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Jakob Tanner

13 The Politics of Memory and the Task of Historians

13.1 History as a weapon

Putin's attack on Ukraine is also a propaganda war that is being fought around the globe.¹ Russia prepared far in advance the ideological terrain on which the armored units advanced toward Kiev on February 24, 2022. The attempt to conquer the neighboring country was based on a military-historical projection of power in which words and actions worked together synergistically. According to the model of a self-fulfilling prophecy, a manipulated historical narrative and the military foray were designed to mutually assist each other in achieving a breakthrough. The latter was supposed to settle the matter by force of arms, the former had to legitimize the annexation and make it appear indispensable for the thriving of Russia's own nation. Imperial great power ideology and armed intervention turn out to be two sides of the same coin. Images of the past, present actions, and expectations for the future merged under the sign of internal repression and external expansion. History is "weaponized for war".²

The Russian state leadership conceived the invasion of the neighboring country as a "special military operation" in order to "denazify Ukraine." This language is based on a multifaceted reframing of Russia's past. Putin portrayed the implosion of the Soviet Union in late 1991 as the "greatest catastrophe of the 20th century." Stalinism was rehabilitated through the lens of imperial greatness and a glorified Red Army. The celebrations and military parades held annually to commemorate the Red Army's victory against Hitler's Germany on May 9, 1945, became ever more lavishly staged, and with this war cult, the underlying message was reversed: a "Never again!" changed to "We'll do it again!" The former peace demonstration was transformed into a parade of military offensive strength. This

1 This essay is a reworked version of my keynote lecture at the Delhi conference from which this edited volume originated. The war in Ukraine brought the topics of the lecture to a head. So I decided to include the new constellation in the print version (September 2022).

2 Simon Schama, "When history is weaponized for war," *Financial Times* (6 May 2022), <https://www.ft.com/content/25a57741-34e6-403b-b216-1704448afc0a> [Last seen: 29 November 2022]. See also: Gwendolyn Sasse, *Der Krieg gegen die Ukraine: Hintergründe, Ereignisse, Folgen*, (München: C. H. Beck 2022); Mark Mazower, "Russia, Ukraine and Europe's 200-year quest for peace," *Financial Times* (24 March 2022), <https://www.ft.com/content/567107fa-2760-452b-8452-e656ca5ca478> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

instrumentalization of the history of the Second World War corresponded to an encroaching interpretation of the emergence and the scope of Russianness.³ In July 2012, Putin published an essay “on the historical unity and Russians and Ukrainians,”⁴ in which he declared that, together with the Russians, the Ukrainian “Little Russians” and the Belarusians would belong to the “triune historical nation” and be bound together by a common heritage and destiny. The aim of this statement was to extinguish Ukraine as a state and nation.

By depicting Ukraine as a fascist-ruled country and a bastion of enemy forces directly on the border with Russia, Putin triggered a sense of urgency.⁵ In an eerie invocation of the war the Red Army had waged during World War II to liberate Europe from the yoke of Nazism, Russian troops were now set on the march against the alleged fascists of today. Contemporary patterns of perception, historical misrepresentation, and imperial aspirations merge in military violence.

Putin’s war in Ukraine is based on a flagrant distortion and instrumentalization of history. This goes hand in hand with the brutal suppression of a methodically reflective independent historical science. It is no coincidence that just before the invasion of Ukraine, the NGO “Memorial International” was compulsorily dissolved by a court, and the state-controlled media now only disseminate the official version of the past justifying the war.⁶ The question of the role of historians in politics and of new forms of public use of history must therefore be supplemented by the search for possible responses to a situation in which critical historical scholarship is suppressed and repressed from the public sphere of perception under the threat of severe penalties in the case of non-compliance with official viewpoints.⁷

To elaborate upon this problem, the next section of my chapter presents some facets of a personal, public, and commercial use of history. A third section asks about the relationship between lies and truth in politics and historiography.

3 Sergej Medwedew, “Krieg im Namen des Sieges von 1945,” *Dekoder* (12 April 2022). <https://www.dekoder.org/de/article/krieg-ukraine-9-mai-tag-sieges> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

4 Article by Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

5 Concerning the anti-Semitic charges of this accusation, cf. Jason Stanley, *Der Antisemitismus hinter Putins Forderung nach „Entnazifizierung“ der Ukraine* (Geschichte der Gegenwart, on-line-Plattform, 9 March 2022). <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/der-antisemitismus-hinter-putins-forderung-nach-entnazifizierung-der-ukraine/> [Last seen: 20 December 2022].

6 Manuela Putz, Memorial, in: *dekoder on-line-platform 2022* <https://www.dekoder.org/de/gnose/memorial> Information is still available on the website of MEMORIAL Deutschland. Mitglied des internationalen MEMORIAL-Netzwerkes (Moskau). <https://www.memorial.de/index.php/ueber-memorial/memorial-international> Last seen: 19 December 2022].

7 See the reports of the Network of concerned historians on Russia: <http://www.concernedhistorians.org/content/ar.html> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

A fourth section introduces the distinction between historiographic revisions and historical revisionism. Section 5 looks at the invented traditions of the nation. This is followed by a brief analysis of the competing interpretations of the history of the EU (section 6) and the temptation of a politically conformist historical revisionism (section 7). In the concluding two sections, the contentious concept of “information warfare”, which also encompasses historiography, is problematized (section 8) and, against this background, the task of the professional historians in the current global imbroglio is reconsidered (section 9).

13.2 Ambivalent uses of historical narratives

In a broader perspective, it is evident that the relationship between historiography and politics is contradictory. There are countries in which scientific freedom is basically respected, and others in which the results of historical research are suppressed. Nevertheless, it is not possible to draw a clear line between scientific statements and political pronouncements. The distinction between “free science” and “controlled propaganda” does not answer the questions of whether and how historians should interfere in public disputes and whether there can be any non-political historiography at all. Rather, multiple entanglements between political power and historical narratives come to the fore. These exchanges between history and society have changed considerably over the past times – and they have always been ambivalent, oscillating between enlightenment of the democratic public, fixation of state power, and obfuscation of the mind. Of particular interest are the intertwinements between the professionalizing of history and state-building processes. Both directions of impact can be observed: the grip of state authority on history as a legitimating resource on the one hand, and a phantasmagoric self-imagination as well as historical criticism of origin legends, of the pretexts of power politics, and of official justifications on the other.

