

## IS HISTORY DANGEROUS?

Professor Eric Hobsbawm's address at the Annual Dinner of the Historical Association meeting in Cambridge, April 1999, on accepting the Medlicott Medal.

There is a good English tradition for serious intellectual works—not high-level popularizations but the real thing—to be addressed to what is supposed to be an intelligent and educated but non-specialist public. Think of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, of Charles Darwin, of Maynard Keynes. It is a tradition that has died out in the natural sciences and is fighting a rearguard action against academisation in the social sciences. I'm happy to say it is still resisting vigorously in history. Those of us who try to keep it going are enormously indebted to the Historical Association which exists precisely to create and preserve a common universe of discourse for those who do historical research, those who teach it (in so far as they are not the same) and those who read it. That is why the late Alan Taylor, as he once told me, always accepted invitations by branches of the Historical Association, even when he refused all others. So I feel honoured to receive your Medlicott Medal. Since I have been publishing historical writings for just over half a century, I see it as a sort of long-service ribbon for fighting in the same campaign as all of you. Many, many thanks.

Is History dangerous? The answer to this question is so obviously YES that you may even wonder why it has to be asked in the days of the Kosovo war, which is about nothing if not history. Or at least history is its justification. On the Serb side it is about a region which they claim to be the cradle of the Serb people and six centuries' fight to wipe out the tragedy of a battle lost to Islam in 1389. It ended Serb independence until the nineteenth century, although even then Kosovo did not become Serbian. It only did so in the Balkan war of 1912. On the Kosovar Albanian side it is about the right of nations to self-determination, i.e. to set up sovereign states of their own, which was a nineteenth century invention in practice and an early twentieth century invention in theory. If Estonia can have a state, or Greek Cyprus, why not Kosovo? But, of course, we're not in the nineteenth century any more. For NATO, or rather for the British and American politicians who, in classic Orwellian newspeak, try to justify an operation which military experts almost unanimously regarded as lunatic, it is rooted in the cold war. What are the functions of an alliance against the USSR after the disappearance of the USSR? How does a military organisation devised for a missile war between two nuclear powers deal with a conflict which, on the ground, is a lot more like the Thirty Years' War?

One might even say: The most relevant danger today is *not knowing or forgetting history*. After all, to take the most obvious example, aerial bombardment has been practised since World War One—well over eighty years. By itself it has never won wars, although there have been now forgotten theorists who thought it would. It has undoubtedly frightened the populations subjected to it. Those of us who lived through the blitz in Britain, at any age, can still not hear the sound of the air-raid siren without a sort of automatic mental shiver. This is undoubtedly also the case with senior citizens in Berlin, Hamburg, and Leningrad—sorry,

St Petersburg. And yet, in belligerent countries whose governments have some popular legitimacy, the political effect of bombing has overwhelmingly been to rally the suffering population round its government. If they blame anybody, it is not their government but the enemy. Is it really possible that the spokesmen for the campaigns of bombing against Iraq and Serbia believe that the inhabitants of Belgrade and Bagdad are blaming the unspeakable Milosevic' and Saddam for the air-raids and not NATO and the Clinton-Blair team? Maybe they should, but the historic experience of the past 55 years suggests the opposite.

Certainly, as far as the decision-makers are concerned, ignorance of or forgetting history is usually more dangerous than misusing it. They leave that to their spin-doctors. The Soviet Union showed such ignorance when it decided to send its army into Afghanistan. The British had long ago discovered that the problem lay not in sending an expeditionary force into that country and capturing Kabul, but in staying there. Plenty of old India hands told each other so over gins and tonics in London gentlemen's clubs. The USA showed such ignorance in the same war when they decided to give total backing to the Islamic fundamentalists on the grounds that any anti-communists must be good guys. (The Israelis made a similar miscalculation when they encouraged the Islamic Hamas movement on the West Bank and in the Gaza strip as a means of undercutting support for the secular nationalist Palestine Liberation Organisation). Almost any student of the history of Islam could have warned them. As we know, for Islamic fundamentalists the USA is as much an enemy of Islam and a Great Satan as Moscow was. The Afghan War—this is less well known but true—became a sort of Spanish Civil War for militant Islam everywhere, with *mujahadeen* going there to fight from numerous countries. The best-known of them is the Saudi Bin Laden, who has been made responsible for the bombs against the US embassies in Africa. And the self-sacrificing suicide bombers who create insecurity in Israel come not from the PLO but from Hamas.

Yet the question "is history dangerous?" is not only rhetorical. It implies another question whose answer is not obvious, namely "just how is history dangerous?" I think it is in two ways. One is in inspiring political movements and states whose very essence is history, that is to say an ideological construct based on a misinterpretation of the past. Nationalism is the chief example of this. Certain kinds of religious fundamentalism though not all may also have this component, for instance those who try to reconstruct some supposed golden age of the past when all was well with the world because the Law of the Koran was literally applied.

