

Memory, Resistance, and Justice

Edited by Erin Goodman
and Juanjo Romero

CASA // Occasional Papers | 2



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THE CASA HISTORICAL MEMORY PROJECT*

CASA's Historical Memory initiative is extremely pertinent. It deals with the recovery of the historical memory of a country, presenting the most relevant events affecting a society during a specific time in the past. However, the interpretation and analysis of these events are as important as the events themselves, because events of a historical nature do not occur in a vacuum. They take place within a political, economic, social and cultural context, which may shape them depending on the limitation or degree of freedom that exists. It is important to distinguish between events that take place during an economic crisis and those that take place during an economic boom, just as it is important to analyze the difference between the press authorized by the regime during a dictatorship and the completely clandestine press. The advantages of the official press are obvious, especially from the point of view of publication and quality, whereas the difficulties faced by the underground press begin with its precarious context—work carried out in basements with infinitely more modest resources—. If we want a historical memory that takes into account the context in which the events occur, it is paramount that this distinction be clear to those involved.

Sometimes it is difficult to make this distinction, but it is the only way to understand in any depth why countries advance or fail. Some projects fall by the wayside because the difficulties were too great from the outset. This experiment, beginning with reflection on historical

* Translation: Libby Turner.

memory, is a valid contribution to the historiographical knowledge of our countries. The research outcomes must be read calmly and carefully, because context determines the level of freedom experienced by the actors at that moment in history.

The work of these young students, now taking their first steps in historical research, will clearly reflect their ability to separate the wheat from the chaff, to discover what is essential and what is secondary, and to analyze the context of many of the events that took place.

CASA's initiative is an attempt to dig deeper than the usual historical review; together with an overview of the events that took place, it also reflects on the circumstances surrounding them, carrying out a more in-depth analysis and striving to produce an account with different perspectives and possibilities.

The success of this project is fundamental to deepening our knowledge of the recent past, at the same time allowing us to navigate the difficulties of writing about and living through an uncertain future.

RICARDO LAGOS
President of Chile
(2000-2006)

PREFACE

A towering new Orthodox church, crammed with icons and glittering gold, has been built near the site where the last Russian czar and his family were executed in 1917. The victims have been declared saints, and believers pray for their souls before a mural that shows them in beatific poses. Yet in the same city, Yekaterinburg, stands a larger-than-life statue of Yakov Sverdlov, the local Bolshevik who directed the death squad that executed the royal family. The heroic statue is a relic of the Bolshevik era and reminds us of how history was understood then. The church reflects a directly opposite interpretation of history. Two reverential monuments, one memorializing victims and the other glorifying their executioner, stand barely a mile apart.

Past and present crash against each other in the United States as well. In DeKalb County, Georgia, officials voted to remove a monument to the pro-slavery Confederacy but were prevented from doing so by state law. They responded by placing a plaque in front of the monument that aims to “contextualize” it. The plaque says that this monument has “bolstered white supremacy and faulty history” and was created “to intimidate African Americans and limit their full participation in the social and political life of their communities”.

Coming to grips with painful history is a quintessential experience of the modern age. It can be as deeply wrenching for societies as it is for individuals. Yet the process of introducing people to their true history is exhilarating for historians and other researchers. Thanks to their work, people in many countries are learning to see history more clearly. This volume is the first in a series featuring a selection of essays written by

undergraduate students who participated in the CASA Historical Memory Project, and their topics are as varied as the countries, cultures, and histories they reflect.

Each generation shapes its own view of what constitutes real or established history. Events of the past did happen, and facts cannot be altered. Yet our understanding of those facts—the way we put them together—is constantly shifting. So is our sense of which historical developments were most important. Every history book is actually about two eras: the one it describes and the one in which it was written. We project our own views back onto history. Since our views change as generations pass, so does history. The way we understand our past directly shapes how we act in the present and how we envision our future.

Reinterpreting the past is an invaluable collective challenge but it loses value when history is used to justify contemporary political projects or ambitions. Demagogues routinely try to reframe history as they rouse the masses. Narratives of national victimhood and ravaged innocence are dangerously appealing. The duty of those who study the past is to search for truth, not to rearrange history in order to suit the transient needs of the present.

In the post-Cold War era, the most widely publicized efforts to face historical injustice have come in societies that have been ravaged by conflict or oppression. Some countries have placed torturers on trial. A few have gone so far as to imprison former leaders. At the other end of the spectrum are countries that have agreed to pardon all who fully confess, as well as those that have not yet even begun the process of looking honestly at their collective past.

Because examining our past is often painful, we instinctively avoid it. We all like to believe in our innate goodness. This leads us to shy away from facing whatever undermines our virtuous self-image. We are quick to see the lies that others embrace as truth, but slow to recognize those that we ourselves accept. Pointing to the sins of others is always

satisfying. Many of the best and bravest investigators of the past, though, are those who work closest to home.

