
AHR Forum
Truth and Reconciliation in History

**Introduction: Historians and
Historical Reconciliation**

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“FOR THIS CRIME, WE SHOULD BEG the souls of the dead and their families for forgiveness,” declared the president of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, in Jedwabne on a rainy July 10, 2001. He was addressing his fellow Poles about a “particularly cruel crime.” Sixty years earlier in Jedwabne, as many as 1,600 Jews were killed by their neighbors—people with whom they had shared the small town.¹ The immediate spur to the president’s remarks was the publication of Jan Gross’s *Neighbors* in 2001. Gross’s book had instigated Poland’s confrontation with its past, and the events it described had come to be seen as a poignant symbol of Polish-Jewish relations.² “Today,” said Kwaśniewski, “as a man, citizen and president of the Polish republic, I ask pardon in my own name and in the name of those Polish people whose consciences are shocked by this crime.”³ The ceremony represented a high point in Poland’s struggle with its history, a struggle that was at once about both past events and the nation’s identity. The government had done much to investigate the crime, especially through the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), which it charged with scrutinizing gross historical violations of human rights and war crimes. Its extensive research and published report on Jedwabne erased the world’s doubts about the historical events.⁴ Yet many locals boycotted the ceremony. And the Church was not officially represented, with Cardinal Jozef Glemp demanding that Jews apologize

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¹ Ian Fisher, “At Site of Massacre, Polish Leader Asks Jews for Forgiveness,” *New York Times*, July 11, 2001.

² Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, N.J., 2001). See also Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, N.J., 2004); Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve, eds., *Shared History—Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941* (Leipzig, 2008). There is still disagreement about the number of dead.

³ Fisher, “At Site of Massacre, Polish Leader Asks Jews for Forgiveness.”

⁴ The IPN was established in 1998, having grown out of the Main Commission on the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish People. The latter, in turn, was developed from the Main Commission on the Investigation of the Hitler-Fascist Crimes in Poland, which in the early 1990s was expanded to include the task of looking at communist crimes, and if necessary to take legal action based on the findings. The tasks of the IPN encompass historical inquiry, along with legal functions. The institute is also responsible for preserving the files of the Security Service of the Polish People’s Republic. See <http://www.ipn.gov.pl>.

at the same time for collaborating with the Soviets in Poland from 1939 to 1941, and the local priest commenting, “It is Holocaust business. It is not my business.”⁵ The Polish Church, a central component of national identity, reflected its ambivalence about the president’s acknowledgment by expressing mere “regret” about the killings. The citizens of Jedwabne on the whole rejected their newfound fame, and the mayor, who had supported the president’s acknowledgment and advocated that a memorial be erected, was forced to resign, and later emigrated to the United States.⁶

The desire to address the legacy of historical wrongs from a contemporary perspective informs the essays that make up this *AHR* Forum. They describe three joint efforts by historians from across national and ethnic divides to write shared narratives of past events as a way of contributing to present-day conflict resolution. In each case, the historians’ intervention aims to promote reconciliation through collaborative work to produce a shared history.

The increased centrality of history to politics, as is evident in the Polish case, presents historians with a new and possibly unique challenge and opportunity. Because group identity is shaped by historical perspectives, historical narratives have an explicit and direct impact on national identities. Thus, by playing an adjudicatory role in the creation of such narratives and ensuring adherence to ethical norms, historians can contribute to reconciliation among nations. The challenge for historians is to write these narratives while maintaining the highest professional standards. The opportunity is to employ new methodologies and collaborative work to open up a whole new discourse of reconciliation that will engage social and political issues in novel ways. We often hear about the decline of the humanities, especially complaints about their lack of relevance to social problems and the corporatization of the universities, and that is true as far as it goes. But the articles in this forum show that there are ways for historians to counter this outside pressure, not by isolating scholarship or by remaining in the ivory tower, but rather by engaging the public in discourse. Scholars and scholarly “truth” carry weight in society that cannot be easily monetized or manipulated by political pressure, which means that historians can employ their scholarship—in this case rigorous and collaborative historical projects aimed at fostering dialogue—in a way that enables them to act as advocates in the cause of reconciliation. Each of the following essays describes the difficulties and successes that such efforts can lead to, and imagines the possibility that historians can write first-rate history and also explicitly contribute to current political reconciliation. But these are only early efforts; there is still much to be learned. While empathy and collaboration may eventually become the norm for historical writing, in the short run the aim is to delegitimize the nationalist (and often hateful) historical myths that feed ethnic and national xenophobia and conflict.

⁵ Derek Scally, “President Begs Forgiveness for Polish Massacre,” *Irish Times*, July 11, 2001.

⁶ “Official Statement of the Institute of National Remembrance—Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation on the Manslaughter of Jewish Inhabitants of Jedwabne, July 10th, 1941,” http://www.ipn.gov.pl/portal/en/19/193/Official_Statement_of_the_Institute_of_National_Remembrance_Commission_for_the_.html. The institute published two volumes: *Jedwabne: Documents, Inquiries, Analyses*, vol. 1: *Analyses* and vol. 2: *Documents*. On the mayor and the event, see the documentary film by Slawomir Grunberg *The Legacy of Jedwabne*, which is a powerful representation of the ceremony, the context, and the local responses.