History has always been in public use, long before it established itself as a discipline in the matrix of academic sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The First World War marked a decisive threshold for modern propaganda. In these war years, historical images and prejudices became important weapons in the fight against the enemy, and without such a pervasive emotional mobilization, this carnage could not have been dragged on for so many years and sustained to the bitter end. Heroic legends about the entrenchment of one’s own nation in history and about its exceptional character fueled the long-lasting war effort. Even more than in the decades before, national identity and the imagination of a historical mission became spiritual elixirs of endurance.

On the other hand, historiography and the archives on which it was based underwent a boost in professionalization and scientificisation in the period around 1900. Historians presented studies that provided new and groundbreaking insights into the past, and questions were raised concerning the “lessons to be learned”: Did history hold any lessons at all? Did historians have to intervene directly in politics – or should they keep their distance from current political events and rely simply on the power of their research results? These questions and arcs of tension have permeated the entire twentieth century.

Since the end of the Cold War, there have been some significant shifts and innovations in the public use of history. I might mention, for example, the government-mandated expert groups which were, along with truth commissions, set up in the 1990s to come to terms with past wrongdoings and – in some manner – to make reparations, issue apologies or offer atonement,⁸ or the flourishing contract research in the field of corporate history, which has been discovered by big and small firms alike to be an effective marketing vehicle. For example, a German “agency for applied history,” which also has commissioned corporate histories in its program, advertises with the slogan “History Marketing. Since 1999”.⁹ And the English-speaking consulting historians write on their platform: “Commissioned histories are one of the most popular and effective ways to represent the past.”¹⁰

In parallel, there are also many offers for privatized family and ancestor research, which impacts the public sphere and benefits from the new possibilities offered by net-based platforms such as Ancestry, My Heritage, Family Tree DNA or Find a Grave.¹¹ Besides that, there is a wide range of popular stories displayed by magazines that want to sell their readers upscale entertainment and thrills. The exoteric news coverage on deep history and the Anthropocene in the alarming context of global warming and ecological crisis are also part of this.

In the twenty-first century, the reliance on history as a medium of national identity has continued to grow in importance. Myths of origin and the assertion of an earlier golden age now unfortunately lost, which had been “deconstructed” by critical historiography in decades before, are once again rearing their heads, not only in nationalist movements and parties, but also in nation-states that are turning away from the rule of law and a pluralistic democratic public sphere, and instead

8 Berber Bevernage, Nico Wouters, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History after 1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Jeremy Sarkin, ed., *The Global Impact and Legacy of Truth Commissions* (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2019).

9 <https://www.geschichtsbuero.de/> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

10 <https://www.waybackwhen.com.au/commissioned-histories> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

11 Jerome De Groot, *Consuming history: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2016).

championing ideals of ethnic-cultural homogeneity.¹² Under these circumstances, the past is domesticated by powerful restoration narratives, which merge the retrospective valorization of a glorious history with a scenario of present-day decline and disintegration, promising to make the country “great again” or “to take back control.”

At the same time, history is being falsified with increasing blatancy. This is promoted by the amplification of state propaganda and its proliferation around the globe. With social media, gatekeepers who as a rule strove for some quality control and undertook fact-checking more seriously were eliminated, and at the same time, the craving for novelty grew significantly. An unsettling fake news dynamic arose as a result.¹³ I might mention just one small episode that took place in tiny neutral Switzerland in 2015. At that time, the national right was rearming an old myth according to which Switzerland had followed the maxim of neutrality since the legendary battle of Marignano 500 years ago, while it also celebrated a medieval victory against the arch-enemy, the Habsburgs, another 200 years earlier still. When asked how one could meticulously describe a war that took place in 1315 despite the lack of sources or evidence, a member of the right-wing Swiss Peoples Party countered with the message: to hell with your outdated belief in facts; and then claimed: “We simply have the juicier stories”.¹⁴ And indeed, it was a challenge for professional historians to outperform the blood-soaked and virile imaginings of triumph and mastery with their sober descriptions of medieval power struggles and calls for reassessment, neither of which were easily accessible to the broader public.

13.3 History between scientific practice and literary storytelling

Such occurrences are not new, however. In her telling 1971 text on the Pentagon Papers, “Lying in Politics”, Hannah Arendt wrote: “Secrecy – what diplomatically is called discretion as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government –

¹² Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); In his history of European integration, Kiran K. Patel indicates that in the meantime the classical right-left schema is becoming increasingly overlaid by contrasts between authoritarian-ethnocentric and liberal-cosmopolitan conceptions. Kiran K. Patel, *Europäische Integration: Geschichte und Gegenwart* (München: Beck, 2022), 108.

¹³ From a slightly optimistic but empirically well founded perspective: Adrienne Fichter, *Smartphone-Demokratie: Fake News, Facebook, Bots, Populismus, Weibo, Civic Tech* (Zürich: NZZ Libro, 2017).

¹⁴ Guy Krneta, “Saftgeschichten,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 30 March 2015). <https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/debatte/saftgeschichten-1.18512693> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings”.¹⁵ She goes on: “The historian knows how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life; it is always in danger of being perforated by single lies or torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups, nations, or class, or denied and distorted, often carefully covered up by reams of falsehoods or simply allowed to fall into oblivion”.¹⁶

But what can the science of history – in full knowledge of the vulnerability of the fact-based narratives it presents – do about the ongoing instrumentalization and misuse of the past by political power, how can it uphold its scientific claims to validity? And what are these claims to validity anyway? How can the “truth regime” of historiography be defined in an adequate way?

It is obvious that historians, too, have to tell stories and can be seduced by their own imagination. The great French historian Jules Michelet, for example, saw himself as a researcher “with great imagination” who “drank too much of the black blood of the dead”. On his gravestone in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris it is written: “L’histoire est une resurrection” (History is a resurrection). But even a historian as prone to flights of the imagination as Michelet knew that some methodological principles must be respected. He sought to combine the skills of historical craft with the art of storytelling, and was thus able to create captivating narratives. What was attractive about his interpretations was not that he fictionalized history, but that he recognized a productive, historically empowering force in people’s fictions. Instead of presenting arbitrary histories, he was concerned with the factual force of the normative, i.e., the incorporation of emotional factors and ideational motivations into the writing of history.¹⁷

The same concerns were shared by historians such as Jacob Burckhardt and, since the 1920s, the Annales historians, in particular Lucien Febvre and Marc

15 Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics”, *The New York Review of Books*, 18 November 1971. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/11/18/lying-in-politics-reflections-on-the-pentagon-paper/> [Last seen: 29 November 2022]. Here quoted after: Hannah Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1972), 4.