One reason to shy away from deeper understanding of our past is the danger it poses to the reputations of revered historical figures. Christopher Columbus was the heroic explorer who opened a new world until he became a slave trader and progenitor of genocide. Andrew Jackson was champion of the common man until he became a mass murderer of Native Americans. Nothing about these people's actions changed, but the way we interpret them has.

Just as reputations of individuals rise and fall, so do the reputations of admired institutions. Honest inspection often reveals rot in our governments, churches, and corporations. Some find this disturbing. People and nations rely on history. Many consider it to be composed of fixed verities and react badly when new discoveries or new interpretations undermine them. This only adds to the value of projects that aim for a deeper understanding of the past.

Undermining established narratives is often exciting. Establishing new ones is more difficult. Investigators of the past make their greatest contributions when they place their insights in a broad context. Grand narratives have traditionally been tools of power, and powerful forces have always sought to shape people's understanding of history. Those who seek to convey a more realistic view of national heritage can also use grand narratives. Reconsideration of a historical episode is most valuable when it leads to a deeper grasp not only of that single episode, but also of how it fits into our ever-expanding understanding of our common humanity.

The control of history has always been a potent tool for dominant groups, institutions, and regimes. Challenging their versions of history often constitutes an assault on cherished beliefs. Yet this is not an essentially destructive enterprise. Delving for richer historical truth is a way of broadening our understanding of our heritage and our contemporary reality. It is a democratizing project that seeks not to deny what

past generations have written and believed, but to enrich it. Rather than seeking to silence voices from other eras, researchers seek to understand the histories that past generations produced and enrich them with new facts, new testimonies, and new perspectives. Opening the process of interpreting history to more people—and more kinds of people—offers the chance to hear a richer variety of voices. This serves the cause of historical truth while promoting the democratization of our societies.

Recovering historical memory is inherently empowering. People whose lives and heritage are left out of national narratives naturally sense that they are unimportant, that society does not value them. When history is written in a richer and more inclusive way, they understand not only that they and their ancestors have played a role in shaping the world, but that society recognizes and acknowledges their tribulations, their successes, and their contributions to humanity. People develop a sense of identity and self-confidence when their pasts are recognized. They sense instinctively that if their stories and their heritage are important, so are they. The fact that this is happening in so many parts of the world reflects the global dimension of the drive to recover historical memory.

The process of examining history, and the commemorative culture that emerges from that history, helps us make sense of our past. At best, it can also shape the way we deal with present-day challenges—and the way we shape our expectations of what is to come. This is not a sterile enterprise. On the contrary, reckoning honestly with history is an urgent challenge for every society. It is a way to enrich and deepen the national narratives that play such an essential role in human consciousness, and that shape political action, including decisions about war and peace. The role of historical memory is to bring idealized narratives closer to reality. Societies, like individuals, often seek comfort in myths of triumph and goodness. They can only establish stable identities, however, by subordinating myth to truth. Historians and other researchers who seek to enrich national narratives are making an impor-

tant—though not always welcome—contribution to honest nation-building.

In today's world, Spain is as good a place as any in which to confront the task of recasting historical memory. Like many countries, it is dealing with traumatic episodes from both the distant and recent pasts. Spain's effort to recast its conquest of lands in the Americas as an "encounter" between civilizations was an effort to begin that process but was not universally welcomed. Its efforts to redress the injustice of its expulsion of Jewish citizens half a millennium ago have been halting and tentative. Spain's most recent cataclysm, the Civil War of the 1930s, has only become the subject of serious study in recent years. The process of interpreting the Civil War—asking what happened and why—has barely begun. Yet a remarkable number of Spaniards embrace it as a positive step in the never-ending process of forging and defining national identity.

The process of reassessing Civil War history in Spain, which includes everything from archeological digs to academic conferences to the renaming of streets and erection of new monuments, mirrors what has happened or is happening in many other countries. Looking honestly at history and ourselves is never easy. So many people are doing it in so many different ways in such far-flung places, however, that we may speak of a golden age in the endless quest to clarify historical memory.

Against such an exciting background, the insightful essays in this volume, all produced by students working in Spain, Latin America, and Ireland, comprise a serious and multi-faceted effort to pry history out of the names-and-dates trap. They remind us that ordinary people forge history just as fully as prominent leaders. Each of these essays is a triumph of both conception and research. They span continents and address questions that are urgent and, in some cases, deeply painful. Taken together, they are thrilling testimony to the vibrancy of CASA's Historical Memory Project.

History has traditionally been presented as a set of immutable facts. Today we recognize that the opposite is true. Creative and thoughtful reflection can dramatically deepen our understanding of how history unfolded. The past, as these essays show, can be every bit as unpredictable as the future.

STEPHEN KINZER
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