

# Is it the Duty of Historians to Correct National Mythologies?

In an age when nationalism is on the rise, the role of the historian becomes ever more valuable – and controversial.

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Saint George and the Dragon, Luca Signorelli (workshop of), 1495-1505. Rijksmuseum.

## **History is, to some extent, inescapably nationalist**

*Colin Kidd, Professor of History, University of St Andrews*

Historians as an academic profession get by without a Hippocratic Oath. There are no prescribed duties. But various market-like mechanisms serve to keep us honest: our wares are subjected to the criticism of our peers, usually before and again after publication, and our footnotes are displayed for the inspection of all. However, there are certain pitfalls which are much less easy to avoid.

One of these is the extent to which a national mindset frames our enquiries, our narratives and our interpretations. After all, documents tend to be stored in national archives and the stories that historians tell follow, as often as not, the contours of the national past.

Indeed, academic history was born during the late 19th century in an age of nationalism and carries the taint of its parentage. In this sense, history is – to some extent – inescapably nationalist. Even those of us who are overtly critical of nationalist delusions are liable at some point or other to slip up and to find ourselves lapsing unintentionally into flawed nation-based assumptions. If academic historians fall into these traps, it should occasion little surprise when non-academic historians writing for a broader public make similar mistakes.

Nevertheless, there is a gradation of error, rising from inadvertent oversight to the grave offence of fantasy mongering. In the free world the operations of the market drive out the worst examples of national mythologising, those which are fantastical inventions with no grounding in the sources. Much harder to eradicate, and sometimes to detect, are those credible stories that a nation has long told and which underpin its sense of self. Herbert Butterfield, who punctured some of the central

myths of our past in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), retailed a version of these myths in *The Englishman and his History*, published during the Second World War. This reminds us that history can have civic as well as purely academic functions. Nevertheless, a patriotism founded on self-deception and bombast is useless for the needs of the nation it purports to serve. The academic virtues of honesty and integrity are not incompatible with civic utility.

### **National myths have staying power**

*Annika Mombauer, Professor of Modern European History, The Open University*

The history of the First World War is a perfect example of why historians should critically examine national mythologies. In Germany, after 1918, it was government policy to write the story of the war as one in which Germany was attacked by its neighbours and entirely innocent in the events that had led to the conflict. Worse still, after the war was lost, it was claimed that Germany had been ‘undefeated at the front’. Internal enemies – referred to as November criminals – had stabbed Germany in the back. Those who had arranged the peace and settled with the victors at Versailles became traitors on whom all postwar suffering could be pinned. This was a powerful national mythology, state-sponsored and told convincingly by historians in the government’s pay – anyone who wanted to argue differently was silenced.

This version of events was readily embraced by many who were disillusioned with postwar German society, and it was easily incorporated into National Socialist propaganda. Nor were these views abandoned after a second, even more deadly, war. This orthodox view was only first questioned in earnest during the so-called Fischer controversy of the 1960s, when historians attempted to prove, based on documents and archival sources, that the reality of 1914 had been different. They were called traitors. But their insistence on questioning national mythology has enabled later generations of historians and students to evaluate German history more critically.

Nonetheless, these mythologies have staying power, as could be seen during the centenary debates in Germany, when they were quickly revived. Many remembered the arguments of Germany’s innocence and its betrayal from old school books and were only too pleased to recall them in public and online. Many Germans were easily swayed by arguments that their nation had been wrongly punished at Versailles. By implication, German history in the 1930s might have taken a different path.

Historians have a duty to examine mythologies. But they will, of course, draw different conclusions from the same evidence. The issue should not be whether historians should correct predominant interpretations, but rather, that they should not be afraid to question them.

### **Contented people are happier to live in the present**

*Shaun Walker, Central and Eastern Europe Correspondent for the Guardian, author of The Long Hangover: Putin’s New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past (Oxford, 2018)*

One of the biggest Russian film releases of 2016 was *Panfilov’s 28*, which told the tale of 28 Red Army soldiers who fought so heroically during the Second World War battle for Moscow that they were able to hold off dozens of Nazi tanks. The only problem was that the story was largely untrue, or at least enormously embellished, over many years of Soviet, then Russian, mythmaking. When the director of the Russian state archive pointed this out, he was fired. Vladimir Medinsky, the Russian culture minister, said that war heroes should be treated the same as saints and not questioned.

In Vladimir Putin’s Russia, where victory in the Second World War was gradually elevated to the national foundation myth, by 2016 it was indeed considered similar to blasphemy to speak about anything to do with the war that strayed from the official legends. ‘Only total scumbags’ would question sacred Soviet war legends, said Medinsky.

In a climate like this, historians more than ever have a duty to be those ‘scumbags’. All countries use myths and legends and collective memory is a slippery thing. But when history is deliberately twisted and inverted, when any dark sides are covered up, it brings serious problems for societies. Just one example: the lack of discussion in contemporary Russia about the two million Soviet citizens internally deported during the war and the many more Poles, Balts and Ukrainians deported afterwards, means a lack of understanding about factors that have contributed to current problems in Chechnya, Ukraine or the Baltics.

The broader point, though, is that overwrought national mythologies tend to find fertile ground in societies going through troubled times. Contented people are happier to live in the present, not the past. Ideally, everyone would work to make the present more palatable and leave the past to historians, who would be seen as scholars rather than scumbags for painting a picture of the past with all its complexities and nuances. ‘Unhappy is the land that has no heroes’ says one character in Berthold Brecht’s *The Life of Galileo*. ‘No’, comes the reply. ‘Unhappy is the land that needs heroes.’

### **Duty depends on knowledge and ability**

*Emily Jones, Author of Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1813-1914: an Intellectual History (Oxford, 2017)*

The ability and willingness to historicise (and, so, ‘correct’) national myths is central to what historians do.

Understanding – and debating – the various ways in which communities create their own narratives, genealogies and myths has allowed historians to critically assess the ways in which ideas, values and symbols that might appear longstanding or even timeless are actually the product of complex historical developments. David Cannadine and Hugh Trevor-Roper have demonstrated this with regards to the British monarchy and the Scottish Highland tradition, as has David Olusoga, writing more recently on race, immigration and Windrush.

In my own work I extend this to political myths of ‘founding fathers’. Doing so helps us to recognise the significant presence that myths, often seen as ‘bad’ histories, have had, for good or ill, within societies old and new.

To ‘correct’ implies a moment of debunking and of raising awareness. That Britain, for example, did not stand alone for two years against Hitler. This claim cannot be divorced from the values or traits that such national myths seem designed to demonstrate: courage, pluck, British exceptionalism. In this instance, telling histories that do not easily align with idealised claims to glory counter a short historical memory, in which Empire and the sacrifice of millions is relegated to a footnote at best.

Duty, however, depends on knowledge and ability: I am no expert on German history, for example, which has its own mythologised *Sonderweg*. Yet the ways in which particular events, heroes and villains, symbols and myths are brought into a national story should continue to attract the critical gaze of historians, precisely because they are seen to do things central to human experience: create loyalties, brand outsiders and, perhaps, form that elusive thing, ‘identity’. This was as true of the Whig constitutional history of the 19th century as of tropes surrounding Windrush and the Second World War. These components of national mythmaking – ‘bad’ history – may never be corrected, but that doesn’t mean we can’t try.