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THE USES OF HISTORY

“[Since college] I’ve spent a third of my life exploring Europe—enjoying my ‘continuing education’ with a curriculum I’ve tailored specifically for myself. I marvel how my travels stoke my interest in history, and how much fun my interest in history brings.”

—Travel writer (and history major) Rick Steves

“When history was no longer an instrument of the [Russian Communist] Party, the Party was doomed to failure.”

—David Remnick

In mid-August 1991, Colonel Aleksandr Tretetsky of the Soviet (Russian) Army wondered whether to continue his gruesome task. The word out of Moscow several hundred miles away was that the overthrow of the Gorbachev regime by a hard-line Communist faction was imminent and that “treasonable” projects like the one he was overseeing were to be immediately terminated.

Some months earlier the government had assigned Tretetsky to manage the excavation of mass graves near the Katyn Forest in eastern Poland. The graves contained the remains of thousands of Polish army officers who, in the Russian version of things, had been murdered by the Nazis during their 1941 invasion of eastern Poland and Russia. Hints that the Russian secret police had really been responsible for the massacre had circulated for years, but in Russia such stories had been ruthlessly suppressed by the state. Information control was the centerpiece, perhaps the vital

1 Quoted with permission of Rick Steves, author of Rick Steves’ Europe Through the Back Door (Avalon Travel Publishing, 2009).
factor, in sustaining the long, seventy-year rule of Communism in Russia. Press reports, film productions, and especially history textbooks had to clear censors in the Moscow bureaucracy. The result was that the Russian people received a cliché-ridden, doctored, party-line version of the past that systematically hid from view the criminal viciousness of earlier Soviet regimes. An entire nation, with few exceptions, believed in a vast fairy tale.

Things began to change in the mid-1980s, especially when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power as the leader of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party. Gorbachev was a true believer in the Communist system, yet at the same time it was he who took the Soviet Union onto a new path of glasnost (openness) that included leanings toward honesty concerning the historical record. Perhaps it is significant that both his grandfathers had suffered imprisonment during the Stalinist era (1924–1953). Gorbachev seemed to believe that the course of development of the socialist state would be advanced if it confessed to its earlier sins—a public cleansing that somehow might bring renewed public devotion to the original Marxist ideals. He therefore ordered the “blank spaces”—essentially those ugly episodes of the Communist past previously hidden by party slogans and lies—filled in. Now, as one writer put it, “the lion of history came roaring in.”

What followed went far beyond Gorbachev’s intent. The “return of history” shook the Soviet regime to its foundations and brought the eventual collapse of the Communist state. After the August 1991 coup by the Communist Party hard-liners against Gorbachev failed, Colonel Tretetsky was able to resume the work of detailing the massacre, in the process confirming that it had indeed been a Soviet secret police operation. But this was but a small part of a much larger movement. Throughout the Soviet Union, historians, researchers, writers, and journalists, with the historical record now open to them, provided elaborate accounts of past Communist crimes. Finally, the Soviet people were informed that since the Russian Revolution in 1917 literally millions of citizens had been systematically exterminated, and that millions more had been imprisoned without trial in Siberian labor camps. In time the “return of history” completely destroyed the Communists’ credibility, and with it their power to govern. David Remnick, in his dramatic account of the collapse of the Soviet Union writes:

> [D]espite Gorbachev’s hesitation, the return of historical memory would be his most important decision, one that preceded all others, for without a full and ruthless assessment of the past—an admission of murder, repression, and bankruptcy—real change, much less democratic revolution, was impossible. The return of history to personal, intellectual, and political life was the start of the great reform of the twentieth century and, whether Gorbachev liked it or not, the collapse of the last empire on earth.

The final irony is that recently the Russian regime of Vladimir Putin has tried to turn back the historical clock by glorifying the Stalinist crimes that Colonel Tretetsky and others were trying to expose. Says Emily Whitaker in a *History*

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3 Remnick, 4.
Today essay: “In 2007 the Putin government directed an initiative to restructure the national curriculum, teaching schoolchildren that Stalin's actions were ‘entirely rational’. In the same year the archives of the eminent human rights organisation, Memorial, were raided. Police confiscated images of Stalinist atrocities, along with 20 years’ worth of oral testimonies chronicling everyday life under his regime.”  

