eISSN 3045-3224

HISTORIA

philosophy & theory

Volume 1 / **2025**

Yerevan State University

Historia: philosophy & theory

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY
Laboratory for Philosophy and Theory of History

HISTORIA

PHILOSOPHY & THEORY

Volume 1 | 2025

YSU Publishing House

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Volume 1, 2025

EDITORIAL

The establishment of a new journal devoted to the philosophy and theory of history marks the creation of a scholarly space for questions that resist classification within either purely theoretical philosophy or strictly empirical historiography. Within this space, history is not approached merely as the representation of what has been, nor philosophy as an abstract and self-contained intellectual endeavor. Rather, it is conceived as a site of collaborative reflection on historical meaning and temporality, as well as on catastrophe, memory, hope, political language, subjectivity, and related problematics that emerge at the intersection of philosophical inquiry and historical experience.

Yet the founding of a journal is not only the creation of an academic platform; it is also the assumption of responsibility. This responsibility concerns decisions about which questions are worth posing, the languages in which they are articulated, and the scholarly ethos offered to the reader. Editorial responsibility entails a resistance to transient academic fashions as well as to ideologically convenient solutions, and affirms a commitment to the view that theoretical work constitutes a mode of engaging with history rather than a means of withdrawing from it.

Against this background, it is legitimate to ask whether the establishment of yet another journal is warranted in a scholarly landscape already populated by respected periodicals in the philosophy of history, the history of concepts, and theoretical historiography. Our response is unequivocal: such a need does indeed exist. First, many existing journals remain embedded within established theoretical traditions and, often, albeit unintentionally, reproduce Eurocentric or methodologically canonical languages. *Historia: Philosophy & Theory* seeks to open a space for experiences, historical temporalities, and intellectual problematics emerging from so-called “peripheries,” from fractures and margins, and from non-central histories – without reducing them to local particularities, but recognizing their universal theoretical relevance.

Second, our historical moment is shaped not only by ongoing struggles over the interpretation of the past, but also by an increasingly pervasive experience of the loss, suspension, or opacity of the future. Catastrophe, genocide, war, and the politics of memory have ceased to function merely as objects of historical inquiry; they have become key modalities through which the structure of time itself is apprehended. Under these conditions, there is a need for a journal that approaches historical theory as a critical engagement with the present and as a reflective practice oriented toward thinking possible futures. In this sense, *Historia: Philosophy & Theory* does not claim to fill a void

conceived as a mere absence; rather, it responds to a tension already inscribed within contemporary historical consciousness.

This process is grounded in a specific institutional and intellectual experience. The activities of the *Laboratory for Philosophy and Theory of History*, founded in 2023 at Yerevan State University together in collaboration with Kalle Pihlainen, progressively revealed not only a sustained research interest, but also the emergence of a stable and expanding field of discussion that exceeded the limits of seminars, lectures, and locally circumscribed projects. Within the framework of the Laboratory, questions were articulated that called for a broader audience, international dialogue, and a theoretically rigorous format of publication.

An important milestone in this process was the organization of the Laboratory's first international conference, *State-Sponsored Histories and Historiographic Authority*. The conference brought together scholars working in the philosophy and theory of history from different countries to examine the institutional conditions of historical knowledge, the relationship between state power and historiography, and the mechanisms through which historiographic authority is produced. The majority of the articles included in the present issue are revised and theoretically elaborated versions of papers originally presented at this conference, allowing the productive tension of a live intellectual exchange to be preserved and transformed into durable scholarly texts.

Ultimately, this journal is founded on the conviction that history is a field of resistance: resistance not only to narratives imposed by power, but also to the uncertainty of the present when it becomes naturalized and unquestioned. Under conditions of geopolitical instability and accelerated change, historical thinking functions as a mode of resistance to the pressure of time itself: it exposes the contingency and fragility of the present and safeguards the possibility of critical reflection. To think historically is to resist the pressure of an imposed present, to disclose its contingency and fragility, and to insist on the continuing possibility of critical judgment. This journal affirms historical theory as a form of intellectual responsibility – one that refuses closure, resists inevitability, and keeps open the horizon of thought.

Davit Mosinyan
Editor-in-Chief

Historia: philosophy & theory, 2025, Vol. 1, pp. 5-14
doi: 10.46991/hpt.2025.1.01

TO ACHIEVE IN HISTORY

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Abstract

Many studies have described how our notions of violence and war have been modified and transformed under influence of new technology, war industries, etc. But they do not explain what in violence can be mechanical as such. This is precisely what I want to explore in this article. I do not want to explain or describe a form of violence as generated by machines, but I first and foremost want to show how there can be a mechanical aspect in a form and in the expression of violence as such. In order to achieve this, I make use of some insights expressed by Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin. The model of violence used is that of a "force" that paralyses any form of adequate reaction and hence introduces a fissure between our experiences and our capacities to act and react. A perfect model of this are the descriptions that German writer W.G. Sebald gave of the population in the bombed cities during the second World War. They exhibit a form of survival that seems to be immune for the unbearable aspects of the reality in which they have fallen. Their actions and forms of behavior start to reveal and to become something purely mechanical.

Keywords: Mechanical violence, genocide, nuclear war, history, Nietzsche, Benjamin.

Received: 18.09.2025
Revised: 05.11.2025
Accepted: 01.12.2025

Introduction

To *achieve* means two things: to accomplish and to finish, which in turn can mean to kill or exterminate. In the 20th century, the meaning of both terms became very closely correlated. Human beings came to conceive of the accomplishment of a project with historical amplitude based basically on the idea of killing: "Yar – Vur – Oldur", i.e., "Burn - Kill - Demolish". As you might all know, these were the scant three terms used by Talat Bey in the telegram ordering the extermination of Armenians in the vilayets of the region of Diyarbakir (Suni, 2015, p. 293).

Often, but not exclusively, the historical account seeks to celebrate and honor human beings for the things they have *accomplished*. And so, for a long time, human beings were deemed to be worthy of the creations of which they considered themselves to be the author. Expressed in the terms of traditional metaphysics, as a cause the human being eminently contained the realization of his or her effects. None of these effects would release itself from the power it exercised as a cause. And this idea has strongly determined the stakes of history and the work of historians: they are driven by the necessity and challenge of understanding, thinking and expressing the things we human beings are capable of doing. The historian's challenge is to bring the understanding of events into proportion with human creativity.

1) This challenge had already been put into question by some philosophers at the very start of what we historically conceived as being the origin of Modernity, 17th century rationalism. A beautiful example of this is what the French thinker Blaise Pascal writes in one of his "pensées", the one dedicated to what he calls "disproportion of man". In this thought, he critics Descartes' claims according to whom nature can be cognitively appropriated and submitted to the proportion of our own ideas and scientific methods. But, says Pascal, all are ideas and representations of nature lack the right proportion: in relation to what is microscopically and infinitely small, our concepts are too broad, we miss the point and feel ourselves giants in relation to that infinite. But in the other direction, once we start to look at, and to try to grasp what seems to us as infinitely giant and huge, we feel how disproportionately small and insignificant our thoughts and beings are. Hence, we are always oscillating between these two extremes, small in relation to what is infinitely big, and big in relation to what is infinitely small. We are vacillating in between these two infinites: our knowledge can only hope to find some momentary equilibrium. That equilibrium definitively crashed with the development of science in the 20th century, among them nuclear physics and quantum mechanics. They pit into question our "proportionate" views one matter and the nature of the universe. But not only that. As a consequence of the discoveries concerning the atomic structure of matter, and the use of the energy delivered by the fission of the nuclei, another disproportion raised. A disproportion that not only affects our cognitive relation in regard to universe and matter.

In the 20th century, the new disproportion affects human creativity as such. This disproportion is related to what the German philosopher Gunther Anders called the *Promethean discrepancy.* Discrepancy: not in the classic sense of the sorcerer's apprentice losing control over self-generated dynamisms, i.e. engineers and industrialists overwhelmed and carried away by the unforeseen consequences of their technological progress. In the 20th century the relation between cause and effects refers to a new kind of disproportion: instead of

being contained eminently in the power of the cause, the effects surpass the cause in power. But this power is of a strict specific kind: the power to destroy.

The 20th century has been fertile in this sense: human beings have excelled in their power to accomplish and do what they were probably incapable of imagining. They dropped the plutonium bomb on Nagasaki and perpetrated and continue to perpetrate a series of genocides or mass murders. As if the first were merely a repetition for the others, and as if the Hiroshima atomic bomb were merely an exercise, a test, a prelude to the one dropped on Nagasaki. How does this *repetition* fit into history? That's what is at stake in this article.