16 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 6.

17 See: Roland Barthes, *Michelet par lui-même: images et textes présentés* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1954); When Michelet, a staunch republican, lost his job at the Collège de France and the archives under Emperor Napoleon III, he turned away from historiography and wrote popular moral-philosophical tracts. Gerd Krumeich, “Jules Michelet (1798–1874)”, in *Klassiker der Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. Lutz Raphael, Vol. 1 Von Edward Gibbon bis Marc Bloch (München: Beck, 2006), 64–87.

Bloch. The role of fictional fantasy resurfaced in the 1968 movement, with which the slogan “Soyons réalistes, exigeons l'impossible” (Let's be realistic and demand the impossible) gained resonance. With it, the protesters wanted to insert fictional energies into the real. They pointed out that there is no cultural reality without the imaginary dimension. At the same time, the rebellion was rubbing up against the social facts of society, in accordance with the motto “La réalité dépasse la fiction” (Reality goes beyond fiction). Social history, which was burgeoning at the time, did well to take an in-depth interest in social structures and processes of change, which encompassed visions of the future, images of the past, and traditions that impinged on social conflicts and class struggles. While many activists made up their own version of the past, it was at all times clear to professional historians that the past could not be an open space for fictitious back-projections of current viewpoints. However, this did not mean that the historical interpretation was unambiguously determined by the sources. As always, there were rival and competing readings of past events. But beyond these differences, there was a consensus that the proposed explanations had to be grounded in methodologically robust research.

This restriction has on the flip side an indeterminacy: the facts reconstructed from the sources do not lead to a single truth, to an uncontested version of the past. Rather, it is precisely the recognition of the complexity and opacity of past times that goes hand in hand with the recognition of different, even conflicting historical interpretations. On the one hand, this is because each narrative inserts the individual facts into a plot, and then this “emplotment” (the insertion of facts into a plot) generates effects of meaning that cannot be traced back to factually supported statements. On the other hand, historical accounts are not homogeneous in terms of their factual density; there are areas in which the narrative closely follows fact-based propositions, and others in which more fictional connectors and hypothetical bridging are necessary.

In general, it can be said that the traces of the past, however random they may be and no matter how many attempts at manipulation or carelessness they are subjected to, nevertheless bear witness to events that are gone and are therefore unchangeable. Despite the diversity of accounts and pluralism of perspectives, written sources, visual traditions and material artefacts (the vestiges of the past) limit the range of interpretation. This is because all these traces of the past, material or symbolic, have the epistemic capacity to exert resistance to nonsensical, preposterous, or freely made-up narratives. As some historians have emphasized, they have a “veto power” or a “veto right” which revokes certain versions of the past and excludes them from the spectrum of historical scholarship.

An instructive example of this epistemic double bind was provided by the Spanish journalist and author Javier Cercas (* 1962) who became renowned as “champion of reparative justice” in a land that has purchased a relatively bloodless transition from fascism to liberal democracy since the mid-70s at the cost of political amnesia about Franco’s victims, which also implied concealing crimes and granting amnesty to the perpetrators. In 2001 Cercas published his best-seller “Soldados de Salamina” (Soldiers of Salamis), dealing with an event in the early years of the Spanish Civil War.¹⁸ His book “was widely embraced as a timely moral intervention in the Spanish public”. But it exhibits an irritating one-sidedness. The fascist protagonist is painstakingly researched, whereas his opponent on the republican side “is largely a product of the author’s imagination”. When later asked about this asymmetry, Cercas stated: “My aspiration was to lie anecdotally, in the particulars, in order to tell an essential truth.”¹⁹

13.4 Historiographic revisions versus historical revisionism

Javier Cercas’s “faction”, viz. the combination of facts and fiction, tells us a true, valid and comprehensible story about the brutal warfare and repression undertaken by Franco’s troops. In the introduction, the first-person narrator of the novel thanks his interlocutors for giving him insight into the history of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent repression by the Franco regime. In the course of his research, he gets deeper and deeper into the maelstrom of the history of that period and decides to write a “narrative after reality”. This ambition to immerse himself in his story and then to draw readers into it and give them an inside view of events was also the basis of his account, published in 2009, of the failed coup in Spain on February 23, 1981, by parts of the Guardia Civil and the military.²⁰ The essay-novel “Anatomy of a moment” is based on the reconstruction of the facts as exact as it can be, but the story could not have been written

18 Javier Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina* (Barcelona: Tusquets ed., 2001).

19 Giles Harvey, “Why a Champion of Reparative Justice Turned on the Cause. A Critic at Large,” *The New Yorker* (6 January 2020, 13 January 2020); <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/13/why-a-champion-of-reparative-justice-turned-on-the-cause> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

20 Javier Cercas, *Anatomía de un instante* (Madrid: Debolsillo, 2009).

from the sources alone. Although Cercas is not a professional historian,²¹ his work reflects basic problems of historical scholarship as a whole.

Today we rightly assume that global and transnational history, and the greater sensitivity to historical entanglements, have deepened and broadened our understanding of the past, just as gender studies, queer studies, subaltern studies, postcolonial studies, critical whiteness studies, disability studies, environmental history as well as deep history have enormously widened our knowledge horizons. And if history as a scientific discipline is to continue to exist in the future, new generations will also need curious, skilled, and technically well-trained researchers who are able to astound us with new hypotheses and findings. Despite the tensions and animosities that always accompany such debates, these ruminations will continue to manifest themselves within the context of scientific discussion – in journals, at conferences, in workshops, research cooperation, reviews, and media appearances. Even though, as is sometimes emphasized, the results of historical research have often been revised, these historiographic revisions have nothing to do with the “historical revisionism” which today appears with increasing impertinence.

According to a useful typology by Aviezer Tucker, three forms of revisionism can be differentiated: Evidence, significance, and values are the three drivers of revisionist reinterpretation of history.²² Since they start from completely different presuppositions and have different levels of legitimacy, they must be clearly distinguished. Insofar as new source-evidence comes into play, a new interpretation conforms to the methodological rules of historical science. A revised history, based on previously unknown or unnoticed *facts & figures*, drives historical research forward, and the idea that this process can be stopped at any point because “everything” is now known and correctly presented is profoundly unscientific. To be separated from this are significance- and value-driven revisions. These are also unavoidable, but regularly lead to fierce disputes both inside and outside science.