Clearly, free and open historical inquiry is not compatible with a government that has authoritarian ambitions.

The foregoing is but one lucid example of how history can be influential in shaping human affairs. But history has other uses as well, giving each of us an informed perspective on the world around us. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with their rapid and far-reaching changes, have made the past seem irrelevant and uninteresting to many. Yet a moment of reflection will show us that in countless areas of life organic connections with the past remain unbroken. The legacies and burdens of the past, the long-term continuities, are with us still. In fact, one could argue that precisely because change has been so rapid in our time, the need for good history has actually increased. There is much truth in the aphorism “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Without historical perspective we are in danger of falling into the mistaken and perhaps arrogant notion that the problems we face and the solutions we propose are unprecedented and bear no relationship to past human problems. Just one of the contributions history can make is to serve as a useful antidote to such narrow present-mindedness.

Even the rapid change we see around us should not hide the basic reality that all we do, all we think, indeed all we are is the cumulative result of past experiences. The future is an abstraction, the “present” but a fleeting moment; all else is history. The past, and judgments about the past, are inescapable. Daily we speak and act according to some perception of past events; and though our knowledge of the past may be incomplete or fallacious, we are thinking historically. When we choose to enroll in a particular course because we like the teacher, when we vote Democratic or Republican on the

A silent tribute at the Cenotaph (completed 1920), Britain’s World War I memorial dedicated to “The Glorious Dead.” Museums, monuments, and memorials help societies remember their past. Cenotaphs around the world are monuments to those whose remains are buried elsewhere. Image courtesy of Roll of Honour.

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basis of our assessment of each party’s record, when we decide not to go to a movie with someone who “isn’t our type,” we are making judgments based on our analysis of past experience. We are thinking historically.

Not only is it impossible to escape history, it would be catastrophic to try. Imagine for a moment what life would be like if you totally lost your memory. You would, in a very real sense, have no sense of belonging—no family, no friends, no home, no memories to guide your behavior, no identity. In short, you would no longer “be” you. Clearly, your sense of personal identity is not so much a function of what you are at the moment, but what you have been your entire life. The same can be said of society as a whole. A society’s identity is the product of the myriad individuals, forces, and events that constitute its past. History, the study of the past, is society’s collective memory. Without that collective memory, society would be as rootless and adrift as an individual with amnesia. Of the many legitimate reasons for studying history, this seems to us to be one of the most compelling. Individually and collectively what we are is the product of what we have been. In the words of philosopher George Santayana, “A country without a memory is a country of madmen.”

### History and the Formation of Public Policy

The events discussed in the introduction to this chapter marked the end of the decades-long conflict between the Soviet Union and the West (especially the United States) known as the “Cold War.” During that period (roughly 1946–1991) the basis of U.S. foreign policy was known as “containment”—the idea that if the West “contained” Soviet expansionism, eventually the Soviet Empire would collapse under its own weight.

The idea of containment was suggested by one of America’s most brilliant diplomats and historians, George Kennan. It is interesting to note that Kennan’s idea owed much to his reading of history. According to a recent reassessment of the Cold War era, “This idea of time being on the side of the West came—at least as far as Kennan was concerned—from studying the history of empires. Edward Gibbon had written in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that ‘there is nothing more contrary to nature than the attempt to hold in obedience distant provinces,’ and few things Kennan ever read made a greater or more lasting impression on him. He had concluded during the early days of World War II that Hitler’s empire could not last, and in the months after the war he applied similar logic to the empire [Soviet leader Josef] Stalin was setting out to construct in Eastern Europe.”