2) When thinking about history, we usually start from a strict difference between inheritance and heredity: the former is accomplished within the framework of human action and freedom (culture) - the latter is purely physiological and deterministic (nature). We may inherit and be determined by character traits, such as irascibility and aggressiveness, but it is as free subjects that we determine whether or not we act according to these traits. But there is also something as pure destructiveness. Walter Benjamin, in this context, wrote a short essay about what he called "Der destruktive Charakter" (Benjamin 1977, pp. 289-290). How is this "destructiveness" transmitted? We could situate Benjamin's short essay within the Nietzschean framework of history, even if he himself does not explicitly refer to it.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche published around 1870 a famous text on the use of History (Nietzsche 1997): it was integrated in a book containing also an essay on David Strauss, Schopenhauer and Wagner. The polemical book was called *Untimely Meditations, Unzeitgemässen Betrachtungen.* Untimely since he considered his own remarks to be far beyond the temporal climate he criticized in his book, i.e. cultural decadence or philistinism. This critique is also the motive of his second essay, the one on History. History has been reduced to a one-dimensional academic enterprise devoted to scientific knowledge and explanation of the past. But, he says, History has three dimensions and forms; there are three forms of *historicization* – i.e., the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical. And these three forms must come together in order to generate and inspire not our knowledge, but our actions: history belongs to those who want to act, he claims, and not just to those who wish to accumulate information about the past generations. History as (academic) discipline always overemphasized the cognitive aspect of our relation to the past at the expense of the vital dimension. As a consequence, life and intellect got disconnected: what we know about the past remains of purely intellectual value and lacks any force or impact on our actions – and in the way we act, nothing from what we know from the past inspires us: we act in stereotypes. At the level of the mind, we are full of sophisticated opinions

and cultural insights – but in our relations with the external world and other persons, we behave as uneducated brutal idiots or ignorant people. Hence the importance, according to Nietzsche to reconnect knowledge of the past and our behavior, to reconnect the mind with life and its vital forces. Our actions have to be inspired by what we know about the past. This is the task of what he will describe as *History* in his text.

In his vision, action has to be driven by the desire to accomplish in the future, what the past has bequeathed to us in terms of greatness, which, by way of example, encourages us to change the present in the hope of a more fulfilled existence. Fulfilling this ideal also means sacrificing and excluding anything that doesn't fit in with the project, or anything that slows down achievement. The very basis of our action corresponds to a dynamism that Sartre in his theory on imagination would have called a double *neantization* (Sartre, 1940): we act when we refuse to conform to the demands and constraints of the present situation, with the aim of modifying them in line with a project that does not yet exist. Acting in this case means doing what we are capable of imagining. In this kind of action, the three dimensions of History, i.e. the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical one, have to form a unity or fit into a temporal synthesis.

The *monumental* aspect presents the past as something huge and inspiring (and it represents the future), the antiquarian defends and protects all the small details belonging to our tradition and that we easily tend to forget in our monumental plans (it represents the past as such), and the critical aspect represents the juvenile and impatient live of the present, that has no time to lose. The dynamical unification of these three temporal dimensions or forms of "History" ensures and should structurally organize what we call human and historical action.

Hence, let us try to imagine what would happen if the "neantizing" power (*denying* the present in favor of a future that itself still *is not*) *frees itself* from this pure dynamism of action? For example, what would happen if the "Kritische Historie" (i.e. the critical, juvenile and vital part of history) emancipates itself from the temporal synthesis and exhausts itself in demolishing the past, without any goal nor project? This is, I think, the situation Walter Benjamin describes.

3) A "destructive character", Benjamin says in the short essay we referred to, generates no action in the strict sense of the term: it cares nothing for what it destroys and what comes in its place. In this sense, what he does is no longer driven by the imagination. All it retains is the power to *refuse* and as a consequence it limits itself to create emptiness.

Action belongs to those people who strife for the transmission of meaning, and hence for the preservation of all the things they care for, they search to protect and to put out of reach - yet destructiveness transmits no meaning but, says Benjamin, only *situations*: i.e. opportunities or occasions to appropriate one's things or objects of care, in order to liquidate or demolish them. The spirit sensitive to history and its legacy is, says Benjamin, nourished by distrust and insecurity about the course that the things they seek to transmit can take: anything can go astray. They're also afraid of being misunderstood and thus endangering their heritage. Hence also, says Benjamin, their incessant chatter (Klatch) to make sure their (good) intentions are well conveyed. The destructive character, on the other hand, is always clear and reliable about its intentions and the nature of what it is doing. No misunderstanding is conceivable here: *demolish*. If, moreover, the destructive character seeks to stay alive, it's not because it thinks life is worth living, but because suicide isn't worth committing. Its only affirmation is a negative one: that of freeing itself from everything that ties it to a history and its dynamics of *historicization*. This destructiveness is not inherited, nor is it the result of genetic transmission. It destroys *without hatred nor passion.*

In Benjamin this destructiveness is still conceived as a form of the vital or as the emancipation of what Nietzsche in his essay called the *critical history*: unburdened by any legacy, without any project, destructiveness rejuvenates. "Zerstörung verjungt" (Benjamin, 1977, p. 289). It is driven by a need for fresh air ("Frische Luft") and free space ("Freie Raum"). It is highly likely that Benjamin was also critically targeting the controversial remarks of German writer and essayist Ernst Jünger, for whom the Great War of 1914 was experienced as the source of an immense vital amplification. A combatant himself, he never tires of glorifying his experiences at the front, aestheticizing them or seeking in them the source of a revitalization that compensates for the "poverty" of the experience of people in large modern cities. Against this modern world governed by Progress, Reason, or the democratic principles born after the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, he championed the virtues of warlike violence and the general mobilization of emotions and "life." His claims are permeated by what has been called Faustian delirium (Brosteaux, 2025, pp. 143-196).

4) However, I would like to put this version of the destructive character or power into question: Benjamin, in line with Nietzsche and Jünger, describes (and criticizes) it as the affirmation of something vital. The destructive character I'm trying to describe is not vital anymore: it's *mechanical*. Not in the sense that the mechanization of war delivers a power on its own, but in the sense that de violence as such is mechanical. Many studies have described how our notions of violence and war have been modified and transformed under influence of new technology, war industries, etc. (De Landa, 1991;

Mhalla, 2025). But they do not explain what in violence can be mechanical as such. This is precisely what I want to explore. Not the violence generated by machines, but the mechanical aspect of a form of violence as such.

Let me explain.

We may not limit ourselves to thinking of the power of destruction in terms of a single, isolated event: its monstrosity is manifested *in its repetition* and in the accumulation of catastrophes. Horror and terror are not Hiroshima, but the unmotivated and gratuitous *repetition* of the destruction of Nagasaki[1]. In the same way, the horror of the crime of 1915 is not condensed in the atrocious genocide perpetrated against the Armenians, but in the repetition and mechanization of death carried out ever since. They say that history repeats itself: no, what repeats itself is what each time destroys and annihilates it.

These forms of violence and massive, systematic destruction of part of the population have often been linked to technical and industrial progress. It's as if the mechanization of life and culture as such, as I said, gave rise to a new form of violence and destruction. This model would also have influenced military management: for example, the army being described as an immense war machine, a machine that mobilizes the totality of a society and submits it to the demands of that big mechanical enterprise.

But I think we need to reverse the relationship: mechanization is not the cause of a new form of destruction: this last one cannot be reduced to a mechanical repetition effect, like the devastating effect of a machine gun. Mechanization has to be understood as the product and materialization of destructive power as such. What is repeated is not an identical effect caused in series by one machine or another. In this model, the effect is determined and programmed by the cause and reinscribes itself into the chain of determinations that control the order of the material world.

But devastating power repeats *itself as such:* because it is neither caused nor limited by anything. It stems from a form of thinking that has freed itself from the dynamic of action. Action, we said, presupposed a form of thinking that neutralizes a part of reality in order to modify its structure. But what happens when consciousness limits itself to neutralizing the impact of reality, without reinvesting itself into action? Then it no longer lets itself be dictated by the apprehension of *something possible* (imagination) to be realized, an ideal or a project. It frees itself as *pure possibility.* As a thought entirely displaced or out of joint with the demands of reality and limited by nothing.

It is this thought which, without limits, repeats itself as destruction. I think Cioran captured this intuition very well, when he wrote: "Thought, in its essence, is destruction. More exactly: in its principle. One thinks, one begins

to think in order to break ties, to dissolve affinities, to undermine the joinery of the 'real'" (Cioran, 1997, p. 387).