Revisionism as “ism” manifests itself when the care for facts that characterizes revised historiography is thrown overboard and a new interpretation is claimed against the source material and archival evidence. Tucker puts it this way: “One of the chief revisionist strategies has been to “fuzzy” epistemological issues, to make

21 After earning a doctorate in Spanish philology in the 1980s, Cercas taught for two years as a lecturer at the University of Illinois at Urbana. Since 1989 he has been a professor of Spanish literature at the University of Girona. After 2017, he was severely criticized as an opponent of Catalan separatism, which pushed him to write a trilogy of crime novels entitled “Terra Alta”. The first novel was awarded the prestigious Spanish literary prize Premio Planeta.

22 Aviezer Tucker, “Historiographic Revision and Revisionism. The Evidential Difference,” In *Past in the Making. Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989*, ed. Michal Kopecek (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 1–14.

the distinction between evidence-based probable knowledge of history and fiction vague and unclear.”²³ Applying this statement to Cercas, we observe that his fictionalization of historical account escapes this problem by keeping his narrative compatible with the findings of professional historiography. He represents a kind of borderline case that demonstrates the problem of a historical “truth regime” in a particular way. His narrative strategy strives to give readers a way to identify with the actors in the story and empathize with their experiences. Cercas wants to elaborate his stories with gripping details to arouse emotional involvement. To get his message across, he employs meticulously invented adornments. This is, of course, out of the question for a professional historian. Nevertheless, Cercas remains within a fact-based, evidence-supported historiography, and his interpretation retains its validity and credibility.

At this point, a semantic gap between the concept of revisionism in Europe and in the USA becomes apparent. According to European standards, Cercas, with his concern to relate historiography to ideas of justice, is not a revisionist. To label him as such would overlook the central fact that his narratives, enriched with fictional elements, are consistent with the results of historical research. In the USA, on the other hand, he would be classified among the revisionists. Here, revisionism exhibits a clear leftward twist due to its egalitarian stance insisting on human rights. A changed understanding of society and the accompanying engagement to finally take the history of racism and colonialism seriously, promoted the examination of previously neglected sources and the unlocking of neglected or overlooked archives. The strategy of this revisionism is to provide fresh evidence for new historical interpretations. It is significance- and value-driven, but pays, as a rule, careful attention to maintaining the methodological practices of professional historiography. Its persuasiveness results from the blatant one-sidedness of previous narratives of progress, which adopted the ideology of “manifest destiny” as the guiding principle of research. When a proponent of this revisionism refers to an “ever-changing past,” he does not mean – and this is another semantic difference from European linguistic usage – the past as an ontological status, but rather of the different narratives that can be recounted about it, depending on perspective, archival collections, and document availability.²⁴

²³ Tucker, “Historiographic Revision”, 3.

²⁴ James M. Banner, Jr., *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History Is Revisionist History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

13.5 The invented narratives of the nation

How to narrate the emergence of a nation: This problem was solved by nationalists who wanted to anchor their forward-looking ideology in the past. For this reason, nationalism in its various manifestations was and is a problem for historiography, and the self-representation of nation states are often at odds with historical truth. At the end of the nineteenth century, at a time when many historians fancied that they could fully endorse “their” state and thus contribute to its legitimacy, the French historian, archaeologist, orientalist, and religious scholar Ernest Renan offered a revelatory account of the epistemic problem of political engagement in historical scholarship. In his Sorbonne lecture “What is a Nation?” in 1882, he referred to the nation as “a soul, a spiritual principle”, which short-circuits the present and the past.²⁵

“Being a people” means for Renan “having common glories in the past and a will to continue them in the present”. A nation is bound together by a deep sense of “having made great things together and wishing to make them again”: In other words: the nation as institutionalized compulsive repetition, which perpetuates an imagined self-referential community through recurrent ritual action and thus colonizes the future. It’s a clear-cut collectivity, and, as such, “a great solidarity constituted by the feeling of sacrifices made and those that one is still disposed to make. [. . .] A nation’s existence is (please excuse the metaphor) a daily plebiscite, just as an individual’s existence is a perpetual affirmation of life.”

Even if a daily plebiscite can also constantly reopen the future and create day-by-day possibilities to break with the past course of things, Renan brought to the fore the affirmative impact of this daily manifestation of a public will. He described a community of synchronized emotions and shared mental models, which at the same time represents an “always brutally manufactured [. . .] unity”. This does not tolerate views that deviate from, differentiate from, or relativize this unity. Therefore, it is also at loggerheads with professional historical research, which disrupts the homogeneous picture. The super-elevated self-image that unites the national community is reinforced, rather, by forgetting and forgery. In Renan’s words: “Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation and it is for this reason that the progress of historical studies often poses a threat to nationality.” By making “the violent acts that have taken place at the

²⁵ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?,” text of a conference delivered at the Sorbonne on March 11th, 1882, in Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* (Paris, Presses-Pocket, 1992) (translated by Ethan Rundell). http://ucparis.fr/files/9313/6549/9943/What_is_a_Nation.pdf [Last seen: November, 29 2022]. All following Renan-quotations from this text, which does not contain page references.

origin of every political formation” disappear, the nation empowers itself to continue to act violently in an unreflective, and as it were unconscious way.

More than six decades later, at the end of the Second World War, the journalist and democratic socialist George Orwell, in a similar vein, albeit more thoroughly argued, drafted his “Notes on nationalism”, in which he presented nationalism as a “state of mind” and an “emotion” that goes far beyond the identification with a nation-state.²⁶ The act of sacrificing one’s individuality for a greater unity, devoting oneself to it flesh, skin, hair and all, can – according to Orwell – be made for any kind of collective claim, from that of a political nation, to religion or large-scale ideologies such as communism and pacifism, to class and race. In all these cases there is an intrinsic logic of enhancement at work. In the mental pattern of nationalism, the accumulation of power is constantly perceived “in terms of competitive prestige”, i.e., of “victories, defeats, triumphs and humiliations”, and translated into the agonal model of “rise and decline”.