The Uses of History

EXERCISES

The discussion of the uses of history emphasized the relationship between the past and the present, and the role history plays in defining our own identity. These concepts are summarized below, along with a variety of other reasons why the study of history is a rewarding venture.5

A. History provides us a sense of our own identity. Each of us is born into a nation, but also into a region, a culture, an ethnic group, a social class, and a family. Each such grouping can and does influence us in a number of ways. The life experiences and values of an African American born into a poor family in the rural South are apt to differ greatly from those of a white Californian born into a suburban family. The study of history helps us to get our bearings in such respects—in other words it allows us to achieve a social as well as a personal identity.

B. History helps us better understand the present. The cliché is true that to understand the present one must understand the past. History, of course, cannot provide clear answers to today’s problems (past and present events never exactly parallel each other), but knowledge of relevant historical background is essential for a balanced and in-depth understanding of many current world situations.

C. History—good history—is a corrective for misleading analogies and “lessons” of the past. Many who believe the proposition that history is relevant to an understanding of the present often go too far in their claims. Nothing is easier to abuse than the historical analogy or parallel. Time and again politicians, journalists, and sloppy historians can be heard declaring that “history proves” this or “history shows” that. But the historical record is so rich and varied that one can find examples that seem to support any position or opinion. If one reads selectively, one can find historical episodes to support a variety of policies and ideas. Good history, on the other hand, can expose the inapplicability of many inaccurate and misleading analogies, as well as expose the dishonesty inherent in “cherry-picking” historical episodes in order to bolster a predetermined conclusion.

D. History enables us to understand the tendencies of humankind, social institutions, and all aspects of the human condition. Given the vast range of its inquiry, history is the best “school” for study of many dimensions of human behavior: heroism and degradation, altruism and avarice, martyrdom and evil excess, freedom and tyranny—all of which are part of the record and part of the story that history tells.

E. History can help one develop tolerance and open-mindedness. Most of us have a tendency to regard our own cultural practices, styles, and values as right

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5 Even this list is but a selection of the “uses” of history proposed by thinkers from ancient times to the present. For an excellent overview of these ideas see Beverley Southgate, What Is History For? (London: Routledge, 2005).
and proper. Studying the past is like going to a foreign country—they do things differently there. Returning from such a visit to the past, we have, perhaps, rid ourselves of some of our inherent cultural provincialism.

F. **History provides the basic background for many other disciplines.** Historical knowledge is extremely valuable in the study of other disciplines—literature, art, philosophy, religion, political science, anthropology, sociology, and economics. Further, with regard to the last four, it is fair to argue that the social sciences “are in fact daughter disciplines [to history], for they arose, each of them, out of historical investigation, having long formed part of avowed historical writing.”

G. **History can be entertainment.** This may seem trivial, but it certainly must be counted as one of the central “uses” of history. Much written history is also good literature, and the stories historians relate are often far more engaging and entertaining than those we find in works of fiction.

H. **The careful study of history teaches one many critical skills.** As noted in the Preface, this is the book’s central message. Among the critical skills discussed in this book are: how to conduct research (Chapter 7), how to evaluate evidence (Chapters 10, 11, and 12), how to present your arguments clearly in writing (Chapters 6, 13, and the writing capsules), how to read, view, and think critically (Chapters 8 and 9), and, of course, historical thinking (Chapters 3, 4, and 5). These analytical and communication skills are highly usable in other academic pursuits—and in almost any career you choose.

**SET A  Exercise 1**

Below are a number of statements describing the various uses of history. Using the letters A through H (review the list), indicate which category best describes each quotation. In each case be prepared to justify your selection. **You may use a category more than once or not at all.** The first item is completed for you.

A. History provides us a sense of our own identity

B. History helps us better understand the present.

C. History—good history—is a corrective for misleading analogies and “lessons” of the past.

D. History enables us to understand the tendencies of humankind, of social institutions, and all aspects of the human condition.