During the first atomic bomb test at Alamogordo, Oppenheimer, in a fit of literary and prophetic megalomania, supposedly proclaimed: "Now I have become death, the destroyer of worlds" (Bird & Sherwin, 2006).

It's true that the very *paradigm* of the devastating power unleashed by human thought is the atomic bomb. Resulting from a thought that splits the internal structure of the very core of matter, it unleashes an energy whose force of effect far exceeds that of the cause. And the effect doesn't merely multiply the original power tenfold (like an engine): it's a power that does nothing but destroy, and whose radioactive fallout itself spreads death. And it's in this devastating power that mankind has invested itself in the overproduction of nuclear weapons (and I'm not yet talking about the threat posed by civilian use), capable of destroying the entire planet in a kind of global human suicide, a total extermination, a *globocide*.

5) Human beings have acquired an immense power: that of neutralizing and ignoring the impact of reality. This is not a sign of a lack of consciousness: we are conscious of what happens in the world, but we put the impact of these events between brackets and continue to act in a manner that seems unaffected by them. What an immense force this power to neutralize the impact of reality releases or unbridles... that of *pure possibility!*

Sebald has written a disturbing essay about the horror of cities bombed and destroyed by phosphorus bombs during the Second World War (Sebald 2001). But what also preoccupies him is the power of repressing their impact. Of course, he has written about the relationship between this power of repression and the frenetic drive to rebuild destroyed cities. But what he also describes is, above all, this power of denial in the very present, leading nowhere, aiming for no future.

He gives the example of a couple in a suburb of Hamburg, which, with the exception of their house, has been completely destroyed: they are *bourgeoisely* having coffee on their terrace amidst the ruins. A disproportionately absurd activity compared to the catastrophe they are clearly able to ignore. From this denial, however temporal, nothing emerges except an instant distraction.

But this same power to deny reality and distract oneself in the face of the catastrophe or misery is the same power that causes catastrophes "by distraction". Nothing prevents it: because this power is itself born out of nothing.

The power to deny reality without passions, without prior motive, and without a goal to accomplish is an ever-renewed and repeated expression of pure possibility: without limit. How is this power transmitted? It is neither inherited

nor hereditary. Neither historical nor natural. It is mechanical by virtue of its *dynamic repetition.* Within history, within nature, within projects in progress or the genetic traits that determine us, this power surfaces without compromising, without adapting, without maturing or mutating, without learning anything. What it propagates is nothing: emptiness, "platz raümen". And nothing holds: it spreads again, always with the same youthful force. Many philosophers, sometimes inspired by Spinoza, emphasize the affective nature of our relationship with things: everything affects my power to act. But what interests me is to understand how a power to destroy arises in us, which is not the expression of an affect (*tristitia* or hatred), but of a power and pure possibility *to deny these things* as such. For Spinoza, this power makes no sense.

6)There is, however, a metaphysical tradition in which this power to deny reality, to turn our back on it, was attributed to sin and precipitated us into the abyss: Pascal describes it very well in his fragments on divertissement: "we run carelessly into the precipice, after we have put something in front of us to prevent us from seeing it" (Pascal, 2000, p. 600).

This denial gives rise to errors, lies and "non-being". But above all, it's interesting to see how certain metaphysicians have attempted to think about the transmission of this *neantizing* power. Malebranche, who combines Augustine with Descartes, links it to the idea of the original sin. Now, he says, this sin, which weighs down our relationship with the body and turns us away from truth or Being, is not transmitted through history, and there is nothing natural about it. To explain its transmission, the author of *The Search for Truth* refers to the purely mechanical laws of the body described by Descartes as a machine, the automaton. The sin is inscribed in the body as a material trace that activates the mechanical (neurological) movements of the animal spirits in our brain. Hence, that trace that does not impose hereditary behaviors. But something without history, without temporality: this is the idea of original "sin".

7) Let me come to a probably provisional conclusion. In this somewhat programmatic article I've tried to explain, or at least understand how, within history as an internal connection of motives and ideals, an action arises that responds to no project other than that of annihilating once and for all the very heritage that is called humanity or endangering the entire planet.

We can trace and compose a history leading up to genocides and the invention of the atomic bomb: but we can never again suppress or overcome their devastating power, or the *destructive character,* to use Benjamin's phrase, from which they stem. Any form of temporalization, any project opening onto the future, is definitively undermined from within, by mechanical repetition leading to an end that no longer opens onto a new world, a new life, a new history starting from scratch: an end that reveals nothing more than the fact that the human being has discovered, exploited and embodied pure and

simple destruction. A destructive power that has freed himself from history, life and passions: *"stärker als jenem hass"* said Benjamin. Faced with this power and its consequences, all morality, politics and juridical concerns remain, I'm afraid, without resources. This lack of resources is exactly what Anders described as the very stupidity of the human being.

"We are smaller than ourselves; we are absolutely no match for what we are capable of inventing and doing: our imagination is not proportionate to these products and certainly not to their consequences" (Anders, 2024, p. 322).

Some say that every époque has its own dominant affective atmosphere. The Greeks had admiration, the medieval philosophers: devotion, the rationalists: doubt or suspicion: the one that determines us today, at best, is shame. The shame of being human.

Notes

[1] This terror, according to the American perception of it, was supposed to secure the end of war: but according to the Japanese ethicist Yuki Miyamoto, it was itself purely genocidal (cf. for example Miyamoto, 2012).

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Conflict of Interest
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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Historia: philosophy & theory, 2025, Vol. 1, pp. 15-27
doi: 10.46991/hpt.2025.1.02

DISPOSITIF DYNAMICS: STATE NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-MEMORIES IN THE FABRIC OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

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Abstract

Collective memory is not a neutral archive of the past, but a contested field shaped by power, institutional practice, and struggles over legitimacy. This article argues that state historiography functions as a disciplinary dispositif in Michel Foucault's sense: a coordinated network of institutions, discourses, and practices that regulates what becomes historically intelligible, publicly commemorated, and socially "true". By bringing the concept of dispositif into memory studies, the article clarifies how official narratives are stabilized through education, museums, media, and commemorative rituals, while alternative accounts are rendered marginal, unintelligible, or politically suspect. At the same time, the article shows that counter-memory is not an external alternative to official history. It is produced within the same power relations that organize dominant memory, and it intervenes by disrupting their effects.

This paper further develops this framework by examining how digital infrastructures reconfigure the politics of memory. Digital platforms expand the circulation of counter-memories through decentralized archives and networked testimony, yet they also introduce algorithmic and commercial mechanisms that modulate visibility and recognition. The central contribution of the article is to conceptualize contemporary memory politics as a struggle occurring across both institutional and platform-mediated regimes of truth, where the production of remembrance and the possibility of historical recognition are continuously negotiated.

Keywords: Dispositif, state narratives, historiography, counter-memory, Michel Foucault, collective memory, algorithmic visibility, disciplinary power.

Received: 12.08.2025
Revised: 25.10.2025
Accepted: 28.11.2025

Introduction

Why do certain versions of history become widely accepted, while others are pushed aside or ignored? What roles do institutions and systems of knowledge play in determining which memories are acknowledged as reliable and which are dismissed as unreliable? These questions are central to contemporary debates on collective memory, historiography, and power. This article examines the tension between official state narratives and the often-overlooked memories of marginalized groups by drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, power/knowledge relations, and the concept of dispositif. Memory is not a passive record of what happened, but a dynamic process through which societies continuously shape and reshape what is remembered and forgotten. What is perceived as "common sense," "self-evident," or historically "clear" is not determined solely by empirical evidence or logical coherence, but by the repetition, circulation, and institutional endorsement of particular narratives. When political authorities, educational systems, and dominant media repeatedly advance a specific interpretation of the past, that version acquires the status of familiarity and legitimacy. By contrast, alternative accounts articulated by marginalized groups often appear unfamiliar, implausible, or unintelligible, not because they lack substance, but because they lack institutional amplification. As a result, historical intelligibility itself becomes a function of power.

In historiography, the idea of dispositif helps to explain how collective memory is formed both by official state stories and by alternative narratives from different social groups. State narratives often promote an official version of history that supports national identity or political legitimacy, and social cohesion. These narratives help to justify existing institutions and are usually spread through schools, media, and other official channels. Such processes do not merely transmit historical knowledge; they actively regulate which interpretations are rendered visible, credible, and authoritative.

On the other hand, counter-memory comes from voices that push back against the dominant narratives, often sharing the experiences and struggles of marginalized communities. These counter-memories contribute to a more plural and contested understanding of the past by exposing silences, omissions, and acts of historical homogenization. Rather than simply opposing official history, counter-memories challenge the conditions under which historical knowledge is produced, received, and legitimized.