POLAND'S ATTEMPT AS A NATION to come to terms with its past, which was a struggle over national identity played out in response to a historical event, is only one of many examples that could be brought forward out of the tidal wave of apologies, truth commissions, reparations, and investigations of historical crimes that accelerated in intensity in the various transitions to democracy at the end of the Cold War. Such redress work has become an international norm following violent conflict or transition from a dictatorship.⁷ Indeed, bilateral historical commissions are now a fixture in Europe, especially, but not exclusively, in cases concerning Germany's relations with its neighbors after World War II. Joint commissions between Germany and its former enemies (France, Poland, and the Czech Republic) are well-known, but there have been dozens of Holocaust-related commissions as well, in more than fifty countries. In the United States, this global trend is evident in the investigation of local histories, with a particular focus on questions of race relations, most notably the investigation of race riots from Greensboro and Wilmington, North Carolina, to the Greenwood neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to the town of Rosewood, Florida.⁸

⁷ The ethnic violence in Kenya is a recent example. Even while the killings and ethnic expulsions were taking place, calls for a truth commission were being raised together with demands for prosecution of the guilty (January 2008).

⁸ The historiography of historical commissions cannot be condensed into a footnote. The following is more illustrative in nature. A good place to start is the "List of Government-Appointed Historical Commissions Concerning the Holocaust," prepared and maintained by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., <http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/teachers/index.php?content=commission/>. The U.S. State Department keeps an archive and partially updates more recent involvement of the government on Holocaust issues; see <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rt/hlcst>. Examples of commissions in Europe include internal commissions such as Latvia's History Commission: Crimes against Humanity Committed in the Territory of Latvia from 1940 to 1956 during the Occupations of the Soviet Union and National Socialist Germany (<http://vip.latnet.lv/lpra/angliski.htm>). Analogous commissions were established in Lithuania and Estonia. Each included international members in order to command legitimacy and additional input. Similarly, Austria belatedly established a commission to deal with the complex of expropriations in Austria during the Nazi era, inviting Jewish representatives to contribute. One example of a bilateral commission that expanded beyond Germany is the Polish-Ukrainian Historians' Commission, which published papers between 1997 and 2002 by one Polish and one Ukrainian historian addressing more or less the same topic, followed by a discussion and a short joint text under the title "Agreements and Differences." I know of no list analogous to the World War II-related commissions that is concerned with human rights violations on the grounds of race in the U.S. or other postcolonial conditions. (I have addressed the question of redress vis-à-vis several indigenous nations in Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* [New York, 2000]. In 2008, after a dozen years of being in the Opposition, the Labour Party came into power in Australia, and immediately its prime minister, Kevin Rudd, delivered an official apology to the Aborigines, and opened the door for reparations.)

On the other hand, there have been few commissions in the U.S. that addressed selected race riots and the memory of slavery. One interesting effort was launched by Brown University. It appointed an internal committee to trace its early benefactors' involvement with slavery and to investigate its current responsibility in light of the tainted legacy. An independent commission was appointed at Greensboro to examine "the context, causes, sequence and consequence of the events of November 3, 1979," when five anti-Klan demonstrators were killed and "at least ten others were wounded, and numerous residents and other witnesses were traumatized," for the purpose of "healing transformation for the community," through research and civic engagement (<http://www.greensborotrc.org/>). Another North Carolina commission was the Wilmington Race Riot Commission (<http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/1898-wrrc/>), appointed in 2000 to examine the race riots of November 10, 1898, which saw, in addition to an undetermined number of deaths, "the only [local] government overthrow recorded in U.S. history." It issued its final report in 2005. Perhaps the best-known race riots commission was the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, which issued a report on February 28, 2001 (<http://www.okhistory.org/trrc/freport.htm>), followed by civil suits to demand reparations. See Alfred L. Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, Race Reparations, and Reconciliation* (Norman, Okla., 2002). I have described the Rosewood Commission in Florida in *Guilt of Nations*, 296–299.

The centrality of historical memory in contemporary political conflict is evident all around us.

Two types of mechanisms have been widely employed in transitions from a dictatorship or civil war to democracy: restorative and retributive. The former includes the growing number of truth commissions and reparations mechanisms, while the latter focuses on prosecuting gross violators of human rights, either in the various international tribunals (including the International Criminal Court) or domestically. Both mechanisms are symbolic: even in the best of cases, only a few of the perpetrators are convicted, and truth commissions provide only a modest measure of disclosure. Nevertheless, the important innovation of truth commissions during the 1980s has become part of the prevailing international political culture. The most famous, of course, was the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which followed earlier commissions in Latin America. Dozens of analogous commissions have operated during the last generation all over the globe. Truth commissions vary greatly: They range from international to local. Some are state-sponsored, while others are organized by civil society. Some attempt to uncover recent crimes, war crimes, and gross violations of human rights, while others are engaged in investigations of atrocities more than one hundred years old. The participants are explicitly motivated by politics: they aim at acknowledgment and reconciliation and attempt to get there by writing a historical narrative that will be embraced by all sides of the conflict. Despite, or perhaps because of, being symbolic, the resulting historical narratives are central to the new identity of the involved groups. The variety of these commissions and the literature they have spawned has given rise to a whole new field of comparative studies.⁹

