

The Past in Contemporary Global Politics

# PARTISAN HISTORIES

edited by

**MAX PAUL FRIEDMAN**  
and **PADRAIC KENNEY**



## Partisan Histories



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The Past in Contemporary  
Global Politics

*Max Paul Friedman and Padraic Kenney*

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# Introduction: History in Politics

*Max Paul Friedman and Padraic Kenney*

The novelist William Faulkner once observed, “The past is not dead; it is not even past.” Events that took place years or centuries ago directly affect the present by setting the conditions in which today’s events unfold. Moreover, the way we tell stories about the past can sway our thinking about the present. Consider two interpretations of the same event: “The Vietnam War was a disastrous mistake, never to be repeated”; “The Vietnam War was a noble cause; next time we must have the will to win.” These two versions of the same past represent competing histories and have very different implications for the present. Thus history, the meaning we assign to the past, can influence such momentous decisions as whether or not to go to war.

For any given subject there is no single, true version of history but multiple contending ones. Often these histories are produced with an immediate goal in mind: they are *partisan histories*, narratives about the past designed to help win arguments and political struggles.

This book examines the role of competing interpretations of the past in political conflicts in different parts of the world today. Each of the nine cases focuses on arguments about history in democratic countries. We have selected democracies because authoritarian regimes, generally, do not witness debates over history, seeking instead to impose their own official versions of history upon a population that may variously accept them, resist, or privately nurture alternative versions to the state or party line. Democracies differ in at least two crucial ways: they provide public space for lively debates, and rather than rely on coercion to obtain cooperation from their populations, they are governed by groups that are able to present a compelling case for their legitimacy as rulers. Often, the evidence offered to support these claims is rooted in a vision of history. Thus democracies not only permit, but also foster or even require, disputes over history.

This is not a book about the work of historians, however. For at least two reasons, the disputes are not between a scientific, objective, professional history produced by historians, on the one hand, and a mythic, politicized, or invented history proclaimed by politicians, on the other. The first reason is that historians are not in agreement with one another. The second is that they, too, carry out their work under



the influence of their own values and interests and those of the societies in which they live. Although good historians abide by professional standards of evidence and documentation and strive for objectivity—that elusive but “noble dream”<sup>1</sup>—they would be mistaken to believe that they ever achieve it. As Ronald Grigor Suny writes in his contribution to this volume, the “pretension to objectivity is also a pretension to an untroubled authenticity of a single reading,” to the exclusion of alternative interpretations. Objectivity is a laudable goal that can never be reached. Claims to complete objectivity often veil a desire to silence competitors.

Rather than being scholarly disputes among specialists, the partisan histories described here are fought out in a public arena outside the groves of academe for political goals of great consequence. Indeed, when the contributors to this volume gathered around a conference table in New York in October 2003, the conversation turned to their experiences of jail, death threats, and exile—experiences familiar to historians under some regimes. It may seem surprising that history can be a dangerous business. As the essays that follow will show, the stakes in history can be very high: war or peace, freedom or imprisonment, powerlessness or control of resources or even of the national government. The actors are a diverse crowd, including politicians, diplomats, ethnic cleansers, and war criminals; revolutionaries, university students, intellectuals, moviemakers, and even comic book writers. All recognize that the past is a rich source of stories, images, metaphors, and “lessons” that have compelling power over the imagination and can move people to action. In the national contests for power depicted here, history becomes a weapon in the struggle for symbolic capital, wielded to acquire legitimacy for one’s own side while delegitimizing the opposition.

To think clearly about these ideas, we need to understand what we mean by several key terms. The *past* is the closest we have to an objective concept: it is simply “what happened before,” an infinite number of events that would be impossible to catalog and reproduce with accuracy because to do so would require omniscience, omnipresence, and eternity. *History* is a sustained narrative about the past, a narrative that is neither natural nor scientific, but is carefully constructed to give meaning to past events by selecting some for inclusion, leaving others out, and interpreting the ones that are recounted in order to convey certain conclusions. To say that history is subjective is not to say that it is illegitimate, or not useful, or unscholarly; it is merely to recognize the production of history as a human activity. Although all history is in some sense political, the *partisan histories* analyzed in these essays are narratives that play central roles in national or international conflicts, without which those conflicts cannot be understood. In their essay in this volume, Subho Basu and Suranjan Das invoke E.J. Hobsbawm’s distinction between subjective partisanship in historical writing and partisan history. Whereas the former “rests on disagreement not about verified facts, but about their selection and combination, and about what may be inferred from them,”<sup>2</sup> in the latter, advancing political interests is more important than standards of evidence. Although we argue that all history is subjective, this is not to suggest a kind of relativism. The very best histories adhere to high methodological standards. But even they are not free of political implications.

