in a tone somewhere between pity and condescension that she understood I naturally was patriotic and quick to defend my motherland, but I did not need to lie. When I protested that I wasn’t lying, she grew indignant. I had just confirmed everything she heard about capitalists.

It may not surprise many in the West that authoritarian countries are cavalier with the facts. We assume this is simply part of the regimes’ intrinsic moral corruption. Surely we in democratic nations—in particular the United States, the oldest continuous democracy—are immune to such abuses. We do not take such liberties with our history.

Sadly, we now know this is not the case. It is increasingly clear what happens when the human need for certainty and stability finds an ideology that gives people what they’re looking for. It’s happening before our eyes in the United States. In extreme cases, that ideology, whether leaning left or right, is staked on a vision of a future that uses the past as a required backstory to the (inevitable) realization of the future. It becomes necessary to burnish the past so that it’s a compelling story of heroes and villains. Then make that version official to ensure that it—and it alone—is taught in schools, written in history books, propagandized through films and television, embodied in memorials, statues, and history-themed amusement parks. It goes unchallenged and is so ubiquitous, it is scarcely noticed on a conscious level. It works its magic subliminally.

The experience of Soviet and post-Soviet Bloc nations has urgent relevance for understanding the ongoing competition over whose history is told. My roommate was only one of hundreds of millions behind the Iron Curtain whose entire grasp of reality was controlled by the regime down to every detail and reaching even into their dream life. This manufactured reality lodged itself deep in the psychology of individuals. Its effect was so crippling on the population that when the Iron Curtain lifted and these lies were exposed, they had little capacity to deal with the radically new reality they faced. If the reality they had known all their life was in fact not real, maybe they were not real either.

What did my Leningrad roommate think when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989? What did she make of the end of the Soviet Union two years later? What was it like when the world she knew and cherished was unmasked? For millions of former Soviet Bloc citizens, it was all too painful to see, let alone acknowledge, the lies that robbed them of true self-knowledge. Their psychic shock is compounded by the sudden revelation of horrific crimes committed by the regime *in their name* and that in many cases they were party to, willingly or not. Their experience reveals what happens when people are forced to reexamine and even abandon long-held ideas of the past in light of newly revealed facts. Not all nations and not all people react the same. There is a stark contrast between those former Soviet Bloc countries willing and able to confront their past, such as East Germany, and Russia, whose early efforts to excavate long-buried facts were quickly shut down by a new regime led by a former KGB official, Vladimir Putin. From that perspective, the cognitive dissonance experienced by many Americans trying to reconcile the facts and consequences of slavery with the dominant narrative of freedom and equality is understandable.

Leo Tolstoy believed that “a historian has to do with the results of the event, the artist with the fact of the event.”⁶ It is the task equally of historians and artists to find the truth and validate it as the key to moral freedom. By examining the reckoning with a painful past through the prism of Eastern European experience, we can see the contours of the American impasse from an oblique angle. (I use the collective term “Eastern Europe” to designate countries that were part of the Soviet Bloc, including Russia, and “Russia”

when I refer specifically to that country.) From that angle it becomes clear that the Americans' struggle to know and acknowledge their history will succeed if and when the values of equality and liberty regain equilibrium.

The small lies my Leningrad roommate believed and the big lies told by Putin are of a piece. In justification of his invasion of Ukraine, Putin claims Ukraine is not and never has been a sovereign nation: "Russians and Ukrainians were one people—a single whole."⁷ Therefore he is compelled to "reunite" Ukraine with Russia. Foreign Secretary Sergei Lavrov warned the West in his chilling baritone that "we will define Ukraine's destiny by ourselves."⁸ These claims are based on fabricated history. Despite Putin's efforts to restore Russia's imperial power and prestige, he cannot put the Russian Empire back together again.