From this perspective, history cannot be understood as a neutral record of past events. It functions as a complex system composed of institutions, symbolic practices, discursive norms, and practices, that work together to determine what is remembered and how it is understood. Schools, museums, traditions, and the media, operate together to privilege certain narratives while

marginalizing others. The sense of “real” or “true” history is created not only by facts, but also through repetition, emotional resonance, and symbolic associations. Therefore, memories that do not align with the mainstream history are not simply ignored, but also actively sidelined, silenced, or perceived as unreliable.

Conversely, counter-memories often come from people on the margins, including survivors of violence, diaspora communities, activists, and digitally networked publics. These voices do not simply present different or alternative facts; they challenge the very way history is created, received, and disseminated. Rather than simply flipping official narratives, counter-memories often take unexpected, diverse forms that challenge the conventional ways in which we are accustomed to remembering the past. This article provides a comparative look at how memory is constructed, challenged, and transformed in different social and political settings, including post-Soviet war histories, genocide memory regimes, digital projects that preserve forgotten or silenced voices.

The article is not merely a replication of Foucault’s theories; it uses his idea of the dispositif as a starting point for further analytical development. It asks why some stories from the past become what we all know and accept, while others are left out or forgotten? When and how alternative memories emerge and are heard, and when they fade into the background? And how are digital spaces changing the way we remember, question, and tell our stories today?

Methodologically, the study adopts a theoretical-analytical approach grounded in Foucauldian genealogy and discourse analysis. It develops a conceptual framework that treats collective memory as a dispositif constituted by institutional practices, discursive formations, and material and digital infrastructures. The analysis is supported through comparative illustrative cases that clarify how power operates in production, regulation, and contestation of historical narratives.

In this framework, memory is understood not as a passive archive of past, but as an active, contested field through which political subjectivities and collective identities are continually negotiated. The politics of memory concerns who has the right to remember, what is remembered, and and the infrastructures through which memory is produced. It operates as an extension of power that is simultaneously disciplinary, productive, and increasingly data-driven. Counter-memories, in turn, are not simply oppositional, but represent interventions that disrupt dominant configurations of meaning and open up possibilities for alternative historical understandings.

Conceptual Framework: Foucault’s Disciplinary Power, Memory, and the Dispositif

M. Foucault reconceptualizes power by rejecting the traditional view that it is settled only in centralized institutions or is exercised exclusively through top-

down authority. Instead, he positions power as diffuse and omnipresent, embedded in the micro-relations of our everyday social interaction. It operates in subtle and diffuse ways, passing through the norms and rules we foster, the language we use to communicate, and the practices of institutions that shape our behavior and perceptions (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Power does not flow from a single, superior source, but is exercised through “capillary” mechanisms-minor, diffuse forms of governance that penetrate all levels of society. These mechanisms regulate behavior, influence how individuals perceive themselves and the world, and structure the way knowledge is produced and disseminated (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). These mechanisms do more than simply maintain order; they shape ways of thinking and acting that seem natural and inevitable, spreading power deep into public life.

Foucault extends this analysis beyond sites traditionally associated with discipline- such as prisons, schools, or military service, but also encompass more subtle cultural domains, such as collective memory. In this sphere, institutions are stabilizing social identities and maintaining ideological equivalence by controlling what is remembered, how memories are formed, and which stories are prioritized or excluded (Foucault, 1980). Memory, therefore, functions as a political technology: its regulation ensures the reproduction of social order and the legitimization of power (Rose, 1999, p. 95). Public education, national ceremonies, museum exhibitions, and media narratives participate in this process, not only transmitting historical information, but also building consensus around dominant interpretations while marginalizing alternative perspectives (Foucault, 1977, pp. 27-43; Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 67-85). This dynamic demonstrates how collective memory is continuously shaped and reshaped to serve current power relations and social cohesion.

However, alongside these dominant memories exist counter-memories, in Foucault's sense, refer to stories that resist or criticize official historiography (Foucault, 2003, pp. 39-47). These counter-memories challenge not only the factual content of dominant accounts, but also the institutional and discursive frameworks that determine which stories will arise as recognized and which will remain ignored. They emerge from oral traditions, activist initiatives, artistic interventions, and testimonies from marginalized communities, undermining the integrity of state-sanctioned historiography and exposing the silences and omissions on which it is based.

To understand the interaction between official memory and its counter-effects, this article has referred to Foucault's idea of the dispositif as a multilayered combination of rhetorics, institutions, legal norms, administrative measures, and spatial forms that are organized in response to particular historical conditions (Foucault, 1980, pp. 195). In the politics of memory, the dispositif acts as a regulatory matrix, subtly delimiting what can be thought and said. Its

influence is rarely expressed in overt censorship; instead, it shapes the cognitive and sensory field in which meaning is constructed, determining when and how certain memories can become visible or remain hidden. As Agamben (2009, pp. 16-19) notes, the dispositif is not simply a mechanism for controlling information; it is a structural force that governs the conditions under which truths can emerge. Counter-memory arises both from within and against the system. It's not a simple alternative version of history, but a "shake" that disrupts the order of the things and authority that is built into official narratives. This dynamic underscore the complex and contested nature of memory formation. This demonstrates that the interplay between dominant memories (which are shaped by official institutions and power structures) and counter-memories (which resist or challenge these dominant domains) shows that collective memory is not something simple or fixed. Instead, it is a complex and continuously debated phenomenon, with different groups and forces struggling over the way history is remembered, interpreted, and transmitted. So, memory formation is a complex process, influenced by power, politics, social context, and resistance. It is always subject to conflict, contradiction and negotiation.

From this perspective, counter-memory isn't something entirely independent of the dispositive – it is born from within it, while simultaneously resisting it. It's not simply a parallel version of official history, but a disruptive force that questions the power woven into dominant narratives. States shape what people collectively remember by designing school curricula, organizing public commemorations, and repeating media-approved versions of the past. All of this serves to discipline collective memory so that it remains consistent with political authority and a particular conception of national identity (Foucault, 1977, p. 194). Counter-memories expose the cracks in this disciplinary structure, proposing alternative forms of historical imagination that challenge the homo-genization of the past.

Thus, within Foucault's theoretical framework of disciplinary power and dispositif, memory is discussed not as a static archive of the past, but as a contested field where power is exercised, resisted, and transformed. It simultaneously becomes both a tool of governance and a platform for struggle, where the past is constantly reinterpreted in light of current power relations.

State Historiography as a Mechanism of Memory Discipline

State historiography functions as a regulatory framework that constructs and circulates selective interpretations of the past. Through mechanisms of normalization, it defines whose histories are visible, whose are minimized. These elements combine a memory dispositif that sustains ideological co-

herence and national identity (Foucault, 1977, pp. 196-197; Garland, 2001, pp. 20-35). This process is accompanying how societies maintain a shared sense of belonging and continuity over time.

Education systems, national museums, media institutions, and state commemorations serve as channels through which these narratives are embedded in public consciousness (Foucault, 1980, pp. 85-86; Markwick, 2012, pp. 45-47). School textbooks reinforce consistent timelines, justify national achievements, and often marginalize episodes viewed as controversial. Museums curate cultural memory, legitimizing specific readings of the past, while state rituals encode political values into symbolic practices (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 120-123). In reality, by actively influencing how society remembers the past, these institutions help to preserve and replicate existing systems of social and political authority, shaping what people collectively remember and believe about their history and identity.

In the Soviet Union, for instance, the Great Patriotic War was portrayed as a narrative of heroic sacrifice, while episodes of internal repression such as the Gulag or Holodomor were downplayed (Markwick, 2012, pp. 38-40). Similarly, the denial of the Armenian Genocide in Turkish historiography reflects an effort to preserve national cohesion and sovereignty by reframing historical violence as civil conflict, thereby denying its systemic nature and discrediting alternative accounts (Akçam, 2012, pp. 52-55). School curricula in the United States have traditionally emphasized stories of the Confederacy and the American Revolution, while stories of Native peoples and African-American slavery have often been marginalized or given limited representation (Ladson-Billings, 1998, pp. 15-23). Comparatively, official narratives about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda were shaped through state media and education to promote national unity and reconciliation, but critics note that these narratives in some cases foster the marginalization of certain victim groups and political views (Straus, 2006, 129-141). In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission challenged the official historiography of apartheid[1] to amplify minority voices and expose state abuses (Tutu, 1999, pp. 53-67). In Armenia, official commemorations emphasize the national sacrifice and resilience of the Armenian Genocide, establishing a collective identity, while other regional or minority perspectives are often marginalized (Balakyan, 2003, pp. 17-37).