In the last three decades, a new subdiscipline of the humanities has emerged to examine some of the questions we engage with here: the study of *memory*.<sup>3</sup> One tendency is to offer the term as a counterpoint to scholarly or official histories: memory

as an experientially based interpretation of the past not found in books but sustained across time through cultural practices such as rituals, memorials, and folklore. The literal meaning of the word derives from a mental faculty that is private and individual: in a concrete sense, people have memories, peoples do not. Two French scholars contributed importantly to broadening the definition of the term to apply it to society. Maurice Halbwachs pointed out in the 1920s that individual memories do not grow in isolation, but are influenced by interaction with others. His understanding of collective memory remained rooted in the organic mental process: memory could not last more than a lifetime, but it could be shared by a community of individuals with common experiences.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1970s, Pierre Nora drew on Halbwachs's concept of collective memory to describe something more enduring and even "living," a presence of the past borne not only by the recollections of a group, but by physical sites and cultural practices that last much longer than a lifetime. Unlike the allegedly dry, lifeless, elitist history written by historians, memory in this sense is supposed to be part of the living body of society, and it is essential to the constitution of national identity.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation, though inspired by a democratic impulse to recapture the study of the past from elitist scholars, paradoxically lends itself well to romantic nationalist myths of origin.

In this volume, we do not directly engage in academic arguments about the usefulness of the term "memory." Instead, we use the term to designate diffuse representations of the past that need not be textual. Memory does not emerge organically from some mythical living body of a nation, but is shaped by many forces including lived experience, and also by the deliberately articulated versions of the past we call history. There is no bright shining line between history and memory in the essays that follow, but histories are usually consciously presented in some form, whereas collective memory can be a more passive understanding of the past. However, we do not believe memory to be an apolitical, organic process, any more than we believe that nations are natural entities. As Patrick Geary has written, all memory is "memory for something."<sup>6</sup>

*Political* in its basic sense means, "related to power." We recognize that power can be found in many sites: in language, in symbols, in personal relationships, in everyday practices. In this volume, the authors focus especially on a more narrow and public realm of the political: the contest for control or influence over the state and its resources. Readers of comparative political science, accustomed to studies of politics at this level, often find discussions of history confined to an introductory "background" section. But history is not mere background, something one absorbs before coming to grips with more current concerns: it is often the very stuff of contemporary political conflict, as all our cases demonstrate.

We have deliberately selected asymmetric cases from five continents to compare with one another. Comparison is a useful tool of analysis whose purpose here is not to conflate the different examples into an overarching global phenomenon, but to highlight differences and commonalities. One might not expect to find much similarity among contemporary political conflicts drawn from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, but comparing such divergent areas and their unique experiences does yield insight into the way the past can be instrumentalized for political purposes in a broad range of circumstances.

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from this comparative look is that whether one examines nation-building projects in Nigeria, electoral contests in Spain, foreign policy in the United States, or the Arab–Israeli peace process, accounts of the past are inextricably linked to the politics of the present. For those interested in assessing rival histories, an awareness of their positioning in political conflicts is essential. For those interested in understanding contemporary political conflicts in various countries, recognizing the role played by partisan histories is indispensable to cutting through mythmaking and pretensions of absolute, objective truth.