For individuals and their larger society, history is a precious source of self-knowledge. Of special value is the knowledge gained only through personal experience. The depth of an experience can be so profound and intimate that at times only subjective descriptions, a bearing of witness, can do it justice. For this reason, artists and writers are best positioned to speak to all dimensions of a life dominated by lies. I give priority to the voices of writers and artists who lived with liberally edited histories, fanciful facts, and propaganda about their glorious future. They convey exactly what is at stake when the truth is fungible and their own history becomes whatever some regime or ego-driven leader chooses to make of it. I focus more on *earned* knowledge and less on theoretical. I provide relevant background that the reader may need to understand the context of key events. Sources are cited in English translation to make it easier for curious readers to pursue topics of interest to them. Above all, I emphasize what these writers and artists reveal about how abuse of history robs people of the ability to know themselves and make informed moral choices. And so, while I write about the influence of Marxism on Russian intellectuals, it is not what Marx wrote that matters but what Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks made of it. I write not about how Stalin turned Marxism-Leninism into totalitarianism, but about the effect of totalitarianism on those subject to it and the role that lies about the past played in the party's grip on power. Its crippling effect still exerts power over post-Soviet populations.

It is equally important to understand how people can be so susceptible to a regime of lies. Why embrace an ideology founded on absolute certainties when the world provides abundant evidence of the unpredictability of all things human? In the present age, dominated by social media, buying into lies has more than personal consequences. One deluded person has a mental health condition and deserves our compassion. But a society that's lost its sense of reality poses a threat to itself and to the world.

The similarities between the United States and the Russian Empire and its successor, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, are striking. They are easy enough to overlook, though, because the lingering effects of Cold War rhetoric play up existential antagonisms and the renewed alienation between the nations. Both nations lie on the periphery of Western Europe and, until the Second World War, they measured themselves against European culture. Both nations built their super-scaled economic and military powers on an abundance of natural resources made productive through centuries of unfree labor. Both nations believe themselves to be endowed with a destiny of world-historical importance. Both believe they have a unique moral mission to serve as a beacon of light to other nations. In 2000, US president George W. Bush told his audience at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, "I believe our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world."⁹ This statement could have been said by Tsar Nicholas I or Vladimir Putin. If we did not have so much in common with the Russians, Trump could never have aligned himself as co-equal with Putin. It is true that some of Trump's affinity with strongmen is due to quirks of his personality. But the portion of Americans who found nothing disturbing about the sitting president of the United States saying he preferred the intelligence of Russian state security sources to America's intelligence sources is what matters.

Some of the writers and artists in our investigation of memory edited are well known in the West. Others are not but should be. Anton Chekhov illuminates the ways that memory works to endow a life with meaning. Fyodor Dostoevsky's account of his time imprisoned in Siberia as a political prisoner was the crucible from which he emerged with profound insight into how personal memory and identity are constrained by community. In

the nineteenth century, a widening division between the educated classes and the mass of illiterate peasants sparked a heated debate between those among the educated who desired to emulate the West and those who rejected Western identity in favor of a Slavic, pointedly non-Western sense of self and national destiny. This debate is memorably articulated by Peter Chaadaev in the 1830s. That identity crisis has never been resolved. It casts a long shadow over Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a direct result of his antipathy to the West. Putin justifies violation of Ukraine's sovereign territory as a necessary righting of a grave historical wrong. *History tells us*, he says, that Ukraine is Russia. The West (that is, the United States and the European Union it dominates) must be stopped from annexing Ukraine into its sphere of influence.

Communism promised to accelerate modernity and destroy the oppressive Russian imperial order, sweeping it into the dustbin of history. The Bolsheviks mapped a path to the utopian future, and many artists and writers eagerly set off to help build that human paradise. We can see the influence of that radical utopian vision of history in Kazimir Malevich's invention of nonobjective art. The same vision inspired the writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, a committed Communist, who by 1919 understood that the Bolshevik mode of revolution would create a dystopia rather than a utopia. It moved the memoirist Nadezhda Mandelstam to record how millions survived under the regime that controlled information and propagated a fictional past. Together these men and women prove the continuous assault on reality led not to the withering away of the state, but to the withering away of society.¹⁰