National museums also serve as “guardian” of “official memory”: the National Museum of China emphasizes stories of state unity and continuity, minimizing periods of political instability such as the Cultural Revolution (Harrell, 2001), and the Royal War Museum in the United Kingdom emphasizes British perseverance in the First and Second World Wars, while suppressing themes of colonial violence (Noakes & Pattinson, 2011).

Linguistic operations constitute a functional component of the dispositif of memory, too. Terms such as “liberation,” “sovereignty,” “martyrdom,” and “civil conflict,” serve as semantic mechanisms that encode historically conditional meanings and classifications. These lexical constructs are embedded within institutionalized discourses, where they participate in the regulation of historical intelligibility. Rather than transferring neutral information, such terminology operates within discursive formations that organize what may be said about the past and under what conditions it acquires institutional legitimacy. For example, in the context of the Armenian Genocide, Turkish state historiography uses the terms “civil conflict” (“iç savaş”) and “relocation” (“tehcir”) instead of using the terms “genocide” or “mass extermination.” Meanwhile, in Armenian collective memory, the terms “martyrdom” (նահա-տակություն) and “genocide” (ցեղասպանություն) emphasize national identity, highlighting suffering and endurance. These linguistic choices serve as powerful semantic tools that frame historical events in a way that obscures state responsibility and mitigates accusations of systematic violence (Akçam, 2012, pp. 45-48). Foucault’s (1977, pp. 78-80) formulation of “technologies of governance” situates these practices within broader apparatuses that structure the distribution of meaning across temporal and political domains.

Thus, working together, these institutional mechanisms normalize and reproduce dominant historical narratives, shaping collective memory in accordance with political power. These examples illustrate that show how institutions like education, museums, media, and memorials not only reflect history, but actively shape and distort collective memory to maintain political power and national identity.

In parallel, Foucault’s (1972) concept of the archive outlines the historical a priori that conditions the emergence, circulation, and stabilization of discourse. The archive does not merely store statements; it defines the parameters within which statements become describable, repeatable, and institutionally recognized. As such, the dispositif encompasses not only institutional and material arrangements but also the linguistic protocols that regulate memory production. Through these interlinked mechanisms, memory is not preserved but operationalized: it is compelled to processes of selection, exclusion, and formatting within historically situated regimes of truth.

The rise of digital technologies reconfigures the operational field of the memory dispositif and introduces new complexities. While traditional platforms controlled by state institutions continue to curate authorized historical Narratives, digital infrastructures introduce additional vectors of memory production and regulation. Social media networks, online repositories, and decentralized archives enable the circulation of alternative narratives that may bypass conventional institutional filters. These spaces, however, are not outside

systems of control. They are embedded within algorithmic architectures that modulate visibility according to engagement metrics, platform governance policies, and commercial imperatives.

The disciplinary function of state historiography thus persists, though it is increasingly mediated through digital modalities. While not totalizing, its efficacy is sustained through the combined operation of institutional authority, symbolic representation, discursive normalization, and digital modulation.

Marginal Memories and the Operation of Counter-Memory

Counter-memories arise where dominant frames of memory fail to encompass the lived experiences, identities, and pains of particular communities. They do not simply represent a denial or opposition to official narratives but rather operate as an independent epistemic field where alternative historical perceptions are formed based on local knowledge, emotional connections, and embodied forms (Foucault, 2003, pp. 7-9). Compared to state archives and institutional commemorations, which seek to stabilize and homogenize public memory, counter-memories often rely on oral traditions, material culture, performative ceremonies, and decentralized network histories, making them difficult to suppress or erase. For example, in Haiti, where Vodou ceremonial songs and rituals carry memories of slavery, the Haitian Revolution, and the US occupation. These expressions are no longer simply cultural elements, but elements of memory that preserve historical knowledge, resisting colonial and neocolonial historiographies (Joseph & Cleophat, 2016). Vodou, as a counter-memory, expresses stories that are excluded from dominant historiographies: stories of resistance, survival, and cultural continuity that stand up to reduction to simplistic colonial categorizations of Haiti as a failed state or a site of chaos.

Similarly, in Palestinian communities, widespread throughout the Middle East and the diaspora, tatreez patterns serve as material mnemonic devices that map the villages that existed before 1948. These detailed textile designs are passed down from generation to generation, transforming clothing into wearable archives of displacement, identity, and memory (Weir, 1989, pp. 54-58). This material counter-memory serves as a tool of memory that resists the state's desecration of history and territorial erasure.

After the division of India in 1947, counter-memories emerged as a rich collection of eyewitness accounts and oral histories within Sikh and Muslim communities of violence and experiences of displacement. These personal and communal accounts were often transmitted within families and communities and were not included in state curricula (Butalia, 1998, pp. 120-127).

Counter-memories emphasize individual losses and displacements, disrupting the pure, politically neutral understanding of state history.

These examples highlight an important characteristic of counter-memories: their material vulnerability and semantic power. They often lack the permanence of institutional archives or state monuments, yet their adaptive and portable forms, such as songs, textiles, and oral testimonies, make them difficult to control or destroy. This fluidity allows counter-memory to challenge the temporal closure of dominant historiographies, keeping the past open to redefinition, contestation, and reinterpretation.

Moreover, the fact that counter-memories are not accepted in official history has profound political implications. State historiography often claims a monopoly on "truth," establishing certain narratives as the only authentic ones and dismissing alternatives as invalid or baseless. Counter-memories destabilize this monopoly by basing historical authority on the moral claims of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Counter-memories act as symbolic and epistemic sovereignty. For example, indigenous peoples around the world are reviving traditional knowledge systems, resisting colonial narratives that portrayed them as primitive or disappearing (Miller, 1996, pp. 88-93). Such initiatives aim to both redress historical wounds and establish new visions of justice.

Thus, counter-memories simultaneously emerge from and resist the dispositif of memory, negotiating the boundaries of visibility and invisibility. As a result, counter-memories are challenge to dominant narratives, serving the machinery of justice, identity, and historical pluralism. They remind us that history is not uniform, but multi-layered, shifting, and deeply connected to power. Counter-memories make collective memory an open and dynamic process, rather than a closed history controlled by the state or dominant groups.

Digital Memory and the Biopolitics of Recognition

The digital environment brings new dynamics and opportunities to the processes of collective memory production and regulation, expanding the possibilities of counter-memories alongside traditional, state-controlled narratives. State institutions continue to maintain permissive narratives on traditional platforms, while digital technologies, such as social media, digital archives, and user-generated content, facilitate the dissemination of alternative narratives. These platforms decentralize and democratize memory practices but operate within algorithmic and commercial systems that limit visibility and recognizability (Loney-Howes, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015). As a result, restricted or marginalized voices gain greater access to public memory, enabling local movements and previously excluded stories to achieve widespread recognition.

Technological mechanisms such as algorithmic classification, content moderation, and metadata classification have become components of the dispositif that determine which historical narratives emerge or are suppressed. As Zuboff (2019) notes, these systems do not simply provide access to information, but rather act as selective filters, amplifying or suppressing content based on programmed logic. This leads to a redistribution of memory visibility, with some stories appearing on a large scale while others are suppressed, not through direct censorship but through infrastructural silence.

However, the commercial logic of digital platforms transforms human expression into commercial units of data, subjecting them to processes of classification, monetization, and control (Zuboff, 2019). This is a form of contemporary biopolitics, where power operates not only through traditional state institutions, but also through digital infrastructures that regulate and govern societies, determining what is visible, what is recognized, and what is forgotten in public memory. Algorithmic governance and content moderation are disciplinary mechanisms of this biopolitical system that actively shapes collective consciousness, amplifying some narratives and suppressing others. The result is systemic barriers that prioritize certain memories and marginalize alternative or dissenting memories, revealing the inherently contradictory and adversarial nature of digital public domains.

The persistence of memory repression is made clear by the removal or censorship of some digital archives, reflecting the persistence of traditional forms of control over memory, regardless of technological developments (O'Malley, 2020). Digital environments do not replace old regulatory mechanisms, but rather reinterpret and amplify them, creating a contested space where access to alternative histories is combined with new vulnerabilities and exclusions. Digital memory activism thus functions as a battleground where empowerment and constraints, visibility and silence, are balanced.

Conclusion: Navigating the Dynamics of Memory and Power

The regulation of collective memory is an axis of political power, through which institutional narratives seek to establish reciprocity and social order by means of selective inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on Michel Foucault's analyses of discipline, archive, and power/knowledge, this article has approached memory not as a neutral cultural repository but as a strategic field in which historical intelligibility and legitimacy are produced. In Foucauldian terms, memory is implicated in broader regimes of truth that organize what may be said, remembered, and recognized within a given social order.