It is not surprising that in contests for control over the resources of the nation-state, groups should seek legitimacy and adherents by presenting themselves as the only true representatives of the nation through historical narratives that support that claim: the rationale for nationalism is always sought in history. This is sharply evident in the case of so-called new nations such as Armenia or Nigeria whose boundaries were established recently enough to require justification or whose populations are diverse enough to require a unifying narrative explaining why the people owe allegiance to the state. But competing nationalist discourses are also explicitly or implicitly present in long-established nations in contemporary conflicts over issues not directly connected to borders or membership in the national community. Germany's postwar effort to regain national legitimacy took the form of various attempts at restitution, expiation, and distancing from the Nazi era, a process marked by the incessant clash of partisan histories wielded by competing sectors of German society. Chile and Spain face the dilemmas not of new nations but of new regimes, where democratic rule has replaced dictatorship in a peaceful transition made possible initially by agreements not to aggressively prosecute or even officially commemorate the crimes of the past, the "pacts of silence." However, as the moment of transition has receded and the pacts have eroded, political parties from different parts of the spectrum have presented partisan histories that make claims to different elements of the national narrative to advance their cause.

One pattern that emerges from the cases is a disparity between left-wing and right-wing approaches to national self-examination. Nationalist conservatives tend to avoid or oppose searching explorations of national guilt or responsibility because they prefer to put forth a celebratory narrative of tradition, of legitimacy through continuity and links to ancestors; if those ancestors were criminals, the claim to legitimacy is weakened. If nationalist conservatives do not wish to take ownership of those crimes, they have to deny that they happened (as when right-wing Germans refuse to believe that regular army units were capable of committing atrocities), denigrate their importance (as when right-wing Japanese belittle the suffering of sex slaves), or attribute them to extenuating circumstances such as military exigencies and self-defense against the victims (conservative American dismissal of civilian deaths in Vietnam, Chilean claims that General Augusto Pinochet's victims were Marxist rebels). Left-liberals tend to be more skeptical of such claims of descentance and often celebrate change rather than tradition, so they have less interest in presenting an unblemished national past. Moreover, by insisting on public attention to atrocities associated with conservative predecessors, they discredit the celebratory nationalism used by contemporary conservatives, and by embracing national responsibility for the past, they can appeal to sectors of the population that identify with the victims

while at the same time furthering a cosmopolitan agenda.<sup>7</sup> This is not to suggest that the Left has no other goals in its uses of the past. Andrew Beattie's essay notes the sometimes scattershot charges of West Germany's links to its fascist past made by the Left, and analyzes East Germany's instrumentalization of memories of communist resistance to the Third Reich. Ilan Pappé implicates the Israeli "Peace Camp," generally associated with the Labor Party, in obscuring the events of the 1948 partition of Palestine. Carsten Humlebæk reports that in Spain, the Socialist Party was the first to break a truce over the use of history for partisan purposes when it feared losing a national election in 1993. Nevertheless, claims of an untarnished national history are almost by definition of greater concern to those for whom asserting national pride based on continuity with the past constitutes a central part of their political program.

In these disputes, the role of intellectuals varies and is rarely so marginal as many self-deprecatingly believe, nor so impressive as some might wish. In countries such as Israel and Germany where professional historians have substantial access to the national media and take part in national political debates, their interpretations of recent history can affect political developments directly. In the United States, Japan, Armenia, and Nigeria, the work of professional historians seems to have less impact on national discussions than do works of fiction, film, public memorial sites, and claims by politicians. Popular writers outside the academy and historians who sustain rather than critique triumphalist nationalist myths tend to have the most success with the reading public and the national media. One reason this is of interest (not only to academics wistful for a larger audience) is that much academic discourse nowadays acknowledges the artifice of nationalism and is skeptical of heroic myths. Many academics and liberals take it for granted that nationalism has been a damaging force, and they cite abundant examples of violent consequences, from Hitler's Germany to Milosevic's Serbia, or the clashes between Israelis and Palestinians, Indians and Pakistanis. But as Toyin Falola points out in his essay on Nigeria, nationalism can also be a positive force in helping to draw a disparate population together.

Finally, comparing these disparate cases shows that although every case is unique, we can detect phenomena that connect them and speak to a kind of *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the age) based on transnational developments. Germany's confrontation with its Nazi past appears as a positive or negative model in nearly every country coming to terms with its own national traumas. As John Torpey has written, "one might well say that 'we are all Germans now' in the sense that all countries . . . that wish to be regarded as legitimate confront pressures to make amends for the more sordid aspects of their past."<sup>8</sup> The Holocaust and its aftermath loom large in many parts of the globe; for example, the reports issued by truth commissions examining atrocities committed in the "dirty wars" in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Guatemala were all titled *Nunca más*, "Never again." The Nuremberg trials of German war criminals conducted by the Allies after World War II (and, to a less visible extent, the Tokyo trials of Japanese war criminals) were central in establishing concepts of international law and human rights that influence contemporary investigations. Nuremberg enshrined the notion of "crimes against humanity," crimes so heinous that they should be subject to no statute of limitations and can be prosecuted even if the acts were officially regarded as legal or condoned by the previous regime. The tribunal also established the principle of "command responsibility," that is, that superiors may be