HISTORIANS HAVE, OF COURSE, played a central role as researchers in these mostly state-sponsored commissions and investigations, but the work was primarily initiated, sponsored, and managed by the government. The articles in this *AHR* Forum describe an expansion of similar methodology to civil society, where joint projects are initiated by groups of scholars who research and write history as a form of advocacy, with the objective of contributing to reconciliation. The main goal is to conduct research that focuses on causes of ethnic and national conflict. The following essays describe the progress and results of three working groups that bring together

⁹ The U.S. Institute of Peace played an early role in the study of truth commissions (and in sponsoring these activities). Neil J. Kritz, director of the institute's Rule of Law Program, edited *Transitional Justice: How Emerging Democracies Reckon with Former Regimes*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1995). The USIP keeps a list of commissions: <http://www.usip.org/library/truth.html>. Among other contributions are Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York, 2001); Ruti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford, 2000); Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson, eds., *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* (Princeton, N.J., 2000); Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston, 1998); Andrew Rigby, *Justice and Reconciliation: After the Violence* (Boulder, Colo., 2001); John Torpey, *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices* (Lanham, Md., 2003); Janna Thompson, *Taking Responsibility for the Past: Reparation and Historical Injustice* (Cambridge, 2002); Teresa Godwin Phelps, *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions* (Philadelphia, 2004); and Naomi Roht-Arriaza and Javier Mariezcurrena, eds., *Transitional Justice in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Truth versus Justice* (Cambridge, 2006). For the Wilmington Race Riot Commission, see note 8. Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin, *Reconciliation in Divided Societies: Finding Common Ground* (Philadelphia, 2006).

historians from both (or all) sides of a historical conflict in order to examine the events empirically within a framework of inclusion and to produce a narrative on which the stakeholders can agree. The explicit purpose of the resulting historical narratives is to provide the basis for a new shared historical identity. These initiatives function simultaneously as an exploration of the historiographical questions that arise from such work and as historical activism in the cause of conflict resolution.

Attempts at historical reconciliation thus provide a third means of redress in addition to tribunals and truth commissions. They deal with long-term memories of group animosity, including cases in which individual perpetrators and victims are no longer alive, yet their actions and suffering continue to haunt the national memory. Such undertakings provide an opportunity for historians both to be socially involved and to participate in collaborative research.

Some of the historiographical paradoxes that emerge from such attempts are obvious: activism involves advocacy and a presentist perspective, both problematic vantage points for most historians. Does constructing a “shared” narrative mean giving equal time to all sides? How do the goals of delegitimizing the nationalist historical myths that feed ethnic hatred and conflict converge with the aim to construct, through history, a new national identity? In other words, how does the historian avoid getting caught up in providing a historical narrative for “political hire” even for a “good” cause? Can historical narratives that are explicitly intended to influence ethnic and national relations be written without violating professional commitments and standards? Can we seek models in the earlier goals of historical writing that sought “moral certainty,” which, while employing the tools of empiricism, aimed at establishing sufficient certainty for action? Participation in collaborative work with a political goal clearly presents challenges to historical research.¹⁰

These dilemmas contextualize the three essays in this forum, but the essays first and foremost provide case studies that illustrate the possibilities and difficulties of conducting shared historical research. Each case is at a different stage in the process, and each is different in the type of conflict it addresses, but in all three, raw politics (often played out among the groups themselves) shape the writing of history, and the resulting historical narrative aims to influence subsequent inter-ethnic relations.

In “On Reconciling the Histories of Two Chosen Peoples,” David Engel describes a project on Jewish-Polish history that seeks to lay bare the underlying assumptions of historical identity of Jews and non-Jews in Poland. Why, Engel asks, has the discrepancy between the historical narratives of Poles and Polish Jews remained bewilderingly stable throughout the world wars, the Holocaust, and communism? Even the physical elimination of Jews in Poland did not profoundly change the two worldviews. As Engel presents it, both the Polish and Jewish narratives represent in distinct ways the self-perception of each nation as a chosen people, where even the imaginary space is not roomy enough to encompass plural uniqueness. Thus, the two groups often find themselves at odds, despite the relative diplomatic closeness between Poland and Israel, the lack of contemporary conflict, and the principled will-

¹⁰ Each of the projects discussed in this forum has cooperated in some manner with the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, an NGO which has been established with the explicit aim of “addressing unresolved historical legacies . . . in former conflict regions.” Situated in the Hague, the IHJR works with partner and cooperating institutions around the world on multi-year projects and networking initiatives that engage stakeholder communities in peace and reconciliation processes.

ingness of many to reconcile. The tenacious durability of historical imagination was illustrated in a workshop titled “History and Memory: Interethnic Relations in the Soviet Occupied Territories of Poland, 1939–1941,” at the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture in Leipzig in 2005. The participants, convened to work toward building a shared narrative, agreed upon the goal, yet the question of the relative suffering of Jews versus Poles, and of antisemitism versus Jewish collaboration with the Soviets (where the presence of several individual communist Jews was presented as evidence of collective guilt and treason), loomed large over the proceedings.¹¹ While the work continues, and the assumption is that differences of interpretation will remain in the multiple new narratives, the goal is that these differences will no longer correspond largely to the ethnic differences of the scholars.