In the conclusion, I address the challenge of emerging from behind the Iron Curtain to reckon with an ugly past, newly revealed. For this, I turn to the contemporary artist Gerhard Richter. Well known today as a German artist, he grew up not in the West but in Communist East Germany. He was twenty-nine when he moved to the West. By his own account, he was profoundly shaped by growing up in a totalitarian country. The past that Richter's art confronts belongs to a Germany that was first in thrall to Nazism and then subordinated to Soviet communism. These multiple layers of personal and collective past are the red thread running throughout his work. I chose an East German rather than Russian artist for the simple reason that the Russian government, unlike that of the united Germany, has refused to

reckon with its own past. In fact, through a series of laws controlling the media and limiting access to state archives, the Putin regime has made it illegal to do so once again.

HISTORY AS PROPHECY

Do we create history, or does it create us? Historical narratives implicitly embed one assumption or the other. Memory—personal and collective—weaves a sense of continuity between past and future. But it is narrative that orders time. Historical narrative is a structure whose power of persuasion rests on three pillars:

- causation, which defines the shape and mechanism of change over time, be it linear or cyclical, goal-directed (teleological) or open-ended, controlled by a higher power or subject to the whims of chance;
- agency, which specifies the capacities of humans to affect their fate as either free historical actors or mere instruments of historical processes; and
- a vision of a moral universe, which accounts for a world rife with human suffering, injustice, and conflict—in short, evil—and that same world infinitely rich with goodness and grace.

The difference between one version of origins and another is not necessarily the facts cited, but intuitions of reality itself, the universe of human affairs. A model of history that envisions an end-state—whether it be the determinism of Marxism, the march of technological progress, or the apocalyptic extinction of *Homo sapiens* following anthropogenic climate change—is flawed because it discounts both human adaptability to change and contingency as a factor in change over time. Such narratives will frame the past and present in terms of their ultimate goal or final purpose—in short, its teleology. (To avoid this technical term as much as possible, I refer to these as goal-directed, end-state, or closed narratives; their opposites are open-ended or undetermined.) Closed narratives follow a through line, “the arc of history,” as if human affairs were like a rainbow that had a beginning you could not quite see, and an end, also invisible. (In a utopian arc, when you

reach the end you'll find a pot of gold.) Proponents of closed narratives have trouble with facts that don't fit into the scripted ending. Magical thinking is substituted for evidence-based history.

At the core of the clashing narratives of American origins are civic values inherited from the Enlightenment that shaped the early republic's ideals of governance. The values written into America's founding documents are often spoken of confidently as timeless and immutable. These notions are not unique to the Enlightenment by any means, but the role liberty and equality play in the American imagination does derive from a specific time and place. What if they are as obsolete as other now-discredited notions inherited from the Enlightenment? Is the idea of freedom and liberty's compatibility as dated as the belief in a universal human nature that is essentially perfectible, or the gradual triumph of reason over superstition, or the virtue of spreading Western civilization across the globe to enlighten those living in darkness? By no means did all Enlightenment thinkers hold such beliefs. But over time, these ideas were taught in classrooms and passed into common parlance. They have become the stuff of campaign promises and partisan sloganeering.

The present isn't a puzzle that a careful reading of the past can fully explain. It's tempting to conclude that things turned out the way they did because they had to. Our intuition of cause-and-effect should be tempered by the knowledge that if there is great uncertainty today, there was equally great uncertainty in all our yesterdays. In the past, people felt as flummoxed and fretful about current affairs as we do. Confusion, coincidence, and pure luck all played parts in things that happened unexpectedly, and things that did not happen, though they were expected. The future of past generations was the great unknown to them, just as our future is shrouded from us.