As the main characteristics of nationalism, Orwell firstly mentions obsession, secondly instability, and thirdly indifference to reality. In the following, I concentrate my remarks on the last criterion, because it is here that Orwell makes some particularly captivating remarks. According to him, the analysis of nationalists is not based “on a study of probabilities but on a desire”; it is not a matter of “an appraisal of the facts but [. . .] the stimulation of nationalistic loyalties”. Thus, the nationalist tries to clutter the past and deny the most obvious facts: he “not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them”.

What is epistemically decisive, according to Orwell, is that “every nationalist is haunted by the belief that the past can be altered” and “spends part of his time in a fantasy world in which things happen as they should”. Thus, propaganda takes on a new quality. It is no longer simply a pretense concerning false facts, but its promoters begin to believe in a kind of sympathetic magic whereby “they are actually thrusting facts into the past”. They no longer know that they are lying, because they are deceiving themselves. Consequently, they manifest a penetrating and self-righteous “indifference to objective truth”, which gives rise to the feeling “that their own version *was* what happened in the sight of God, and that one is justified in rearranging the records accordingly”.

²⁶ George Orwell, *Notes on nationalism* (first published in: “British Magazine of Philosophy, Psychology, and Aesthetics” Polemic, in October 1945). All following Orwell-quotations from this text, which does not contain page references. [http://seas3.elte.hu/coursematerial/LojkoMiklos/George_Orwell_Notes_on_Nationalism_\(1945\).pdf](http://seas3.elte.hu/coursematerial/LojkoMiklos/George_Orwell_Notes_on_Nationalism_(1945).pdf) [Last seen: November, 29 2022].

These new types of propaganda create an unprecedented sense of cognitive insecurity. The decisive distinction between truth and untruth, between facts and lies, is hollowed out and erodes. A feeling of unreality begins to shape the social mood: Hannah Arendt would later refer to this as an “Alice in Wonderland atmosphere of reality”. Orwell at this point turns to the categories of psychiatry, writing that there is “no limit to the follies that can be swallowed if one is under the influence of feelings of this kind”. And he diagnoses those who are “living quite happily amid dreams of power and conquest which have no connection with the physical world” as “not far from schizophrenia”: “The general uncertainty as to what is really happening makes it easier to cling to lunatic beliefs”.

13.6 Competing interpretations of the European Union

Against this background, the promoters of the “United States of Europe” and other supporters of a European integration sought to overcome the nationalist regression of politics and the belief that history is a fungible resource for power strategies.

Emerging from the partisan and resistance movements and embedded in a broad public debate, which had a particularly strong resonance among the younger generation, new European perspectives were devised. An important first milestone was the *Ventotene Manifesto* of 1941 which called for “the abolition of the division of Europe into national, sovereign states”. Written by anti-fascist activists (Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi and Eugenio Colorni) on an Italian prison island, it launched “the movement for a free and united Europe” at the very apex of the war.²⁷ The main thesis of the manifesto was that the nationalist competition for power would transform the state from a “guardian of civil liberty [. . .] into the master of vassals bound into servitude” in order “to achieve the maximum war-efficiency”. In such an interpretation, the process of European integration was indeed a self-imposed project of liberating the minds of Europeans from historical hallucinations and securing peace on the continent.

This flattering blueprint, which fitted later self-portrayals of the EU, came under the shadow of criticism from two sides: from the right, the EU (in common with its predecessor-organizations, the EEC and the EC) was rejected as an “artificial

²⁷ Altiero Spinelli, *Il manifesto di Ventotene (con un saggio di Norberto Bobbio)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991).

construction” directed against “natural nationalism” or primordial “European culture”, and was also branded as a conspiracy of the elites against “the peoples”.²⁸ On the left, there was talk of a “Europe of the corporations”, which was promoting the Europeanization of capitalism at the behest of corporate power.²⁹ In both cases, the supranational and intergovernmental institutions of the EU were vilified as a sinister “Brussels bureaucracy”, with tentacles reaching into national polities, seeking to undermine their sovereignty and the very essence of democracy.³⁰

These generalized judgments have been rebutted by historical research that addresses the multifaceted history of the European Union with a variety of questions. The economic historian Alan S. Milward refers to a *European Rescue of the Nation State* and this diagnosis fits the facts. Milward accurately predicted that the political geography of the nation states would not dissolve in the course of European integration, but that they would be fundamentally transformed in this process toward a model of shared, cooperative sovereignty.³¹ Against teleological versions of a progressive, irreversible integration process, it has been emphasized that integration was improbable in various respects and shaped by many contingencies. For the historian Kiran K. Patel, the EU is a “compromise and enabling machine”.³² In particular, he points out that the paramount standing of the EC, and from 1992 onward the EU, became apparent only from the 1970s onward. In the 1990s, the emphasis of the integration process shifted from peace to freedom, which became the normative parenthesis between Western and Eastern Europe after the Cold War. Since the 2010s, however, the EU has been evolving very much in the vein of a security project. A break with the logic of openness in the decades around 2000 became evident. The goal of “strategic autonomy” under the sign of sovereignty, protection and safety moved into the foreground and gained dominance.³³

28 Barbara Rosenkranz, *Wie das Projekt EU Europa zerstört: eine überzeugte Europäerin rechnet ab* (Graz: Ares-Verlag, 2013); Jan Drees Kuhn, *Die Zukunft der Nationen in Europa: ist das Zeitalter der Nationen und Nationalstaaten in Europa vorüber?* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009).

29 Johan Galtung, *Kapitalistische Grossmacht Europa oder Die Gemeinschaft der Konzerne?: “A Superpower in the Making”* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1973); Stephanie Sand, *1992: Das Europa der Konzerne* (München: Heyne, 1990).

30 For an overview: Kiran K. Patel, *Project Europe: a History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

31 Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State* (London: Routledge, 2000); Alan S. Milward, *Politics and Economics in the History of the European Union* (London: Routledge, 2005).

32 Patel, *Project Europe*, 118.

33 Patel, *Project Europe*, 114–115.

The EU as a whole responded with resolve to various challenges – the financial market crisis of 2008/09, the Euro-crisis 2010–2012, the Brexit of 2016–2018, the Corona pandemic since 2020. But the internal conflicts have not lost their virulence. Russia’s violent attempt to eradicate Ukraine is the most recent and foremost political-transnational stress test for EU cohesion. The sanctions not only have a long-term effect on the Russian economy and society, but also a negative short-term impact in European countries dependent on Russian energy supplies. Solidarity with Ukraine is not free but comes at a price. It is obvious that Putin is betting that the provision problems will drive a wedge between regions and population strata and divide Europe from within.