Building on this foundation, the article advances a conceptual extension by treating collective memory itself as a dispositif. Rather than remaining an

implicit effect of disciplinary institutions, memory is analyzed here as an organized configuration of institutions, discourses, symbolic practices, and infrastructures that actively regulate historical visibility. This shift foregrounds memory as a mechanism of governance in its own right, one that stabilizes dominant narratives while simultaneously generating the conditions for their contestation.

Within this framework, the article further elaborates the concept of counter-memory. Consistent with Foucault's insights, counter-memory is not understood as an external alternative to official history, nor as a position outside power. Instead, the analysis shows that counter-memories emerge from within the same dispositifs that produce dominant memory, functioning as internal disruptions that expose exclusions, silences, and contingencies embedded in institutionalized historiography. Counter-memory thus operates as a critical intervention that unsettles the apparent coherence and inevitability of official narratives.

The article also reframes these dynamics in relation to contemporary digital infrastructures. The digital age increases the opportunities and challenges of memory politics. Digital platforms democratize the production of memory and allow marginalized voices to emerge on a global scale, but at the same time reproduce and reconfigure mechanisms of control through algorithmic and commercial logics. This ambiguity makes memory a battleground where reinforcements and limitations coexist, requiring nuanced and critical analysis. This reframing shows how algorithmic visibility, platform governance, and data-driven modulation have become integral components of the contemporary memory dispositif.

Taken together, the analysis underscores that collective memory is neither static nor fully controllable. Essentially, memory functions as a dynamic battleground where identities are formed, power is exercised and resisted, and notions of justice and collective belonging are continually revised. Engaging in these processes requires paying attention to the interplay of institutional power, technological mediation, and underground movements, which creates a platform for more just and diverse perceptions of the past.

Notes

[1] Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination that existed in South Africa from 1948 to the early 1990s. Under apartheid, the government enforced laws that separated people based on race, severely restricting the rights and freedoms of the non-white population, particularly Black South Africans.

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Conflict of Interest
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

Historia: philosophy & theory, 2025, Vol. 1, pp. 28-40
doi: 10.46991/hpt.2025.1.03

DESTRUCTION OF MEMORY AND MEMORY OF DESTRUCTION

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between violence, memory, and historical erasure in modernity, arguing that certain forms of political violence aim not merely to shape history but to obliterate its conditions of possibility. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and W.G. Sebald, the paper traces two distinct but converging strategies of silencing the past: the organized lie – a deliberate, state-engineered falsification of factual reality – and equanimity, a cultivated indifference that renders atrocity banal despite the continued visibility of its traces. These mechanisms neutralize the disruptive potential of memory, which otherwise resists the homogenizing force of official narratives. Arendt's concept of the organized lie is compared to atomic annihilation, wherein falsification spreads through networks of interrelated facts, dissolving the fabric of historical intelligibility. Violence, in this context, is not a political instrument but an apolitical force that undoes the very structure of worldhood and temporality. The paper argues that historiography must move beyond the accumulation of empirical data and toward a reconstruction of the intentional destruction of history – Influenced by what Sebald calls a "natural history of destruction." By shifting focus from world-producing to world-dissolving violence, historiography must recognize that violence is not simply enacted within history but is directed at history itself: at its intelligibility, continuity, and transmissibility. The task is not to discern the annihilative force that renders the past incommunicable or meaningless, and to bear witness to what resists re-inscription into the historical record.

Keywords: Violence, history, historiography, organized lie, forgetting, destruction, annihilation, remembrance.

Received: 04.07.2025
Revised: 26.11.2025
Accepted: 12.12.2025

Introduction

In his *Untimely Meditations* on history, Nietzsche asks us to imagine a dialogue between a man and an animal from a grazing herd. The man, being the

rational animal, is by his nature condemned to remember the past, and hence condemned to problematize time. The animal, by contrast, "does not know what yesterday and today are," and is instead only concerned with the "pleasure and displeasure, enthralled by the moment and for that reason neither melancholy nor bored" (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 60). The animal is not capable of embedding their concerns in a broader temporal coherence of past and present: the worst hunger it may know is confined to the now, which is permeated by it like paper can be permeated by ink. Yet the animal will never know hunger as a *historical* injustice, which – as Marxist thought suggests – is infinitely worse than the instant in which food is lacking. It is worse, because the historical injustice connects this unjust instant to the one of yesterday, thus elevating hunger from permeating not just the present, but time itself. If the animal were to remember the past, it would also see that time is not only the reoccurrence of hunger and injustice, but rather that hunger and injustice are the essence of time. Once this is understood, the solution is clear: to change time itself.

But, as Nietzsche points out, the non-rational animal *doesn't* remember, and for that reason its conversation with man never starts: "Man may well ask the animal: why do you not speak to me of your happiness but only look at me? The animal does want to answer and say: because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say – but then it already forgot this answer too and remained silent" (Ibid.). Like the animal in Orwell's famous novella *Animal Farm,* the animal is bound to forgetfulness. Even though its world is progressively deteriorating, the signs of that deterioration are themselves deprived of any meaning before they reach the animal's senses. For Orwell, the cruelty of time consists precisely in the imposed inability to read the signs of that cruelty. This is precisely what occurs when Orwell describes how Stalin establishes his power on the fact that nobody can remember what the revolution was all about. Or stated more generally, authoritarianism thrives where, as Aleida Assmann points out, the asymmetrical relation between memory and history is compromised and their difference is eliminated. When history and memory are reduced to one another, the past is fully controlled by official discourse.

Orwell's *Animal Farm* is, of course, a mere allegory. Its animals are not truly animalic; they are not "beasts" in Derrida's sense of *bête,* which – according to the logocentric framework – is animality without rationality. On the contrary, in so far as Orwell's animals are an allegorical representation of a human state of affairs, his animals must be understood as being rational, i.e. as *humans.* Just like with Nietzsche's animal, forgetfulness for humans is intrinsically linked with silence, but with humans the relation between silence and memory changes: whereas the animal forgets because it lacks memory, forgetting in

humans is a *modality* of memory. Given this situation, what role does silence play in human forgetting?

In the following pages, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and W.G. Sebald will be brought together to focus on the mechanisms by which authoritarian regimes and modern power structures *silence* the past. As I will argue through conceptual analysis, silencing the past is the means that can serve the political project of producing collective amnesia. This can occur either through an active erasure of the past, or by rendering it meaningless by generating collective indifference. My argument is that both strategies neutralize the disruptive force of memory, which otherwise has the potential to challenge the present and open political futures. In addition, I contend that not all violence is political, and that phenomena such as the atomic bomb or systematic historical falsification are instances that destroy history itself rather than merely reshape it. Drawing an analogy between nuclear chain reactions and the cascading falsification of historical facts in totalitarian regimes, we will see how violence can destroy not only material reality but also the conditions of sense and memory. The paper concludes that historiography must do more than recount the effects of violence; it must recover the silenced past and acknowledge violence as a force that threatens the very fabric of worldhood and historicity.

Concretely, the section “Silence of the past” explores conceptually the relation between memory and forgetting by bringing together Benjamin and phenomenological insights on temporality. After that, in “Organized lying”, Arendt is invoked to specify the means through which collective amnesia is induced by political institutions. I will clarify this by focusing on Arendt’s distinction between traditional and organized lying, and by relating the later to Chomsky’s notion of “equanimity”. The section on “Total annihilation” connects the violence of the organized lie to that of the atomic bomb by identifying total annihilation as their distinctive structural similarity. This will lead me to my main thesis, namely that we must draw a conceptual distinction between world-productive and world-dissolving violence, which I will elaborate through Sebald in the final section.

Silence of the past

For us rational animals, silence often manifests meaning. For example, it can be the reproachful silence of offence, or the complicit silence of those who witness injustice but choose to ignore it. Whether it be one or the other, Heidegger tells us that silence here must be understood not as the absence of vocalization *(phōnē),* but as the articulation of *Rede,* which is his translation

of *logos*. Logos, for Heidegger, is not just our typically human ability to cognize rationally, but first and foremost our ability to let phenomena speak for themselves, to grant phenomena a voice. When phenomenology taught us that the past is never truly past but always remains present as the *horizon* of the present, it asserted that the past is not silent but always 'speaks' though the present by endowing it with sense. Simply put: if the item on my table gives itself as "book" as soon as I direct my gaze at it, this is because the sedimented past in which the meaning of this object was established still operates in the present and releases this present in terms of sense. This counts as much for how we make sense of our present situation in general, as it does for concrete objects of perception: in writing this text, for example, I engage not just my attained knowledge of the English language, but also the authors I've studied. The past, therefore, is only past to the extent that it is never truly silent, but instead "calls out" like Heidegger's "voice of conscience" *(Gewissensruf)* to remind us of what things were and still are (Heidegger, 1996, §55).

