

Edward Serotta, in his commentary about memory, warns us against “bad” national memory in favor of a “good” personal memory. Can one ever really be free from national identification? Would such individual or personal memory, without roots and traditions, be better? It seems to me that this experiment has already failed in Soviet Russia; I see former Soviet citizens longing for some collective identity — filling churches and fighting for national independence. Of course “there is no Greek or Jew” in Christ, one would say, as if national boundaries were not implicated in religion. But what about “Jew” when that personal memory is also collective — that is, national and religious at the same time? Is the Exodus from Egypt followed by the Giving of the Torah a “thing that didn’t happen, remembered by those who weren’t there, that tries to create a future that cannot be attained?” Or is the creation of a Jewish state with its institutions a result of Jewish national memory? Distortion or not, we can not reproach our memory for not being creative. The Holocaust is the essence of Jewish national memory today and I do not think it is ever possible for the Jews to forget about it. If we do, would all those victims make sense?

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Does memory form a country’s identity and institutions? Or do a country’s identity and institutions form memory?

Memory and its sibling, the performative

promise of future memory, use past tragedy and joy in the hope of respectively avoiding or prolonging them. English writer Robert Laurence Binyon’s “We will remember” conjures up World War I. The transcribed *sh’ma*, placed into *teffilin* and *mezuzot*, physically recalls Jewish faith and unity.

Leaders are guilty of commanding citizens to remember the teachings of Ghandi, the vision of Ataturk, sorrow in Babylon, or sacrifice “four score and seven years ago.”

As long as there are contested borders, those in power will seek to create both presence and a unified present by justifying the future with the past and the past with the future. Less than a century after the 1918 murder of the czar’s family in Russia and the removal of their images from the public sphere, their remains were memorialized, their names canonized.

A popular narrative rarely accommodates

two perspectives at once. And so the individual must remember more deeply. She must deepen her own vision of history to counter a hallowed past.

“Memory starts a process that forms the identity of a country and its institutions.”

Marcelo Brodsky,
Habitus: A Diaspora Journal

I think about memory as an American who has lived in Central Europe for two decades; this is a region that has remembered badly and forgotten well.

“The identity of a country and its institutions” is invariably battled over by those who try to mold memory to justify current policies (Serbia, for instance, 1992-1999) and those who use memory as a warning about terrible past deeds (postwar Germany confronting World War II).

Every country uses memory — manufactured, distorted, re-imagined — in films, books, and other forms of cultural arts. What, after all, is nationalism or, to use the term Americans prefer, patriotism? Is it the creation of a nationally-distributed memory, sometimes about things that didn’t happen, remembered by those who weren’t there, that tries to create a future that cannot be attained?

No country is exempt from distorting ‘memory.’ Note, for example, Israel on the 1948 War; Turkey on the Armenian genocide of 1915; Italy on its atrocities in Ethiopia in 1935; and the United States on the horrors it inflicted on the Vietnamese and, of late, the Iraqis.

“Countries” have no memory of awful events they inflict on others. National identities are forged around forgetting them.

Please leave memory to the individual, and keep it as far from national narratives as possible.

— Edward Serotta

— Alina Polonskaya

— Amelia Glaser