In “Truth in Telling: Reconciling Realities in the Genocide of the Ottoman Armenians,” Ronald Grigor Suny describes an initiative, under way now for several years, that includes scholars of Turkish, Armenian, and other ethnicities. The weight of history on current politics is exceptionally heavy in the case of Turkey, whose image has become intimately associated in public opinion with the question of Armenian genocide. For moralistic reasons, no issue is more controversial in characterizing Turkey’s relationship with Europe than its denial that the massacres of Armenians in 1915 amounted to genocide. In October 2006, the French proposed a law that would penalize the denial of the Armenian genocide, provoking a diplomatic crisis that led Turkey to suspend its military relations with France. The dispute is ongoing, and involves substantial disagreement over the denial and the recognition of the genocide, as well as a proxy struggle over the process of Turkey’s accession to the European Union. Similarly, in the fall of 2007, members of the U.S. Congress pushed for formal recognition of the genocide. In response, Turkey threatened to cease military cooperation with the U.S., to forbid the passage of American military cargo to Iraq, and to escalate its war against the Kurds. Political realism won out over moral considerations, and the resolution did not make it to the House floor. It is certain, however, that the topic will be revived in the near future. This is an intense case that exemplifies the ascendancy of demands for historical redress and acknowledgment in international politics. It testifies not only to the growing role of human rights in political debates, but also to the public awareness that historical identity is central to shaping relations between states and peoples.

As described by Suny, the participants in the Turkish-Armenian initiative have conducted a number of workshops. These meetings, which were initially kept confidential, have been informed by a shared goal of bridging differences, recognizing and acknowledging the victims, and contributing to resolving the conflict between Turkey and Armenia (and Armenians). They have achieved broad agreement on new understandings and areas of research, and public reports of the work have been viewed as proof of progress. Suny’s story delineates the evolution over the last decade of increasing cooperation between Turkish and Armenian scholars in studying the calamity of 1915 in the face of the Turkish state’s denial. Suny describes the agreement among Turkish and Armenian scholars on the specific events of the Armenian catastrophe, even as the terminology of genocide remains contested. Nevertheless,

¹¹ Barkan, Cole, and Struve, *Shared History—Divided Memory*.

while individual efforts are being routinized—meetings of Armenian and Turkish scholars to discuss the topic are no longer unprecedented, and the ability of the participants to work together has improved significantly—the diplomatic stalemate and Turkey's active opposition to acknowledgment remain a major obstacle. The rapid shift over several workshops as participants learned to trust each other and as professional integrity enabled the overcoming of earlier perceptions suggests that the construction of shared narratives is feasible, even if the critical step of formal embrace by the state is not near. At the same time, it is precisely the international and scholarly attention that Suny describes—of which the workshops have been a manifestation, and to which they are a contributing factor—that pressured Turkey to modify its position. Suny's analysis emphasizes the importance of collaborative projects in shaping scholarly and public opinion. Indeed, Turkey's campaign to counter this work is one indication of its impact.

Finally, Charles Ingrao describes the Scholars' Initiative for the former Yugoslavia, which is an ongoing effort at coordination in which three hundred loosely affiliated scholars have been engaged at various points, collaborating mostly online, but also meeting at several conferences. The ease of e-mail communication makes such a project feasible, but ethnic animosity remains an obstacle, even among well-meaning scholars. By including foreign scholars outside the Balkans, the initiative has attempted to mitigate raw disagreements. This project, which is relatively more advanced than the others, has set out to publish eleven reports on the most contentious issues of the war in the former Yugoslavia. Its teams, which have included members of all ethnicities in the region (and outsiders), have earned praise and promises of support from leaders across the Balkans. The reports aim to do more than merely bring together individual papers on one topic; the goal is to jointly author a report that will adjudicate the disagreements and present a single narrative of all the horrendous crimes, as well as a structural analysis of the causes and the conduct of the conflict. The current phase aims to engage the public through publications and the organization of public forums. This in itself will contribute to a reconstruction of the narrative. The publication of the reports creates a new challenge. Even when agreement is reached, scholars faced with nationalist critique and extensive media attention may be hard-pressed to adhere to some of the most controversial findings. With respect to the publication of the 2006 report "Ethnic Cleansing," for example, Bosnian scholars found it hard to maintain support for their own account because in the general political atmosphere in Bosnia, the crimes were viewed as constituting genocide, and critics regarded "ethnic cleansing" as a euphemism. The next challenge is to expand the shared narrative beyond the wars in the 1990s to engage with identity conflicts throughout the long twentieth century.