judged guilty even if they did not participate directly in the crime, while rejecting the excuse “I was just following orders” as a defense for criminal acts. At the same time, Nuremberg and Tokyo are sometimes held up as a negative model of “victor’s justice” by people eager to ensure that today’s proceedings against former regime supporters are carried out as part of an internal process of national renewal, not imposed by conquerors. More recently, South Africa’s post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission has served as a model for similar commissions in other countries.

These transnational developments are in part due to the demonstration effect of a few highly publicized cases such as Germany and South Africa, and are also influenced by external actors. German politicians debating forms of restitution for Nazi crimes monitor public opinion in the United States and seek to maintain harmonious relations with Israel and neighboring countries in Eastern Europe. International pressure from East Asia and beyond seems to account for the increasingly pervasive discourse of apology in Japan. In truth commissions in El Salvador and Guatemala, the presence of United Nations personnel served as a counterweight to the preponderance of power held by the military and the right wing that would have preferred to see no investigation of the dirty wars. In Spain, the Left’s decision to break the pact of silence over the civil war of 1936–1939 came after a delegation to Mexico found that Spain’s war was already being commemorated there.

Where partisan histories are deployed in favor of or in opposition to reparations, the core issue is rarely the monetary damages themselves, since the damage done by atrocity can never be repaired or repaid. More important is the need for official recognition of past wrongs as a form of moral compensation and a way of bringing renewal to a society whose past has delegitimized it internally and internationally. There must be some form of punishment of or contrition by the perpetrators or their heirs to satisfy the needs of the victims and their allies in civil society and the international community. To say that this is a political process is not to denigrate those who participate in it, but merely to acknowledge how decisions are reached in democracies: politically. Where the process includes some version of a truth commission, the point of these investigations is not simply to reveal what is in any case often already known. The goal is, above all, official acknowledgment as a corrective to previous official denials and deception (sometimes embodied in the physical disappearance of victims).<sup>9</sup> These are some of the commonalities that emerge from a study across multiple cases.

In a sense, all histories are political, but not all partisan histories are equal. Some are more plausible than others. While the historical profession provides standards of evidence and argumentation and forms of peer review to evaluate academic works of history, these, too, are implicated in political processes for good or ill. Ultimately, whether an interpretation flourishes in the public sphere is determined not by guardians of an academic discipline but by the broader political context of the society in which it appears. The chapters of this book should make this apparent.

### ***The Cases***

The nine essays that follow are divided into three parts. The first group of cases are societies riven by present conflicts over past crimes by former regimes, including

Germany, Japan, Chile, and Spain. The second group consists of “new nations” (postcolonial or newly independent states) where contested narratives of the past are an integral part of ongoing disputes over borders and sovereignty (India and Pakistan, Israel and Palestine) or national legitimacy and cohesion (Armenia and Nigeria). The third part examines the uses of historical analogies in foreign policy, especially the role such analogies played in the United States in debates over the meaning of the Vietnam War and the subsequent use of military force. Although each case is unique, and interesting for its particular circumstances, there is naturally some overlap among the categories.

Andrew Beattie’s essay on Germany provides a natural starting point because the German process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, “coming to terms with the past,” so often serves as a reference point and a model, whether positive or negative, invoked in other countries. Germany is sometimes described as confronting a “double past,” working through the aftermath of both the Nazi era and communist rule in East Germany. Merely asserting such equivalence between two very different dictatorships is highly controversial, but there is no denying the complexity of the web of historical narratives running through German political life.