The danger of internal tensions and rifts was an ongoing issue in the EU’s predecessor organizations. Since the EU’s eastward extension in 2004 and 2008, these centrifugal forces have been gaining momentum. The picture is not uniform; the Eastern European countries, propelled into a full-scale economic transformation, have positioned themselves quite differently against the comparatively prosperous Western European members that have built the very first European institutions during the Cold War. The drive for demarcation results not only from a disparity in material wealth that also determines the balance of labour migration, but primarily from historical experiences within the violent power constellation of the Cold War. The Soviet-dominated satellite-countries perceived the implosion of the Eastern bloc and the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 as a significant step toward national self-determination. In this region, and especially in the Baltic states newly established at the beginning of the 1990s and in Ukraine, Russia continued to be considered as an acute menace.

In order to hold an expanded, inwardly heterogeneous EU together, the invocation of “western values” became a mantra of internal cohesion. This appeal to the “European community of values” is not without problems. It neglects the fact that Europe refers basically to human rights, i.e., universal values. The insistence on these values as being “western” or “European” can be regarded as exclusionary, according to the all-too-well-known colonial formula: “The West and the rest”. It was a major flaw in the European strategy against Putin that the EU and the NATO did not cooperate and coordinate more with the United Nations and other international organizations, thereby striving for a language that could have broadened the defensive line against Russia’s flagrant violation of international law.

13.7 A “new narrative for Europe” and the temptation of revisionism

This narrowing to an exclusive self-perception, which at the same time constitutes a normative self-nobilization, was already evident earlier. Parallel to the reevaluation of the idea of security, the quest for a common European history also became more intensive. Thus, in 2012, the European Commission mandated the initiative “for a new narrative for Europe”.³⁴ The initiative was launched in Brussels in 2013 with a fanfare of trumpets and was subsequently substantiated by a series of conferences. Political differences, however, soon devolved into a struggle over the interpretative authority of this great narrative. While from the right, the triad of “Christianity, (heteronormative) family and fatherland” was strongly promoted as value-drivers of European history, the political center and the left relied on a narrative model that presented Europe as an area of peace, freedom, security, stability and justice. A consensus could not be reached on the guidelines of a history bridging different value-attitudes and integrating national past-policies.

A recent and more promising project focusing on World War II and the Holocaust was started in 2021 with MemAct! (Memory, Agency, and the Act of Civic Responsibility). Fueled by the intention to counter the rise of right-wing extremism in a variety of EU countries, MemAct! aims at moving toward a cross-European perspective in Holocaust education. Citizens with diverse backgrounds, and above all too-often-passed-over voices from East- and South East Europe, “will be encouraged to define their own meaningful questions on the Nazi past and connect them with challenges of our current Europe to approach the ethics of civic responsibility”. MemAct! aims at building and coordinating networks among historians, teachers and activists in the field of civic education from a European perspective, thereby integrating people of all ages and lifestyles communities, migrants, disadvantaged people. It is particularly interested in how these different people mediate their own history within a European context.

Such a project, with a new approach to the history of World War II, also offers the opportunity to overcome the revisionist approaches that, after the eastward enlargement, have appeared in historical statements of the EU. This was particularly noticeable in the case of the European Parliament Resolution of 19 September 2019 “on the importance of European remembrance for the future

34 In German: “für ein neues Leitmotiv für Europa”; Bernhard Forchtner and Christoffer Kølvrå, “Narrating a ‘new Europe’: From ‘bitter past’ to self-righteousness?,” *Discourse and Society* 23 (2012/4): 377–400; Melina Fäh, “Die ‘New Narrative for Europe’- Initiative der Europäischen Kommission: eine kulturanalytische Betrachtung” (Zürich, Universität Zürich: master’s thesis, 2015).

of Europe”.³⁵ While this resolution may aim at creating a cohesive European culture of remembrance, and thus pursues a goal that is diametrically different to, for example, that of the German AfD (“Alternative für Deutschland”) with its demand for a “historical-political turnaround by 180 degrees”, it contains annoying elements of a revisionist historical rectification and concessions to the demands of day-to-day politics.³⁶ To be sure, the resolution invokes “respect for human rights and the rule of law both inside and outside the European Union”.

However, the document is not intended to highlight problems, but to use historical memory as a malleable catalyst for cultural integration. Europe is presented as a unity that has overcome a totalitarian past. Clearly and succinctly, the text discloses the dangerous “efforts of the current Russian leadership to distort historical facts” and to divide the continent with an “information war waged against democratic Europe [. . .]”. To conjure up a “common culture of remembrance” it “rejects the crimes of fascist, Stalinist and other totalitarian regimes of the past as a way of fostering resilience against modern threats to democracy, particularly among the younger generation”. On the same lines, the Resolution mentions “the historical revisionism and the glorification of Nazi collaborators in some EU Member States”,³⁷ and expresses dismay “about the increasing acceptance of radical ideologies and the reversion to fascism, racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance in the European Union”.

But when it comes to the outbreak of the Second World War, the text exclusively refers to 23 August 1939, i.e., the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Historical research has shown repeatedly – and thus established a consensus across all differences of interpretation – that this so-called “non-aggression pact” (which included a secret protocol that regulated, among other things, the division of Poland) was indeed an infamous gambit and notable event in the lead-up to war. Nevertheless, the conclusion that this pact “paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War” is misleading. Hitler would have brought the war off the fence without this pact, he would have found

35 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

36 Suzanne Kristkoiz, “The Utilisation of Historically Revisionist Narratives by the FPÖ and the AfD,” *E-International Relations*, 21 April 2021, <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/91269> [Last seen: 29 November 2022]; Meron Mendel, “Geschichtsrevisionismus der AfD: Es genügt nicht, defensiv zu sein,” Column in: *taz-tageszeitung* 9 November 2020. <https://taz.de/Geschichtsrevisionismus-der-AfD/!5725048/> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

37 On blatant revisionism in Poland, see: Todd Carney, “Can European Law Stop Historical Revisionism?,” *OpinioJuris*, 17 February 2021, <http://opiniojuris.org/2021/02/17/can-european-law-stop-historical-revisionism/> [Last seen: 29 November 2022]. In paradoxical reversal, it is the task of the European Union to hold accountable nationalist governments that whitewash their own country’s past.

other ways and means to launch it. The road to military conquests was already taken after he was appointed Chancellor of the Reich at the end of January 1933. The Resolution conceals this insight, which has been well established by historical research,³⁸ because it seeks to reduce internal tensions in the European Union.