These cases illustrate the intense political attention given to historical narrative as a methodology of redress and as a tool for promoting human rights and contributing to conflict resolution. The force of narrating history as a means of reconciliation was asserted in a UN report titled "Alliance of Civilizations," which explicitly recalls and rejects Samuel P. Huntington's theory of the "clash of civilizations." With respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the construction of "the mutual recognition of the competing narratives that emerged following the es-

tablishment of the state of Israel,” this UN initiative included this core recommendation:

The competing narratives of Palestinians and Israelis cannot be fully reconciled, but they must be mutually acknowledged in order to establish the foundations of a durable settlement. To this end we recommend the development of a White Paper analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dispassionately and objectively, giving voice to the competing narratives on both sides, reviewing and diagnosing the successes and failures of past peace initiatives, and establishing clearly the conditions that must be met to find a way out of this crisis. Such a document could provide a firm foundation for the work of key decision-makers involved in efforts to resolve this conflict.¹²

The recommendation has yet to be implemented. The founding of historical commissions to investigate extreme violence and the demand for redress in various forms for historical crimes demonstrate that history has become central to human rights and politics. In this way, historical narratives have become an explicit political tool.¹³

ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM HAVE TRADITIONALLY been viewed as the polar opposites of dispassionate scholarship. Similarly, the study of history as the study of the past has been understood as distinct from an intentional activism aimed at influencing the future. Of course, history has been employed to advance any number of political aims, and historians often pursue an explicitly political agenda in their writing. Indeed, some may see the discussion of activism and scholarship as a non-issue. So much of “identity” and other scholarship has been closely tied to activism that it might seem trite to engage the issue at this late date. Yet it is probably not unwarranted to acknowledge that the professional credo of scholarship for scholarship’s sake remains strong.

For both temporal and methodological reasons, historians have not traditionally viewed their own professional work as a tool for furthering specific political goals; nor have policy schools regarded history as a methodology that is useful in pursuing political goals or capable of contributing to public or international policy. Professional historians have justifiably been concerned with maintaining credibility and the appearance of historical impartiality. At times this has been done at the expense of bringing together scholarship with political and social commitments. Most historians accept that one’s identity and politics profoundly shape one’s work in any number of ways—from the choice of subject matter to the methodology and the interpretive framework—but preserve the goal of not distorting the data to fit one’s conviction.

¹² “Alliance of Civilizations: Report of the High-Level Group,” November 13, 2006, V.5.7, <http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/64/94/lang.english/>, 18.

¹³ This is reflected in the growing attention to the history of human rights. See Linda K. Kerber, “We Are All Historians of Human Rights,” *Perspectives*, October 2006. The increasing publications on human rights are an example of a field that is closely shaped by political developments, even when the connection is not made explicit. Kenneth Cmiel, “The Recent History of Human Rights,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (February 2004): 117–135. Also Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2007); Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen* (Philadelphia, 2003); Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Micheline R. Ishay, *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005); Mark Mazower, “The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933–1950,” *Historical Journal* 47, no. 2 (June 2004): 379–398.

As the essays in this forum illustrate, this is all beginning to change. Historians understand that the construction of history continuously shapes our world, and therefore it often has to be treated as an explicit, direct political activity, operating within specific scientific methodological and rhetorical rules. As a result, they are taking on the role of public intellectuals and engaging in the construction of historical identity both as individuals and as participants in commissions. These sentiments were expressed in the phrase “intellectuals without frontiers” and in Stanley Katz’s call to “apply our theoretical training and experience to urgent problems whose full complexities have as yet gone untended.”¹⁴ Going beyond a simple dichotomy between activists versus sophisticated historians who engage the symbolic and the ambiguous, the role of the historian may be to engage real-world concerns and concrete goals with methodological sensitivity and empathy.

Charles Maier expresses this tension between resignation and action in a short essay on retribution and reparation: “We repair and remember because we cannot return,” he writes, because our aim is “to enable survivors to carry life after the rearing.” The first part of Maier’s claim suggests an acceptance that goes beyond the obvious points that time past cannot be recaptured and history is irreversible. Loss has created a reality in which memory is primarily nostalgic and only secondarily ameliorative. This attitude of resignation is in contrast to the second half of Maier’s statement, however, where resignation is replaced by an activism oriented toward providing a political program to “enable survivors.” This “enabling” speaks to one end of a spectrum of redress that stretches from retribution and vengeance to accommodation and subjective memories. “Enabling” opens a passage between impartiality and engagement, between empathy and mobilized scholarship.¹⁵

Professional commitment among historians is viewed as rightly constraining the political agenda, but it also results in the frequent erasure of the “external” motivation from the text. A different approach, as pursued in the following essays, is to

¹⁴ Stanley N. Katz, “‘Excellence Is by No Means Enough’: Intellectual Philanthropy and the Just University,” *Common Knowledge* 8, no. 3 (2002): 427–438. Katz urges scholars to do more than “mak[e] our universities just,” and says that intellectuals face demands for action and worldly involvement.

¹⁵ Charles Maier, “Overcoming the Past? Narrative and Negotiation, Remembering, and Reparation: Issues at the Interface of History and the Law,” in Torpey, *Politics and the Past*, 295–304. It should be noted that after a generation of writing about history and memory, what began as two competing concepts (foremost perhaps with the writings of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* [Seattle, 1982], and Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory* [*Les lieux de mémoire*, 1984]) have merged. The construction of many bridges and overlapping spaces—at times physical, such as sites of memory (see, for example, the interesting effort of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/>), and at other times intangible—means that it is impossible today to delineate two separate domains for history and memory. While the antecedents of writing about memory go back to antiquity, it was during the 1980s that the intensity of engagement with the topic really took off. The two distinct concepts have melded into various layers where history and memory construct and reshape each other, where the collective and the private are intertwined. In addition, these concepts have been intimately related, among others, to the notions of trauma and nostalgia, all of which has been the subject of extensive writing. More than ten years ago, Alon Confino claimed that memory has become the leading concept in cultural history: “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1386–1403. On the early years of the burgeoning literature, see Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” in *Grounds for Remembering*, Special Issue, *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000): 127–150; as well as Gil Eyal, “Identity and Trauma: Two Forms of the Will to Memory,” *History & Memory* 16, no. 1 (2004): 5–36; Jeffrey K. Olick, ed., *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection* (Durham, N.C., 2003). It is always good to revisit Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton, N.J., 1995).