Germans after World War II faced an array of challenges whose working through would require explicit engagement with the past. If self-aggrandizing German nationalism was thoroughly discredited by Nazi crimes, on what basis could Germans find legitimacy as a nation? Beattie examines the two German states’ distinct and mutually exclusive legitimization strategies, each based on a disavowal of National Socialism. In the East, this took the form of a doctrine of “anti-fascism” that linked the capitalist West to the Nazi era while celebrating communism as the true source of resistance. In the West, the doctrine of “anti-totalitarianism” fused communism and fascism into a single phenomenon, with democracy its antithesis. Since many East German communists, including leaders such as Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker, had survived Nazi persecution, there was a plausible basis for the assertion of a historical antifascism that was carefully nurtured through official discourse, commemorations, and educational policy. West Germany’s democratic bona fides were established through a series of restitution and compensation payments to Israel and survivors of Nazi crimes, a foreign policy based on international cooperation, and, especially after the 1950s, an intense and ongoing critical debate in the public sphere. Since the end of the cold war, that debate has intensified.

In postwar Japan, professional historians for many years steered clear of the recent past in favor of studying earlier periods, leaving the terms of the debate over Japanese responsibility and possible restitution to be set by political parties that generally minimized the importance of Japanese crimes, and by popular forms of writing, including best-selling comic books, that promote a revisionist nationalism. These are not the only sources of information available in Japan, where the reading public buys serious books about the war and leftist schoolteachers in their lectures expand beyond the meager treatment of World War II contained in official textbooks. As Alexis Dudden makes clear in her essay, the impression widely held in the West of an unapologetic Japan is out of date. The country does not seem to be developing anything on the scale of an official penitential discourse like the one in Germany that sets boundaries for acceptable behavior by public figures. Yet in today’s Japan, the

concept of apologizing for past crimes has moved from being a faintly audible demand from the victims to being co-opted by the state in an attempt to meet contemporary international standards of legitimacy that require gestures of atonement. In both former members of the Axis, while individuals may be impelled by some degree of shame or ethical motivation to make public conciliatory gestures, material factors such as the drive for access to important export markets also influence government policies designed to improve the national image.

Katherine Hite's essay on Chile presents another post-dictatorship society, but one whose former regime was not defeated in war. A number of repressive Latin American military regimes lost power in the 1980s and 1990s, but this was a retreat "in an orderly fashion," with the departing generals able to impose conditions that prevented successor governments from prosecuting former leaders guilty of crimes.<sup>10</sup> This was the Faustian bargain made by post-authoritarian governments: trading amnesty for stability, they accepted a form of extortion according to which high military officers consented to live under democratic rule only on condition that they not be brought to justice, implicitly threatening to revolt if their demands were not met. Those implicated in former crimes retain a degree of power that constrains democracy and the rule of law, while they seek to influence interpretations of the past that become official history.

During Chile's transition to democracy, the Chilean military, which had not just lost a war, retained powerful allies among conservative civilians. Chile therefore saw few prosecutions, but pressure from victims and their families, and from opposition political parties, led to the creation of a truth commission that presented detailed accounts of the structure of repression under General Augusto Pinochet. Hite's study delves deeply into the intersection of official histories and private memories of what she calls the "trauma" of experiences associated with the overthrow of the democratic government of Salvador Allende in 1973 and the subsequent dictatorship under Pinochet. This trauma still circumscribes electoral politics in Chile today. An uneasy truce and sporadically broken silence endured through most of the 1990s, until Pinochet retired from the military, entered the Senate, and then was sought for prosecution by a Spanish magistrate. Loosely organized groups of young people whose parents were victims of the Pinochet regime played an important role in breaking the silence when they staged demonstrations in front of the homes of perpetrators. (This generational conflict is not unusual; many young Germans of the "generation of '68" confronted their parents over their roles in the Third Reich and produced a sea change in national discourse on the past.) As Hite concludes, since private memories endure in spite of any agreements laying out the limits of official history, political leaders may be forced to come to terms with popular demands for addressing the past.

The bitter legacy of the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939 remained largely unprocessed in the constricted public sphere of Spanish society under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, whose rule ended with his death in 1975. Unlike what happened in Japan and Germany, but as in Chile, there was no "de-Francoization"; the principal civil and military institutions of the Franco regime remained in place, and there were no prosecutions of former officials. There followed a period of transition in which the Spanish military and political parties respected a "pact of silence," out of fear that

to begin a heated debate over the civil war might risk sparking a new one. To maintain social peace, the parties agreed to apply an amnesty program to political prisoners who had opposed the dictatorship as well as to Franco's enforcers who had committed human rights violations.