Even though the EU Resolution is tied to the proclamation of noble values – such as “peace, freedom and democracy” – such historical revisionism is a symptom of an underlying tectonic shift in the institutional use of history. So, in a strange role reversal, a fake news-prone Russian government can credibly defend the historical facts. In “Foreign Policy”, the historian Sergey Radchenko held firm: While he [Vladimir Putin] is right to criticize a recent EU Parliament resolution, his historical revisionism doesn’t stand up to scrutiny.³⁹ This way, the EU resolution complicates a straightforward critique of Russia’s historical revisionism, which has since exhibited its immediate violent propensity. Moreover, as Zoltan Dujins observes, the “Europeanization of an antitotalitarian ‘collective memory’ of communism” also “reveals the emergence of a field of anticommunism” that is “seeking to leverage the European Union institutional apparatus to generate previously unavailable forms of symbolic capital for anticommunist narratives”.⁴⁰ In the meantime, the European Union is confronted with dangers of a new factor from within. In Italy, but also in France, post- or neo-fascist parties are seizing power or trying to do so. They share many of the values of Putin’s Russia and consequently sympathize with the warmongering policies of the autocratic regime.

13.8 “Information war” as information war

If such occurrences become more frequent, the impression will be created that historical discussion is simply a matter of “opinion against opinion”. False reports and brazen lies also claim to be taken seriously as opinions, and obviously such disinformation campaigns work surprisingly well. The targeted manipulations through social media of political decision-making and national elections, which have been

38 Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Nazi Menace: Hitler, Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, and the Road to War* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2020).

39 Sergey Radchenko, “Vladimir Putin Wants to Rewrite the History of World War II,” *Foreign Policy*, 21 January 2020) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/21/vladimir-putin-wants-to-rewrite-the-history-of-world-war-ii/> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

40 Zoltan Dujisin, “A history of post-communist remembrance: from memory politics to the emergence of a field of anticommunism,” *Theory and Society* 50 (2021): 65–96, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09401-5>, published online: 8 July 2020).

conducted since 2016 on a large scale, have shown how in this emerging field creative online activists who want to generate some cash make common cause with state-financed troll-factories. As Orwell emphatically described three-quarters of a century earlier, a proliferation of confusion destabilizes the normative certainties and the epistemic robustness of scientific knowledge. It seems that everything, even the most improbable and implausible, can be true. If every conviction is bombarded with opposing opinions, every political figure is declared untrustworthy, a general hullabaloo will eventually ensue. And this in turn promotes the impression that all statements about the past are in principle the outcome of a power game and as such irreparably contaminated with interests. Historiography then appears merely as a succession of purpose-bound, arbitrarily malleable opinions and as such just another axis of a strategic parallelogram of forces in the merciless battle for power.⁴¹

If this perspective prevails, the concept of a “historical fact” itself will become critical. The journalist McKay Coppins recently broached this problem in an article in *The Atlantic* entitled “The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President” in the following, conclusive way: “The problem we are confronted with is not about telling the truth or lying, but we observe the emergence of a heightened state of suspicion that undermines truth itself because ‘reality’ is more and more difficult to locate. The very notion of observable reality drifts further out of reach.”⁴²

The British journalist and network analyst Peter Pomerantsev points out the same embarrassing state of affairs. His new book bears the Magrittian title *This is Not Propaganda* and examines “The disinformation architecture” with its top-level chief architects and the “community-level fake account operators” who use trolls, bot-herders and cyborgs to spread fabricated claims virally.⁴³

Pomerantsev focuses on Russia and “the Kremlin’s rulers [. . .] precisely because they had lost the Cold War”. Confronted with this unsettling condition, “Russian spin doctors and media manipulators managed to adapt to the new world quicker than anyone in the thing once known as ‘the West’”.⁴⁴ This opens

41 There are also more “technical” definitions of information warfare, which is described as a variant of cyber warfare. In addition to techniques of profile falsification and data collection, information flooding also attracts attention here. Through the mass proliferation of false news via algorithms (social bots), “censorship through noise” is exerted.

42 McKay Coppins, “The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President,” *The Atlantic*, March, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-2020-disinformation-war/605530/> [Last seen: 29 November 2022].

43 Peter Pomerantsev, *This is not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality* (London: Faber and Faber, 2019).

44 Pomerantsev, *This is not Propaganda*, 9.

new prospects for a word-view “that wants to see everything through the frame of information war”: “In this vision all information becomes, as it is for military thinkers, merely a means to undermine an enemy, a tool to disrupt, delay, confuse, subvert”.⁴⁵ The main message is: “facts don’t matter”, they are irrelevant, and whoever has the power can say whatever he wants and, moreover, can expect that even absurd and vicious statements will create a mood in the alarm-stricken electorate and thus, as it were, be disseminated voluntarily until they have ascended to hegemonic public opinion. In such a situation, the question is not whether we are able to distinguish lies from truth but “how can we win an information war when the most dangerous part could be the idea of information war itself?”⁴⁶

This question is of crucial importance today in view of Russia’s military assault on Ukraine. In such a situation, information warfare becomes a weapon in a war fought with modern armament systems. Its main purpose is to sabotage other countries’ moral and material support for Ukraine. When Russian state media claim that the reason for the war is a fascist regime in Kiev, which in turn serves as a bridgehead for a Western offensive, this is, according to all scientific criteria of truth, quite frankly false, and not simply a position in an “information war” in which everyone is working with distortions and falsities. On the contrary, it is necessary to stick to the distinction between information and statements against facts. This is particularly important for historiography, precisely because it is so difficult to substantiate facts epistemologically.

13.9 The task of the historians

If we take this problem seriously – and there seems to be no other choice – we should sharpen our reflection philosophically. An essentialist concept of truth, which sees the past as a thing that can be objectively and unambiguously represented, has served its time in historiography for a long while. Historians such as Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch – to name just two French innovators in the science of history – made it clear nearly a century ago that the “factum” literally means what has been *made*. The fabrication of a fact always kicks off with a question. And once it is available as a datum, i.e., as “the given”, it has to be arranged into meaningful statements and conclusive interpretations. It is always concatenations of facts and narrative connections that create the meaning

⁴⁵ Pomerantsev, *This is not Propaganda*, 112.