acknowledge the tension between the two types of commitments up front. This underscores Maier's sense of resignation that alludes to the notion of history as past events that cannot be changed. At its most fundamental level, this is clearly true. One response to this irreversibility of history is to explore redress. Forgiveness is one such response. But if we think of memory and historical truth as constructions that are produced under particular rules and constraints and that furnish new realities, then historical activism as a component of redress begins to take a specific shape.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY is not limited to professional historians. Since history defines our identity in so many ways, numerous writers and politicians employ and disseminate historical narratives to advance their own goals. Often this is simply a subject for domestic political analysis or dispute, but when it instigates a national conflict, it can become a cause of war and of gross violations of human rights. Historians can hardly be content in these cases to avoid the public arena as unsavory. In both Rwanda and Bosnia, the worst violence in the 1990s was buttressed and to a degree caused by particularly hateful national memories and interpretations of history. The exploitation by nationalists of historical narratives is readily apparent around the globe, explicitly aggravating low-level conflicts. It is understandable that individual historians abstain from getting involved in such ugly public debates, leaving them to political actors. But when the profession as a whole disengages, we create a vacuum that all too often is exploited by nationalists.

As the essays in this *AHR* Forum show, there is an alternative to such nationalist histories. It is achieved when historians create space for joint work that engages intellectuals from both sides of a conflict who come together to cooperate in the writing of a shared narrative. The term "shared narrative" is used in this context to describe a historical narrative that intertwines and brings closer the perspectives of two or more national histories that are in direct conflict. It is unlikely to be linear or monovocal and will most likely have distinct registers. There may be meta-agreement and a variety of interpretations about the local and the specifics, or the other way around. The aim of a shared narrative is to erase the dichotomies along national lines. As Ron Suny tells us, many Turkish and Armenian historians can agree about the massacres and deportations and the fact that they were ordered, organized, and carried out by the state. Although numerous empirical disagreements remain, the critical rupture is not among the participants in the joint work, but between those historians and the official Turkish view. A similar, if less entrenched, dispute bedevils the former Yugoslavia. Yet, as the Scholars' Initiative described by Charles Ingrao shows, it is possible for agreement to be reached on overall perspective, as well as on specific questions. This is demonstrated by the numerous inconvenient facts agreed upon by scholars belonging to all ethnicities in the former Yugoslavia.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the distance between the national narratives remains significant. The ability to create a shared narrative is not meant to convey undue optimism. It is a step in a process of conflict resolution. It has to be followed with multiple types of

¹⁶ See Charles W. Ingrao and Thomas A. Emmert, eds., *Confronting The Yugoslav Controversies* (West Lafayette, Ind., 2009).

dissemination and education before it can have any significant impact. But it does provide both a necessary example of the feasibility of the reconciled narrative and a building block in the process. In many conversations involving scholars and politicians, the attractiveness of the shared narrative is patent; the challenge is to implement it.

It has been suggested that I am too optimistic in my belief in the power of historical reconciliation, and that by focusing on the symbolic rather than the tangible, I minimize the significance of redress embedded in historical narratives. Both implications are probably true. I believe this reflects the state of the field: while the symbolic power of shared narratives may appear to the outsider and the uninitiated to be minimal, it is enormously important to the stakeholders. Since historical redress is unlikely to restructure society and power relationships in the short run (although it may lead to long-term changes), even the symbolic becomes a cause for optimism, especially when it carries minimal material reparations.

Sharing may sound benign, but the process of constructing narratives may in certain instances be risky, and may subject historians to public pressure or more. One would be amiss not to note that the uncertainty of a shared space can be a lightning rod for nationalists. Scholars must be courageous enough to present a counternationalist narrative, and they must be willing to construct and sign on to a narrative that criticizes the national myths and gives “comfort to the enemy.” In certain cases it leads participants to transgress the law. In Turkey, scholars and others have often been indicted for offending the nation by referring to Armenian genocide (article 301 of the criminal law). Hrant Dink—a journalist, not a historian—was assassinated following his indictment for participating publicly in this dialogue.

This is an extreme case, and more often a shared narrative leads to animated discussion and strong criticism. The political pressure exercised against historians for even participating in such an enterprise can be significant, however, as I have witnessed in both the Balkans and Palestine. Nationalist backlash is a real impediment, yet international professional legitimacy can provide encouragement and crucial support. The custodians of the nationalist discourse do not disappear; they are likely to mount a counteroffensive, but at least they face an agenda and a narrative that challenge their own myth.