But the amnesty threatened to become a kind of amnesia, writes Carsten Humlebæk in his essay. Although all political parties were eager to protect the fragile democracy, it became clear that the benefits of the pact of silence were unequally distributed. The pact worked in favor of the Right, whose misdeeds were obscured, but not of the Left, whose suffering and resistance in the war and the dictatorship could neither be compensated for nor turned into political capital because the subject was taboo. In 1993, after enough time had passed that democratic rule seemed stable and the Socialists thought they might lose an election, they abandoned the pact and tried explicitly to associate the rival conservative party (the Partido Popular) with Franco's dictatorship. A steady stream of challenges to the pact of silence followed, from restitution claims by former prisoners or victims' families to the successful campaign to grant Spanish citizenship to aging foreign volunteers on the anti-Franco side in the civil war. This process of step-by-step rectification of past wrongs has included the search for new forms of expressing Spanish nationalism without echoing Franco's exaltation of the "Spanish Nation" or his practice of suppressing powerful regionalist sentiment. One recently proposed model reflects the influence of the German concept of constitutional patriotism, that is, civic national pride not based on ethnicity or a myth of origin, but rather on the satisfaction of sustaining a democratic form of governance.

Comparing the cases of Germany, Japan, Chile, and Spain shows that in post-authoritarian societies, the way new governments establish their legitimacy and the scope of discourse about the past is greatly influenced by the fate of the perpetrator regime, how discredited it has become, and how much political power its remnants may yet hold.

If politics works partly through history in countries coming to grips with the legacy of authoritarian rule, in the so-called new nations that achieved independence after World War II or after the cold war, contested narratives of the past are indispensable to any position one takes on the boundaries of sovereignty. This can refer concretely to disputed borders, or more broadly to the question of who belongs to the nation, who does not, and who should rule.

How do nationalists use history "to constitute collective loyalties, legitimize governments, mobilize and inspire people to fight, kill, and die for their country"? Ronald Grigor Suny takes up this question in his wide-ranging essay on the struggles to establish hegemonic narratives of unitary nations in the republics that gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Shedding discredited communist ideology and the legacy of Russian and Soviet imperial rule, elites adopted ethnic nationalism as an argument to support their claim to run the state and to define those who might enjoy full membership. To many observers and to the partisans of nationalist movements, this was merely the flourishing of eternal nations liberated from Soviet repression. But as Suny shows, exclusionary narratives of ancient and continuous national identity obscured centuries of experience in the Caucasus, where a shared regional culture and a "polyglot, migrating population" had made the current capitals of Azerbaijan and Georgia into "models of interethnic



cohabitation.” Nationalists who invoked heroic narratives to support their cause did not appreciate the irony of the debt they owed to the USSR, since one unintended consequence of Soviet nationality and modernization policies had been to draw administrative boundaries that artificially hardened fluid ethnic distinctions. In Kazakhstan, historians contributed to the work of forging a new nation by eliminating the multi-ethnic aspects of the Kazakh past and promoting an ethnic Kazakh claim to territorial control. In Armenia, romantic essentialist claims to authenticity and territorial rights reach back much further than the 1915 Turkish genocide that constitutes such an important element of Armenian national consciousness in the diaspora. In the independent republic, Armenian nationalists today vehemently reject proposals—such as one put forth by Suny himself during a visit there—to understand nationality as a combination of historical traditions and subjective will and to emphasize the potentially inclusive character of cultures in the Caucasus.

Subho Basu and Suranjan Das analyze the production of nationalism through narratives of the past on the Indian subcontinent since independence in 1947. They present examples of Hindu and Muslim nationalists wielding partisan histories through the decades before and after independence to seek legitimacy and attract adherents. Basu and Das point out that these historical narratives did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, they followed a disciplinary tradition established during colonial rule, when the British presented India as “a complex mosaic of static, unchanging, and conflicting well-defined ethnic communities,” among which Britain served as a neutral umpire. This colonial project of control survives into the contemporary era of religious nationalist ideology, taking the form of Hindu *Rashtra* (Hindu state) in India and Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan, each of them suppressing historical periods of tolerance and syncretism to create an unbroken narrative of purity in states that actually contain great diversity. The extent of constraints on historical debate in Pakistan, the least democratic of the countries discussed in this book, where the questioning of certain founding myths and heroes is banned by law, undergirds our hypothesis that democracies foster more open debate about the past.