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7 Many of the quotations in this exercise, and the companion exercise in Set B, were drawn from an extensive list compiled by Ferenc M. Szasz, *The History Teacher*, “The Many Meanings of History,” Pt. I, 7 (August 1974); Pts II and III, 8 (November 1974 and February 1975). The quotations in Part IV of the series, 9 (February 1976), were contributed by subscribers.
E. History can help one develop tolerance and open-mindedness.
F. History provides the basic background for many other disciplines.
G. History can be entertainment.
H. The careful study of history teaches many critical skills.

A 1. “History is a means of access to ourselves.” (Lynn White, Jr.)

A 2. “History presents the pleasantest features of poetry and fiction—the majesty of the epic, the moving accidents of the drama, and the surprises and moral of the romance.” (Robert A. Willmott)

A 3. “The chief lesson to be derived from the study of the past, is that it holds no simple lesson, and … the historian’s main responsibility is to prevent anyone from claiming that it does.” (Martin Duberman)

A 4. “History can help us shake off the shackles of ethnocentrism and the debilitating bias of cultural and racial purity… . History helps us to illuminate the human condition.” (Lester Stephens)

A 5. “Everything is the sum of its past and nothing is comprehensible except through its history.” (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin)

A 6. “[History’s] chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.” (David Hume)

A 7. “History provides a training ground for development of many valuable intellectual traits.” (Anonymous)

A 8. “The chief practical use of history is to deliver us from plausible historical analogies.” (James Bryce)

A 9. “The study of history is in the truest sense an education and a training for political life…” (Polybius)

A 10. “In an age when so much of our literature is infused with nihilism, and other social disciplines are driven toward narrow, positivistic [i.e., scientific] inquiry, history may remain the most humanizing of the arts.” (Richard Hofstadter)

SET A  Exercise 2

On a separate sheet of paper, write a short, paragraph-length essay on the following topic: What is the most important reason for studying history? Read Writing Capsule 1 (below) before you begin.
Coherent Paragraphs: The Topic Sentence

A strong paragraph requires a meaningful topic sentence. The topic sentence should summarize the central point of the paragraph it begins. For instance, in responding to the question in Exercise 2, write a brief one-sentence answer: “The most important reason for studying history is … .” That sentence should serve as your topic sentence. Then, complete the paragraph by indicating specific reasons or examples that support your position on the most important reason for studying history.

Thus, ordering your ideas is a basic task. When you write a paragraph begin by putting down your basic generalization, followed by the two, or three, or four supporting points that make the generalization plausible. (For more on this point see Chapter 13, “Writing for Your Reader,” page 83ff.)

SET B  Exercise 1

Below are a number of statements describing the various uses of history. Using the letters A through H (review the list above), indicate which category best describes each quotation. In each case be prepared to justify your selection. You may use a category more than once or not at all. The first item is completed for you.

B  1. “With the historian it is an article of faith that knowledge of the past is a key to understanding the present.” (Kenneth Stampp)

____  2. “If history teaches any lesson at all, it is that there are no historical lessons.” (Lucien Febvre)

____  3. “What man is, only history tells.” (Wilhelm Dilthey)

____  4. “History has to be rewritten because history is the selection of those threads of causes or antecedents we are interested in.” (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.)

____  5. “History maketh a young man to be old, without either wrinkles or gray hairs; privileging him with the experience of age, without either the infirmities or inconveniences thereof.” (Thomas Fuller)

____  6. “The ultimate reason for studying history is to become conscious of the possibilities of human existence.” (Rudolf Bultmann)

____  7. “History is, in its essence, exciting; to present it as dull is, to my mind, stark and unforgivable misrepresentation.” (Catherine Drinker Bowen)
8. “To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to be ever a child.” (Cicero)

9. “History is not only a particular branch of knowledge, but a particular mode and method of knowledge in other disciplines.” (Lord Acton)

10. “History enables bewildered bodies of human beings to grasp their relationship with their past, and helps them chart on general lines their immediate forward course.” (Allan Nevins)

SET B  Exercise 2

On a separate sheet of paper, write a short, paragraph-length essay on the following topic: “What is the most important reason for studying history?” Before you begin, review Writing Capsule 1 (on page 10).