

The cult of memory: when history does more harm than good

It is a truism that we must remember the past or else be condemned to repeat it. But there are times when some things are best forgotten

by [David Rieff](#)

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Most decent people still endorse George Santayana's celebrated dictum: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." We have been taught to believe that the remembering of the past and its corollary, the memorialising of collective historical memory, has become one of humanity's highest moral obligations.

But what if this is wrong, if not always, then at least part of the time? What if collective historical memory, as it is actually employed by communities and nations, has led far too often to war rather than peace, to rancour and resentment¹ rather than reconciliation, and the determination to exact² revenge for injuries both real and imagined, rather than to commit to the hard work of forgiveness?

It is possible that, whereas forgetting does an injustice to the past, remembering does an injustice to the present. On such occasions, when collective memory condemns communities to feel the pain of their historical wounds³ and the bitterness of their historical grievances⁴ it is not the duty to remember but a duty to forget that should be honoured.

In these situations, at least, is it possible to state⁵ with confidence which is worse, remembering or forgetting? There can be no categorical answer. But given⁶ humanity's tendency towards aggression, then it is at least possible that forgetting, for⁷ all the sacrifices it imposes, may be the only safe response.

To put the dilemma even more bluntly⁸, remembrance may be the ally of justice, but it is no reliable friend to peace, whereas forgetting can be.

As a reporter during the Bosnian war, which was in large measure a slaughter fuelled by⁹ collective memory, or, more precisely, by the inability to forget, I used to carry with me copies of two poems, *The End and the Beginning* and *Reality Demands*, by Wisława Szymborska. Born in 1923, she had lived through Poland's agonies under Germans and Russians alike. For her, as for the majority of her generation, the soil¹⁰ of her nation's countryside and the paving stones of its cities were drenched in blood, suffused with¹¹ memories of the most tragic, unbearable, and destructive character. And yet, in *Reality Demands*, Szymborska wrote:

*Reality demands
we also state the following:
life goes on.
It does so near Cannae and Borodino,
At Kosovo Polje and Guernica.*

What Szymborska articulates is the ethical imperative of forgetting so that life can go on – as it must. And she is right to do so. For everything must end, including the work of mourning¹². Otherwise the blood never dries, the end of a great love becomes the end of love itself, and, as they used to say in Ireland, long after the quarrel has stopped making any sense, the memory of the grudge endures¹³.

1 resentment: *ressentiment*
2 to exact: *exiger*
3 wounds: *blessures*
4 grievance: *grief, rancœur*
5 to state: *affirmer*

6 given ..: *étant donné ..*
7 for: *malgré*
8 bluntly: *brutalement*
9 slaughter fuelled by:
un massacre alimenté par

10 the soil: *la terre*
11 suffused with: *qui baigne dans*
12 mourning: *le deuil*
13 the grudge: *la rancune*
endures: *demeure, persiste*