At times, agreement on very elementary aspects of the conflict is viewed as an achievement and perceived as a step forward, since people on both sides are surprised to see the extent of the shared ground. For example, in a recent exchange that occurred during some joint Palestinian-Israeli work on a historical atlas of 1948, the mere acceptance by Israelis that what are now Jewish cities were previously Arab cities (such as Tiberius/Safad) was welcomed by Palestinians, although from the Israeli side this was not a gesture or a move of reconciliation, but merely a well-known historical description. On the other hand, the nationalist specter continues to haunt both sides when it comes to the Sanctuary, known to Arabs as Harem al-Sharif, and to much of the rest of the world as the Temple Mount. The willingness of the two sides to collaborate on a single text is innovative and is seen as a sign of goodwill, a potential facilitator of conciliation.¹⁷ There is little doubt that the process of de-

¹⁷ See <http://www.historyandreconciliation.org>. In an op-ed piece, Dennis Ross described the construction of myth in the outcome of Camp David (2000): “Nothing has done more to perpetuate the

termining the historical status of holy sites has profound implications for the contemporary Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and one way to move forward is for scholars from both sides to conduct specific historical investigations according to professional standards. The resulting shared narrative can first delineate the emerging agreement between the sides and secondly clarify the differences of opinion and explicate the reasons for the remaining disagreement (e.g., conflicting sets of data and interpretations of causality). Such a narrative has the potential for countering nationalist propaganda on both sides, and can present a framework within which politicians may be able to explore new possibilities.

An alternative theoretical way to reconcile historical national memories is to erase differences, that is, to create parity at any price. Vaclav Havel's famous assertion that "We are all perpetrators" is analogous to the focus of German expellees' organizations on "We are all victims," and to Desmond Tutu's emphasis on comprehensive forgiveness. These narratives, although impelled by polarized moral intuitions, construct moral equivalences among perpetrators and victims. Such views erase differences through their focus on individual actions and sufferings: victimized civilians are victims, no matter what crimes have been perpetrated by their kin. Havel's spread of the responsibility for political violence among the population at large mirrors the expellees' desire to share in the victimization of World War II. Tutu's insistence on forgiveness places yet another obligation on the victims that constructs a semblance of reciprocal responsibility between the perpetrators' need to apologize and the victims' need to forgive. The problem is that if everyone is either responsible or guilty, then no one is. If everyone is a victim, then neither guilt nor responsibility matters. Erasure of historical responsibility and the flattening of difference have not, however, generally been successful in persuading public opinion, and collective guilt remains a strong force in national politics. Neither the Czech nor the Polish publics embrace the notion of being perpetrators toward Germans, and at the same time, the victims of Germany are not willing to share their own victimization to allow parity for German suffering.

Confronting collective guilt presents a crucial challenge for redress. There is no parity in history, and no one should expect it. While the liberal worldview abhors the notion of collective guilt, national memory is replete with collective characterizations including guilt and responsibility. Collective guilt is a frequent if not a permanent fixture of public memory, and it has to be engaged directly. Engaging the national collective guilt and constructing the memory in a way that incorporates it into the national identity, rather than confining it to a form of collective accusation, can produce recognition and a more productive relationship. A rich narrative is not one that displays similar sympathy to both sides, particularly in cases of gross violence. One can assume that the conflict, and the nationalist histories that drive it, are often (perhaps always) based on memory that is flat, binary, and simpler than the complex historical record. Therefore it is probable that a rich narrative will undermine nationalist perspectives and provide for a more nuanced history. Yet there are cases

conflict between Arabs and Israelis than the mythologies on each side." Ross, "Don't Play with Maps," *New York Times*, January 9, 2007. Even when the history is in the immediate past, mythologizing can be instantaneous.

in which one-sided memory actually coincides with the historical research, in which victims are victims and perpetrators are perpetrators. In such cases, the overwhelming evidence necessary to produce a coherent and unambiguous narrative may well persuade the parties whose myth is shattered that their self-perception and their view of history ought to be revisited. Indeed, such was the response to the Jedwabne commemoration by some Poles and the government at the time.

More likely, assigning responsibility or guilt will evoke stiff opposition. This is evident in the Yugoslav Scholars' Initiative's focus on the wrongs/crimes committed by all sides, yet the recognition that Serb forces committed the most/worst crimes. As I experienced in presenting the question of Serbian aggression to a Serb audience, and as is widely evident in public discourse, there is a powerful desire among Serbs to contextualize Serbian crimes in the 1990s within the history of World War II in the region, especially the crimes committed by the Ustaše. The Serbs' memory of the Second World War provides them with vital justification for the 1990s war. These national narratives remain a potential and real cause of conflict.