⁴⁶ Pomerantsev, *This is not Propaganda*, 114.

of the story and make up the significance of what has gone before.⁴⁷ Although facts are by no means arbitrary, but the result of source-criticism and controlled methodological operations, they can provide different answers to the questions posed. In any case, inquisitiveness is the very ferment that keeps science moving, and since inquiring curiosity can go in a variety of directions, the writing of history is subject to continued revision.

Here we come to the central philosophical problem that Immanuel Kant attached to “the thing in itself”. For Kant, the “thing in itself” exists, but is as such inaccessible. Its intelligibility depends on its contact with a perceptive faculty. Although it is unchangeably there, and may resist human plans and purposes, it cannot manifest itself before it has in some way been prepared. Even if it plays a massive role in human experience as mute resistance and resilient presence, it cannot be integrated into the realm of culture until it has been imbricated into symbolic systems and inserted into empirical relations by a knowing agent and thus made real.⁴⁸ Kant thus formulated the following contradiction: Things are exactly as they appear (they always coincide with their data) but never as they are seen (they are never identical with their data). With a semantic shift this antinomy can be reformulated as follows: The past is exactly as it appears (it always coincides with traces and sources) but what has happened can never be comprehensively represented (it is never equivalent to those traces).

Kant refers to the transcendental conditions of cognition and distinguishes the synthetic from the analytical unity of apperception. This means that the subject is constantly oscillating between a pole of identity and a pole of the objects. The conceptions present in the self-consciousness, which correspond to perceived things, cannot link themselves, but require an I, which establishes connections by remembering.⁴⁹

This contradiction is inherent throughout the scientific truth regime and must also be faced up to within the field of historical research. The idea that a regression to pre-Kantian essentialism can only be avoided by fleeing into an airy *Anything Goes* is not particularly helpful.⁵⁰ The recognition that historical interpretations cannot be anchored directly in the facts distilled from documents and vestiges does not

47 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft: Introduced by Joseph R. Strayer*, trans. P. Putnam, (New York: Knopf, 1963). Lucien Febvre, *Michelet, créateur de l'histoire de France: cours au Collège de France, 1943–1944* (Paris: La Librairie Vuibert, 2014), 38.

48 See e.g. Gernot Böhme, *Philosophieren mit Kant: zur Rekonstruktion der Kantischen Erkenntnis- und Wissenschaftstheorie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1986).

49 Rainer Schäfer, *Ich-Welten: Erkenntnis, Urteil und Identität aus der egologischen Differenz von Leibniz bis Davidson* (Münster: mentis, 2012).

50 On this pretension, which was introduced into scientific debate by Paul Feyerabend, cf: Philipp Sarasin, „Anything goes“: *Paul Feyerabend und die etwas andere Postmoderne* (Berlin: Geschichte der Gegenwart, on-line-Plattform, 2019).

unlock the door to arbitrariness. Rather, interpretations float within a corridor of different possible propositions whose common feature is that they are all supported by differently arranged and weighted facts. The scope for historical storytelling is thus limited by the irrevocable veto power of the sources.⁵¹ However this intricate problem is conceived, one point is nevertheless clarified: The fallacious juxtaposition of historical realists, who cling to a pre-critical understanding of factual evidence and reality, and postmodern relativists, who confuse a constructivist position with trashy arbitrariness, has never been illuminating and does not deserve to be rehashed.

It is more productive to assume that modern societies are always inventing traditions but are also always questioning them and consciously engaging with their past. The flip side of this view is that history is used as a manipulative resource for self-legitimation and propaganda campaigns. That this often happens can be observed from the fact that in the social conflicts of modernity the rival interests usually fight intensively for the hegemony of their own understanding of the world. Any incumbent in a position of power and any major social movement provides new versions of the social fabric of society and advances new claims, whether these are universal human rights or particular privileges. And every community that constitutes and establishes itself in a modern society provides offers of identification and embeds itself in a vivid culture of remembrance. As Maurice Halbwachs showed already in the 1920s, families, religions, nations, professional associations and groups of any kind proceed in a similar way and are comparable in this respect.⁵²

With the French historian Pierre Nora, it can be assumed that there is an irresolvable tension between “history” – understood as historical science – and “memory” – considered as popular culture of remembrance.⁵³ While the former pursues a methodologically guided “working through” and proceeds in a methodical manner, the latter practices a repetitive “acting out” with which a sense of self-esteem and an approach to the world is regularly reaffirmed, regardless of whether it is a matter of previously experienced situations or sheer mental projections. In such a constellation, professional historiography can make a credible claim to truth despite – or precisely because of – its manifold conflicts of interpretation and reinterpretation. It

51 Reinhart Koselleck, “Einführung,” In *Auch Klio dichtet oder Die Fiktion des Faktischen: Studie zur Topologie des historischen Diskurses*, ed. Hayden White (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991), 1–6; Edward P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978).

52 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 6th ed., 2006).

53 Pierre Nora; in collab. with Charles-Robert Ageron et al., *Les lieux de mémoire*, 7 vol. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992).

can reflect the gap between the two approaches and thus also recognize its own dependence on vantage points in the present.

This task in many countries has recently become more difficult. Yet reflections on the public use of history have never been simply an interesting aspect of social communication; indeed, they are a very serious matter, because political repression, ideological propaganda, and the struggle for financial resources have always been the order of the day. Since the transition to the twenty-first century, however, these problems have worsened. All over the world, historians are coming under political pressure precisely because of their hitherto-independent scientific research, and in some countries, they are also threatened existentially. At the same time, information wars are being accompanied by the reallocation of vast financial resources. Governments generously fund their own world views and, in many cases, invest large sums in Internet-based manipulation campaigns. This at the expense of highly respected research projects, renowned scientific institutes, but also indispensable archives and databases, which are confronted with an increasing shortage of money.

Transnational networking among professional historians and social scientists is an integral part of the solution to this political problem and its associated epistemological conundrums. The commitment to scientific freedom and the independence of research, together with the claim for an appropriate share of public funds, become central. To achieve this, however, historians must insist on the importance of their professional skills, and collaborate closely and transnationally. This is not only for political-organizational considerations, but because international cooperation is of crucial importance from an epistemic viewpoint. The endeavor must always be to relate historical research with a local or national focus to a global problem horizon.