The assertion of sovereignty by one group over an area of diverse population on the basis of selective historical claims is also at the heart of the enduring conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, writes Ilan Pappé in his contribution. A popular founding myth of Israel, expressed in slogans such as “making the desert bloom” or “a land without a people for a people without a land,” posited the absence or irrelevance of an indigenous population. This provides a good example of what scholars mean when they say that collective memory is a process not only of remembering but also of forgetting. Arabs living in the territory Israelis now claimed were driven away in what Pappé calls the successful ethnic cleansing campaign of 1948. Since then, the facts of 1948 have been sustained in the individual memories of Palestinian refugees holding “property deeds, faded photographs and keys to homes they can no longer return to,” and were confirmed by recent scholarship of the so-called revisionist Israeli historians. But an official Israeli historical narrative that avoids the events of 1948 has contributed to the failure of every attempt to negotiate a peace settlement. Reintegrating the neglected history of the ethnic cleansing campaign into the peace process would allow for restitution to Palestinian refugees, in the form of a right of return or financial compensation. In the theory put forward by Howard Zehr, this

would enable restorative rather than retributive justice.<sup>11</sup> The partisan histories that substitute for an accurate account that might better enable Israel to come to terms with its past, however, block an understanding of this central Palestinian concern. Pappé joins Edward Said in accompanying this call with the appeal that Palestinians demonstrate their understanding of the significance of memories of the Holocaust to Israeli Jews. Such a twin development in historical empathy may be indispensable to any possible reconciliation.

Nationalism plays a destructive role in most of these accounts, but this need not be a universal law. In Nigeria, a nation fractured by sectional differences, nationalist interpretations of history are part of a project of establishing unity by promoting African or Nigerian traditions, as opposed to colonial or tribal ones, thereby, it is hoped, increasing the viability of the nation-state. As Toyin Falola says, “the colonial library slandered Africa” by presenting Africans as divided and incapable of self-government. Although Europeans created a state called Nigeria, the nation called Nigeria—the “imagined community” that, once established, provides legitimacy to the state and can produce collective allegiance to a central government—must be created through Nigerian narratives of history.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, nationalism can be a positive force. But what should the narrative say? And how does one handle ethnic and religious divisions in developing a national history? There is no consensus about the past in Nigeria, but there are many partisans of rival interpretations. Falola describes the principal categories of historical interpretation that have been used to try to gain broad political support. In the north, political leaders among the Hausa–Fulani appeal for unity based on Islamic tradition. In the south, Yoruba politicians invoke a mythical father figure, Oduduwa, to argue that all Yoruba share a common descent and should belong to the same political party. In the east, the Igbo tend to emphasize another aspect of the past—their widespread suffering during the Biafran War of the late 1960s—to argue that this victimization requires compensation in the form of political power. Falola concludes that in spite of a panoply of attempts by intellectuals and educators to draw on the past for arguments in favor of certain forms of governance, given the challenges of unifying a plural society, discourse on Nigerian national history will continue to be partisan and fragmented.

In exploring the function of partisan histories in political conflicts in the United States, there are many possible subjects one could consider. Campaigns for restitution and redress for past injustices draw the national spotlight from time to time, from the successful efforts of Japanese Americans to gain acknowledgment of their unlawful incarceration during World War II to the campaign for reparations from government and corporations for the descendants of slaves and ongoing struggles by Native Americans to obtain, if not compensation for something that cannot be restored, then various forms of restitution that address acute symbolic grievances (such as the return of human remains held in museums) or provide material relief to make daily life more tolerable. Partisan histories feature in these and in an array of other disputes. Selective symbolic imagery from the Revolution, the civil war, Reconstruction, and World War II plays a role in appeals to party loyalty and clashes over civil liberties, race issues, even tax policy. Legal battles over many subjects are resolved by the courts through a particular interpretation of what the “founding fathers” or “framers of the Constitution” intended.