I don't have to explain why nationalism is dangerous. We can all see the consequences of breaking up Yugoslavia into mutually hostile nationalisms daily on TV screens. But I will. Just mention, by the by, that history is not a significant element in the other major danger of the twentieth century, namely the aspiration to world or

continental domination—whether by some state like Nazi Germany, or by the triumph of a world revolutionary ideology as in the early days of the Soviets, or by both at the same time, as perhaps in the case of the last surviving ideological empire, the USA today.

The other way is by selling this concept to the mass of the people, without whose support political ideas remain ineffective, at least in the twentieth and presumably the twenty-first century. Consider the differences between Cornish and Irish nationalism. The Cornish political nationalism that has been emerging in the past 20 years—up to and including the attempt to resuscitate a language last spoken in the eighteenth century—is at present so politically insignificant that we are tempted to treat it as a joke. It has no electorate. So far as I am aware it has not even got to the stage of Scottish and Welsh nationalism between the wars, which had formed nationalist parties, though they had hardly any voters. It may get beyond this phase, although there are small nationalisms which have never got beyond it. On the other hand Irish nationalism, with the aim of political self-rule in Ireland, has been a basic political fact about the island since the Third Reform Act demonstrated that virtually all Catholic Irish constituencies would vote for nationalist candidates; and it still is. By the way, this doesn't mean that all the beliefs of nationalist ideologists are equally shared by their supporters. The restoration of Irish as the spoken language of Ireland remains as much a dream as the restoration of Cornish as the spoken language of Cornwall will prove to be. In practice it was abandoned by the government of the Irish Republic in 1948.

But the idea that nationalist convictions of the political kind are, as it were, inborn and instinctive—for instance the belief that what all Basques want is to secede from Spain and France and the creation of a sovereign territory that belongs exclusively to a Basque “nation”—has no historical basis. It cannot be derived from the feeling, which may well be wired into all social animals, that we all distinguish between an in-group to which we belong, and the others—between “us” and “them”. It has to be acquired.

This is where the historians come in and those who teach history or use historical material in the mass media. For it is through the printed word and the image that ideas and ideologies are spread from the minorities among whom they arise to the mass of people, even though the most powerful medium for fixing them in their mind may be in combination with music—as in hymns and national anthems. And, in a world which, for the first time in history will be predominantly literate in a few more decades, the *school*, and especially the primary school, will be the main medium by or through which, as the Jesuits recognised during the Counter-Reformation, the basic ideas of most people will be acquired before they start looking at the internet. In fact, school may well become more important than before, now that military conscription, the other engine for universal group socialisation—at least for males—is on the way out.

Let me explain what I mean by the example of Israel, a national state so unprecedented that the historical distortions or arbitrary constructions on which it is based are readily visible, and so are their dangers. I need not tell you that the concept of Zionism, namely a secular territorial nation-state for an ethnically defined Jewish people went completely against at least 2000 years of Jewish history, and probably against all of Jewish history, since pretty certainly the Old Testament kingdoms of Judah and Israel were no more like the late nineteenth century nation-state which was in

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Theodore Herzl's mind than Brian Boru's Ireland was like the one constructed by Eamon De Valera. So there was absolutely no historical continuity between Palestine before the destruction of the second Temple and Palestine after the Balfour Declaration— not even the Hebrew language, a holy and learned idiom which people neither spoke in the days of the Temple—they spoke Aramaic— nor in the days of early Zionism—when most of them spoke Yiddish.

The only directly relevant history was that of the Old Testament. So a highly politicised Israeli archaeology has been used both to prove that Jerusalem had been the capital for 3,000 years, and the more right-wing, fascist-inspired branch of Zionism which is now governing Israel, justifies expansionism and replacing West Bank Palestinians with Jewish settlements by stressing that ancient Israel had ruled over all Judea and Samaria, that is to say over all the West Bank and a lot of modern Jordan. The chances of peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs have therefore diminished sharply.

In the historiography of twentieth Israel politicised mythology has not had such a clear run. At least since the early 1980s the historical legends and propagandist lies of the independence struggle which had entered the educational system have been controverted by critical historians—as Irish revisionist historians have done with the equivalent nationalist myths of Irish history. And since, in democratic countries, the work of reputable historians seeps down from universities to schools through teachers and exam syllabuses, the straight history of nationalist myth will no longer reach children automatically through school. Of course it can still rely on the great purveyor of historical and any other mythology, the visual media. I doubt whether today even Scots nationalist teachers would be comfortable passing on to their pupils what passes for Scottish history in *Braveheart*. But my Israeli example shows what can happen even in democratic countries, before the discipline of academic research and debate has put limits on the flights of political fantasy. And that's why bodies like the Historical Association are so important.