It is this voice – the voice of *logos* disrupting the silence of the past – that Walter Benjamin puts at the center of his analysis of history. Benjamin follows Nietzsche's anti-Hegelianism in localizing the most important aspect of history not in its *telos,* but its *archè.* The historian's task is essentially archeological. Rather than focusing on what constitutes the landscape or horizon of the present, the historian must see that present as rubble under which lies buried a past that never had the chance to become present. Focusing on this untimely *(Unzeitgemäße),* the historian must dig through the debris of official history, so as to uncover, layer by layer, not its 'foundation' (Heidegger's *Ursprung*), but *that which had to be forgotten in order to make place for the present.* The untimely archè sought by the archeologist hence entails uncovering what had to be silenced into oblivion by official history. But what was thus silenced and buried always leaves a trace. The remnants and ruins of the past are dissipated along the landscape of the present and *resist* integration into the official history: these can be for instance the architectural remnants of a people who supposedly never existed. Such fragments, which never fully belonged to the established historical order, possess a disruptive force that can destabilize official narratives and challenge hegemonic structures of power. If the archeologist attends to these ruins, the silence of the past is disrupted by noise that renders the present unbearable.

That the silence of the past can become noisy, indicates that memory, as understood by Benjamin, has the power to destabilize the present. This destabilizing power of memory can be compared to the power Sartre ascribes to imagination. In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre explains that the present conditions, considered on their own, lacks the power to effect any change. No matter how dire our circumstances, the present alone cannot motivate us to

change our situation (Sartre, 2003, pp. 457-458). To achieve such change, we must first take distance from the present by imagining an alternative: the existing world can only become world-to-be-changed when it appears in the light of a world as it *could* be. Sartre thus shows that imagination transforms the present by releasing it from its entrapment in a single possibility, i.e. that of the actual. One can hence say that imagination is not merely the medium that opens the future, but simultaneously one that *breaks open* the present. In that sense, what phenomenology calls the "openness" of consciousness towards the future, is not a given (as Heidegger has it), but a *project*. The project may as well fail, while the present and the world may just as well remain what they were yesterday. In short, the future may remain closed, leaving one unable to imagine any alternative to the given state of affairs. As Vaclav Havel indicates in a short essay from 1987, one of the terrible achievements of the Soviet totalitarian regime in the 20th century was precisely its success in reducing the future to a single possibility (Havel, 1987, pp. 14-21). The same idea was expressed by another dissident writer, Yevgeny Zamyatin, who in his novel *We* (1924), which was written only a couple of years after the October Revolution, described how the totalitarian state neutralizes subversiveness by surgically removing the faculty of imagination from the brain. In both examples, the desired effect is to totalize the present instant as the only possibility of being – or to turn man into Nietzsche's animal: unable to remember, unable to regret, and therefore unable to change time.

While imagination changes the present from the point of view of what does not (yet) exist, memory does the same from the perspective of what *could-have* existed. The "could-have," moreover, is a complex modality, since it involves *both* memory and imagination. To understand the present in its full extent, means to also understand that the past could have been different: the Armenian genocide could have been prevented, the atomic bomb could have never been made, and so on. At their best, both imagination and memory are productive: the one produces the future, the other produces the past – but both of those faculties can also be degraded to a mere *reproduction* of the present. When this happens, the *untimely* – that which could have been yesterday or could be tomorrow – is silenced by a present that refuses to change. In this sense, the inertia of official history renders us into a semblant of Nietzsche's animal: enthralled by the present, and therefore unable to be disturbed by what *could have been.*

Organized lying

The sharpest analysis of how the untimely past is subjected to state-regulated silence is provided by Hannah Arendt. She observes, for example, that factual

truths, which pertain to human deeds, are entirely dependent on memory: once they are forgotten, there is no retrieving them from oblivion (Arendt, 1961, pp. 57-60). Arendt follows Benjamin by positing that the past always leaves a trace, but she diverges from him in her awareness that state-regulated destruction of the past can become a totalized political project. While Benjamin was certainly aware of the state-engineered suppression of truth and regulation of memory, he never lived to witness WW2's aftermath and the subsequent discovery of what in the early 1950's Arendt called the "organized lie".[2] For this reason, Benjamin's concern with state-regulated suppression of historical truth was not as radical as the politics of collective amnesia described by Arendt in essays such as *Truth and Politics* (1967).

Since the advent of our 'post-truth era', the strategies Arendt discerned in how states pursue politics of collective amnesia, have been widely studied. In *Truth and Politics,* Arendt famously distinguishes between the traditional and the organized lie (Arendt, 1961, pp. 252-253). The traditional lie aims to dissimulate some particular fact, without affecting the truth of the fact itself. The truth is merely concealed, but remains intact. The traditional liar is hence somebody who seeks to turn a particular truth into a secret, hiding a fact from public view to gain some advantage. As Arendt explains, lying is a form of *action,* oriented towards changing the world. The liar is somebody who wants the world to be different; but rather than actually changing its shape through future-oriented action, the liar only seemingly changes the world by puncturing a hole in its factual fabric. By contrast, the organized liar aims not to dissimulate some particular fact, but to change the fabric of factuality itself. Rather than changing some concrete given within an otherwise unchanged context, the organized lie seeks to modify the context itself. As Arendt notes, factual truths, which pertain to human deeds, are entirely dependent on our ability to talk about them, hence to remember them: once they are forgotten, there is no retrieving them from oblivion.

The transition from memory to oblivion in state-regulated amnesia of the organized lie involves a tremendously destructive force. The politics that seeks to truly silence the past, is inevitably involved in a project of *totalized* destruction. It must destroy the fact *and* its trace, the event *and* its witness, the past *and* the possibility of its return in memory. In each case, the organized lie essentially aims at what amounts to "historization of the ahistorical", i.e. a process through which something historical is removed from the domain of history and replaced with an imaginary alternative that does not belong to the order of history yet behaves as if it did.[1] While Arendt herself never uses this term, her work following *The Origin of Totalitarianism* (1951), specifically the third part on ideology and propaganda, was continuously preoccupied with history and its neutralization by a fake Ersatz. The recurrent theme of these preoccupations

was her exploration of the insight that factual truths, unlike rational truths, are entirely dependent on human memory. As she puts it, if due to some catastrophe humanity loses all its knowledge, there is still a chance that it may one day rediscover rational truths such as the Pythagorean law. By contrast, if we lose our memory of the basic "who did what, where, when" as inherent to the fact – which always pertains to something said or done by somebody – then there is no retrieving it from oblivion. The same insight was intuitively shared by Stalin in his unprecedented effort to organize collective amnesia against his enemies. Already in 1939, when Arthur Koestler was finishing *Darkness at Noon,* it was clear that the monumental authority and power of Stalinism was partly rooted in the fact that historical records were altered and certain individuals would disappear from photographs (Koestler, 2019).

There currently exists a good amount of literature that examines some aspect of Arendt's discussion of historization, but one particular element is still undertheorized. This entails the phenomenon where criminal states make people forget the state's crimes by cultivating indifference. This phenomenon was first addressed by Noam Chomsky in 1969 with regard to the Vietnam War. Specifically, he observed "the terrifying detachment and equanimity with which we view and discuss an unbearable tragedy" (Chomsky, 1969, p. 371). The equanimity described by Chomsky is interesting because it achieves some of the effects aimed at by Arendt's organized lying, but it does so through an entirely different procedure. In both instances, some part of history is silenced and rendered impotent, by which it is marked for oblivion; but in contrast to Arendt, Chomaky's case occurs not by eliminating the material traces of the facts, but rather *in spite of* their material presence. Consider for example what in retrospect appears as the general indifference with which the Western world witnessed the events of September 2023, when the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh fled the region following a swift military offensive by Azerbaijan. Or the catastrophe that struck Sudan since the start of the brutal civil war in April 2023, involving mass displacement of over 14 million people, famine and disease, war crimes, and other atrocities. In all these cases, political violence becomes possible not in the lack of those who witness the truth, but despite their presence – and, indeed, even *because* of the indifferent state of these witnesses. Here, truth is as impotent as when it is successfully dissimulated by propaganda. While these events possess the disruptive power of a catastrophe for those who are directly affected them, they are experienced by the indifferent and uninvolved witness as *trivial.* They are neither untimely (since they do not disturb the present) nor timely (since they are not integrated into the horizon of the present), but instead they immediately dissolve in the flux of mundane world-time. Put differently, they're catastrophic nature is silenced. Alluding to Arendt, one could call this phenomenon the "banality of violence": the violence that brings about these

catastrophes no longer appears in the grandeur of its destructive force, but rather as something unmemorable, something already forgotten.