We have chosen to focus here on the Vietnam War, not because it is more important than all other possible topics, but because it offers a useful example of how disputes over the past can be urgently present in national politics. Rival interpretations of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam 30 years after its conclusion still are very much a part of how Americans make—and justify—decisions on foreign policy.

Patrick Hagopian begins his essay by calling attention to the suppleness of interpretations of the past in providing lessons for the present. Vietnam and Munich regularly arise as historical analogies in contemporary debates over taking military action. The conventional wisdom about the lesson of the 1938 Munich agreement, which granted Adolf Hitler a third of Czechoslovakian territory in exchange for a promise that he would not ask for more, is that negotiating with dictators only emboldens them, and one must intervene early to avoid catastrophic wars. There is no such consensus about the meaning of the Vietnam War. That disastrous episode might teach that there are limits to American power, that one should avoid distant interventions in internal conflicts at the risk of getting caught in a quagmire. To supporters of military intervention, however, the lesson of Vietnam is that one must intervene more forcefully from the start to win a war, not proceed in stages of escalation. Those rival interpretations have been played out in the United States during debates over military intervention abroad from the 1970s into the twenty-first century.

As Hagopian demonstrates, and as we have seen in the other democracies, control over historical interpretation is quite diffuse, and cannot simply be asserted by government. When President Ronald Reagan put forth the “noble cause” interpretation of the Vietnam War in the context of increasing intervention in Central America in the early 1980s, his narrative strategy rallied his conservative supporters but alienated his opponents and much of the public, who feared that if Reagan thought the war in Vietnam had been a good thing, he might try to have another one in Nicaragua or El Salvador. Comparable difficulties faced subsequent administrations with regard to the Gulf War of 1991, intervention in Somalia and former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and in the war in Iraq in 2003. In each case, competing interpretations of Munich and especially of Vietnam were wielded in public debate and invoked in private deliberations over whether or not to commit U.S. forces.

Hagopian agrees with Ernest May that foreign policy makers often invoke historical analogies simplistically, seldom considering ways in which the comparison might be misleading.<sup>13</sup> In his essay, Hagopian draws on the analysis of Yuen Foong Khong<sup>14</sup> to examine the different ways politicians and their advisers use historical examples: “do they use them *heuristically* as analytical exercises to help them to make decisions; do they use them *didactically* as rhetorical devices to explain their decisions and persuade others; or do they use them *cosmetically* to dignify their decisions after the fact when they write their memoirs, giving their actions a learned appearance by showing how they were informed by historical knowledge?” The same question should be asked about the eight other cases in this book, indeed, about the use of history in political conflicts worldwide, whether these conflicts revolve around national identity and sovereignty, restitution, electoral politics, or foreign policy. The reader may determine that, like the rest of us, policy makers perform all three actions at once: they are greatly influenced in their thinking by narratives about the past that they find compelling; they deploy these narratives to draw support and undercut the opposition; and they turn

to interpretations of the past as an unparalleled source of legitimacy on weighty questions.

It may be appropriate to amend Hegel's insight that the only thing we ever learn from history is that we never learn from history. We can be confident that history will continue to be deployed for political purposes, if often with more passion than learning. This collection of essays should encourage a skeptical posture toward political conflicts about the meaning of the past, so that claims of historical justification are not left unexamined.

## Notes

1. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
2. Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1990), 166.
3. A good introduction to this field can be gained by perusing the journal *History and Memory: Studies in Representations of the Past*, published semiannually since 1989.
4. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980, originally published in 1925).
5. Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–1998, originally published in 1984).
6. Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 12.
7. See A. Dirk Moses, "Coming to Terms with Genocidal Pasts in Comparative Perspective: Germany and Australia," *Aboriginal History*, 25 (2001), 91–115.
8. John Torpey, "Introduction," in Torpey, ed., *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 3.
9. Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 25.
10. Juan E. Méndez, "Latin American Experiences of Accountability," in Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi An-Na'im, *The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing, and Social Justice* (London: Zed Books, 2000), 127.
11. Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1990).
12. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).
13. Ernest R. May, *The "Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
14. Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

## Suggestions for Further Reading

- Barkan, Elazar, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (New York: Norton Press, 2000).
- Berg, Manfred and Schäfer, Bernd, eds., *Historical Justice in International Perspective: How Societies are Trying to Right the Wrongs of the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- Hein, Laura and Selden, Mark, *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2000).