The trick is that imposing a narrative on the past requires a complicated adjudication between facts and storytelling, contingency and coherence.¹¹ Historical narrative's job is to create a coherent tale from an undifferentiated mass of details. It edits the known facts to sort events and people that are significant from those that are not. In a story, nothing "just happens." There are causes and effects, actors with motivations and actions with consequences. The literary critic Frank Kermode argues that stories are satisfying only to

the degree that the beginning harmonizes with the end.¹² Facts alone cannot make a satisfying account of the past, no matter how deftly arranged. Historical truth is antithetical to narrative satisfaction.

Trying for a comprehensive sense of the past can spin a narrative that tells people little more than what they are inclined to believe. That's when knowledge of the past is taken to be prophetic. The prophecy can be nostalgic—the South will rise again. We can make America great again. Or it can focus on the future as progress toward a happy ending because history tells us that “by walking straight ahead one would rise into the air.”¹³ Faith in continuous progress is likewise the tenet of the techno-optimists of the digital age. They believe that significant social problems should be understood as technical problems: engineers can solve these problems by creating more technology, only newer and better. That mentality has driven the globalization of communication, trade, and education in the name of universal good, which in reality has benefited chiefly the few.

The crises of this century are among the results of multiple technical “fixes”—Google for search of burgeoning databases, Facebook for connecting and sharing content with others, Amazon for one-stop shopping and instant consumer gratification. But searches can be skewed to generate company profits; social media can promote propaganda and lies; and a centralized online market can become a juggernaut that eliminates valuable local or small-scale businesses. The problems created by powerful technology enterprises will not be resolved by forging ahead with more technical innovation. As for the fallout from these largely unregulated industries, especially in undermining trustworthy civic discourse, the accounting has barely begun. So while today's social, political, and economic problems don't appear to have much to do with a closed narrative, in reality such a narrative constrains our choices and drastically limits the kinds of solutions we can imagine and implement.

The proximate cause of Americans' dangerous ignorance of the past is the failure of the public education system. But the proximate cause, which can be addressed, is itself only a symptom of a larger disregard for the past. There is a long tradition of seeing America as a place to welcome the new and leave behind the old. This view is foundational to both conservative and

liberal convictions. Neither the technology nor news industries created this trope. They capitalize on it.

James Baldwin homed in on the difficult truths in the American past that trouble the nation to this day. He believed that, when unrecognized, those truths poison the present and future. Baldwin articulated those truths without demonizing *them* or deifying *us*. He resolutely steered clear of ideologies that offered false comfort in unambiguous answers, writing:

The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, thereafter, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to re-create oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating: one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.¹⁴

If Americans take the premises of the Declaration of Independence seriously today, they are doing so in an era that entertains conflicting views about humanity's perfectibility, the compatibility of personal freedom and social equality, and material and moral progress marching hand-in-hand. Among many there persists an expectation that Western civilization will expand over the globe because it is the apex of a linear cultural development. This assumption in the Bush White House justified the shock and awe of America's invasion of Iraq. It undergirds the conviction that economic globalization is a universal good, as well as the belief in digital technology and social media. Such zeal to spread the good word of modern life and technological innovation is today's form of the crusade to save souls or spread enlightenment. Seeing the consequences of these views in the degradation of the physical environment and the nihilism of "what-about-ism" in civic discourse has spawned a reaction against technology, capitalism, and democracy here and abroad.

The facts of the past don't change, but they are often inaccessible to us—censored, permanently erased by the destruction of records, buried with those who bore witness to the truth. Tracing the lives and work of Eastern Europeans allows us to see that the meaning of the past as determined by the model of history—open or closed—frames the narrative. So if the meaning of the past is not absolute, what possible good is history to us?

History doesn't teach lessons, but if we consider it as an instrument of self-knowledge, we see the hidden dangers of taking liberties with history. If history tells lies, then the foundation we build our lives on is no more stable than quicksand. If we don't know our true origins, we live in ignorance of our true character and capabilities. History is not a court of law, and pleading ignorance cannot protect us. In other words, what we don't know will kill us. We cannot always anticipate what the past holds in store for us. But if we choose to ignore it, we stumble blindly into the future and encounter the past there, waiting for us.

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