Addressing the collective memory will of necessity include the exceptions, the plurality of attitudes, including those actions and individuals who provided haven to the victims. Although many Hutus were guilty of perpetrating genocide, the Hutu collective guilt cannot mean that every Hutu is guilty.¹⁸ Telling the stories of the "righteous" is also part of the national identity. Indeed, in places where the affected societies and peoples continue to coexist in proximity, such engagement is a must. The alternative too often is renewed violence.¹⁹

The history wars are on the front line of politics. As of mid-2009, Kenya, in the wake of the political violence of December 2007, is in the process of constituting a Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission with the goal of investigating historical injustices since independence (1963). Despite sustained international pressure and threats of intervention by the International Criminal Court, it has taken eighteen months to set up, requiring the negotiation of political compromises. The scope of the investigation is wide; its aim is to facilitate a transitional democracy that will be accountable and work toward peaceful coexistence. It thus presents a dilemma: What should the TJRC privilege in order to achieve its larger goal of leveraging the historical truth to construct a usable history for Kenyans of diverse identities? So far, the headlines are not promising. The Kenyan public seems mesmerized—at least in the short run—by discussions over the nature of historical injustices, but most of these focus on the top political echelon and on unresolved political assassinations. They ignore long-term structural historical injustices and thus have quickly alienated deprived communities who do not see the commission

¹⁸ The number of persons accused of genocide soared to 818,000 in 2007. Those trials are still ongoing. Tens of thousands of Hutus, and probably more, were to be tried by the Gacaca courts, a system of "traditional" local "juries" adopted to prosecute "lesser" criminals who have been in custody for years because of a judicial backlog. The system is overwhelmed by the challenges it faces, not the least of which is that it has more than 200,000 judges who are not paid, and who are open to widespread manipulation. See "Rwanda: Events of 2007," <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k8/docs/2008/01/31/rwanda17828.htm>. Also, for an overview of the courts, see Christopher J. Le Mon, "Rwanda's Troubled Gacaca Courts," *Human Rights Brief* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 16.

¹⁹ The sense that ethnic separation is a real alternative has gained new adherents since the 1990s. Chaim Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1996): 136–175.

as serving their own interests. Muslim communities in the northeast, for example, have threatened to boycott it. Kenya provides an example of a society in transition that is focusing its national energy on acknowledging and amending historical injustices as a way of building a democracy. Recognition becomes a precondition for national unity. Whether the process will succeed is another matter; it will need a great deal of help.

If in Kenya grassroots human rights advocacy as well as international pressure led to the employment of history to resolve a political impasse, the government in Russia is in total control in mobilizing the writing of history for its own ends. In May 2009, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev established a wide-ranging special presidential commission for “historic truth” with the goal “to counteract attempts to falsify history that undermine the interests of Russia.” This political statement, which some commentators saw as having “strategic importance,” was published on the eve of the military parade in Moscow to commemorate World War II Victory Day. This move to defend the motherland against “the falsifiers of history” was directed at, among others, Ukraine and the Baltic states, but even more so against internal dissent. The suppression of freedom of speech is one of the most pointed attacks on human rights in Russia, and now Russia has officially opened the “history wars” as a new frontier in this suppression of human rights and in its propaganda war with Ukraine and the Baltic states. As with human rights, history is now central enough to international politics that it is used as a tool of abuse and is becoming a focal point for distorters of written history as much as it is for historians and advocates in pursuit of “legitimate” history. History is clearly subject to falsification, and abusers’ attempt to own the process is akin to the policy of countries such as Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and China, which are being elected to the Human Rights Council with the sole goal of undermining a vigilant human rights system. When it comes to history, the challenge is to build a vibrant civil society advocacy movement that will counteract the abuse of history as a means of provoking conflict and repressing human rights.

One tangible shared narrative can be found in reparations agreements, which provide explicit and quantitative negotiation over memory and victimization. The worst violations of a people, genocides and the Holocaust, are the clearest examples. The reparations accord is a complex construction involving myriad issues, but the most important is that the protagonists, victims and victimizers alike, recognize each other’s story in the narration. This form of closure, which acknowledges the current memories of each side, provides the structure for a shared narrative that retains a place for one’s own national story. Such closure is more than merely an agreement of material claims; it is also a bartering of memory. As with other forms of writing history, the narrative remains subject to reinterpretation. While each side can turn around and reinterpret the memory, and even the meaning of the reparations agreement, it does signal that there is more to the shared narrative than divergent perspectives on the conflict.

STANDARDS OF TRUTH IN PHILOSOPHY and science form the backdrop to historians’ struggle with objectivity, subjectivity, and activism. The tentativeness of historical

truth was articulated by Carl Becker in “Everyman His Own Historian,” delivered as the AHA Presidential Address in 1932, long before most of today’s practicing historians were born. The subjectivity that is an unavoidable component of the writing of history can lead at one end of the spectrum to George Orwell, who famously viewed historical writing as omnipotent because “those who control the present control the past and those who control the past control the future,” and at the other end to Jorge Luis Borges, for whom “historical truth . . . is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened.” Borges’s perspective may lead to resignation in the face of the past, for history writing, as he says, is “an undertaking which was exceedingly complex and, from the very beginning, futile.”²⁰ On the other end of the historical realist spectrum stands Günter Grass, who in *Crabwalk* vividly expressed the necessity of the writing of history because the past is like “a clogged toilet” that refuses to clear.²¹ The contributors to this *AHR* Forum suggest a middle way between these distant ends of the spectrum. They attempt to put the subjectivity of history not in the service of controlling or reversing the past, but rather to the delicate task of narrating the past in a way that enriches the present.

²⁰ George Orwell, *1984* (1949; repr., New York, 1961), 204; Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York, 1964), 43–44.

²¹ Günter Grass, *Crabwalk*, trans. Krishna Winston (Orlando, Fla., 2003), 122.

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