This kind of silence can no longer be understood as “meaningful”: it is not the constitutive silence that bestows the present with its sense through sedimentation or some other constitutive power. Rather, it is the silence of what was sentenced to oblivion. If, as Benjamin points out, what is silenced and buried always leaves traces that are able to disrupt the silence, the disruption occurs because the past becomes noise. The ideal goal of state-regulated amnesia would be to stop this noise of the past, to achieve a silence that is eternal absence, the silence of total oblivion – Ideal annihilation.

Total annihilation

While equanimity or indifference tends towards the same oblivion as the one produced by the organized lie, there is still an important difference between the two. Equanimity does not involve an active effort to destroy the facts and their traces. For this reason, whatever has been forgotten through indifference may still be retrieved through remaining traces of the forgotten fact. Equanimity is hence characterized by a lack of violence that characterizes organized lying. Since the organized lie intends a total annihilation of the fact and its traces, as well as of the very possibility of remembering the targeted history, it is closer to the atomic bomb than equanimity. To be sure, the organized lie achieves within the domain of *res cogitans* what the atomic bomb achieves within the domain of *res extensa:* total annihilation.

The structural affinity between organized lying and the atomic bomb is not a mere metaphor. As Arendt indicates in the prologue to *The Human Condition,* “Scientifically, the modern age which began in the seventeenth century came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century; politically, the modern world, in which we live today, was born with the first atomic explosions” (Arendt, 1958, p. 6). This idea must not be dissociated from Arendt’s later writings, which consistently relate the organized lie to modernity itself, as is also reflected in her description of the organized lie as the “modern lie” (Arendt, 1961, pp. 252-253). Certainly, the organized lie is not in any way placed among the foundations of the modern age; yet it is undeniable that the organized lie is itself a fundamentally *modern* phenomenon. This modern aspect is not limited to the fact that it requires modern ideology and bureaucracy for its effectuation, but is also related to the specifically modern concept of history as a process presupposed by both. Atomic explosion involves starting natural processes of fission or disintegration of existent matter that would have never started on their own, whereas organized lying involves initiating the anti-historical

process of annihilating the past. In this sense, the atomic bomb and the organized lie are bound together by the kind of *violence* both are capable of, which is a typically *modern* kind of violence.

To be sure, atomic annihilation is a chain reaction of fission. As a transmission of nothingness from one disintegrating atom to another, it involves a contagion of destruction. To materially disintegrate in the nuclear sense, destruction must expand through a network of atoms and unweave the molecular fabric that holds a substance together. In a similar manner, the organized lie differs from the traditional variant, in that it seeks to destroy not a concrete and localized fact, but a network of facts that constitute the "fabric" of the past. If an imposture is a web of dissimulations (Breeur, 2019), the impostor – whether an individual or an institution – finds himself necessitated to maintain the lies *in the face of* a reality that resists nihilation. Imposture overcomes this resistance when it successfully expands the nothingness of the lie, destroying one fact after another, until the lie covers the entire truth it nihilates – just like atomic annihilation expands over the entire substance that it annihilates.

Orthodox phenomenologists may frown upon this analogy between destruction in the domain of the *cogito* and the domain of matter. Is this analogy not an epistemological confusion? A mere contamination of phenomena by metaphysical constructions? Such criticism would already assume a priority of sense over matter. The existence of the nuclear bomb, and the possibility of world-annihilation contained in it, suffices to show that the entire body of phenomenological literature, to the extent that it prioritizes consciousness over matter, fails to understand both matter and metaphysics when it posits the priority of consciousness over both. Since phenomenology cannot think anything *outside* of sense (i.e. phenomena), its concept of violence is bound to be understood *in terms of* sense. As a result, it sees violence in relation to world (horizon), temporality, inter-subjectivity – in short, violence as world-productive, or *political* violence. But this politization of violence already takes it out of its proper domain, which is not that of sense of destruction, but the destruction of sense.[2]

This alone leads us to a remarkable paradox: the essence of Arendt's political modern lie is itself *apolitical.* To further conceptualize this apolitical violence, let us shift the focus from its sense to its causal power. Doing this will allow us to discern violence as the difference that repeats itself over various domains, be they political or not.

Violence precedes politics

The idea that the essence of Arendt's political violence is itself apolitical allows us to highlight the relationship between violence and oblivion not in

conjunction with, but in separation from, its political meaning. Of particular interest in this regard is W. G. Sebald's 1997 lecture *Luftkrieg und Literatur,* where he claims that the bombardment of Germany by the allied forces left the Germans with a collective trauma, which remains repressed (forgotten) to this day. For Sebald, these bombings are misunderstood when we embed them into history as the process through which the major players of WWII politically paved their way to victory. Instead, these were campaigns of destruction, revealing a type of violence that is usually overshadowed by the political objectives invoked to justify it. In its desire for retaliation for the Blitz, the British air force unleashed a destruction in which all principle of modern war becomes visible: not the production of history, but its annihilation—or as Sebald puts it, "life in the terrible moment of its disintegration.[3]"

If the German people repressed this trauma, it is not merely because Nazi-Germany attained the position of the perpetrator and inexorably found itself restricted by a taboo. Rather, it is primarily because of the *ahistorical* character of that violence, a character that reveals something universal about the particular German repression. Certainly, by foregrounding the impersonal and procedural nature of the industrial destruction-machine, the Nazis exemplified annihilation within the confines of genocide. But this kind of mechanized violence, as a *principle* of destruction, was not exclusive to the Holocaust. Indeed, the Allied bombings of Germany were marked by a similar form of mechanical violence, albeit driven by different motives than those of the Nazis: the Royal Air Force did not intend to destroy the German people as such, but it did intend the *total destruction* of cities like Dresden and Hamburg. This is evidenced by the fact that the initial target of the Manhattan Project was Germany, until it surrendered just three months before the Trinity Test on July 16, 1945 (Antón, 2024).

Whether it is the Allied bombardments or the genocide, we tend to remember the meanings that violence attained for us in its aftermath, but we rarely remember the violence itself. That is why we know much about the effects of violence, yet can say little about it as a cause. We remember history, but not its destruction. It is not irrelevant that when Sebald critiques the ability of memory to articulate the trauma of the past, his primary target consists in the manifold encyclopedic facts collected by historiography. With regard to the RAF bombing campaign of Dresden and Hamburg, Sebald points out that the factual and statistical knowledge about the quantity of damage, in itself reveals very little about what happened. The fact that "there were 31.1 cubic meters of rubble for every person in Cologne and 42.8 cubic meters for every inhabitant of Dresden," does not illuminate what this all actually *meant.* When taken at face value, the fact alone is levelled down to a quantum, losing its 'quality' as it fails to convey the reality of the destruction that it is supposed to

represent. One could indeed argue that here too factual discourse effectuates something akin to banality of violence.

But do we really gain anything by thematizing the violence that otherwise tends to escape our factual discourses? What we gain, I believe, is the means to attain the very sense of historiography: *to gain a clear and distinct idea of what happened.* Evidently, there is barely anything to gain if historiography is reduced to a mere summary of horrors to which people had been subjected during, say, an attempted genocide. But neither is there anything to gain from a mere encyclopedic summary of factual material, as it occurs too often in historiography. What is needed first and foremost is an effort to articulate the essential problem that underlies all history: namely the fundamental fact that humanity's attempts to construct a future are cyclically met with attempts to destroy it. To politicize all violence is precisely to reduce the destruction to construction. As an alternative, we must acknowledge that historiography should not only reconstruct all productive steps taken towards the establishment of the present (including the sacrifices), but just as much reconstruct the attempts at destroying the past that at some point was a present. Sebald teaches us that such endeavor cannot be attained by factual discourse alone. Instead, it requires us to engage our imagination and to draw out, as sharply as we can, the contours and details of what was essentially a *project* of annihilation – *not for the sake of something else, but for its own sake.*

By shifting our attention from world-forming to world-dissolving character of violence, we can see how violence is not something within history but that which undoes history itself. A failure to comprehend this inevitably results in the forgetting of said violence. To forget, in this context, means to turn the constant disruption of history into historical continuity.

Conclusion

As opposed to common belief, not all violence is political, and not all detriment amounts to violence. If history consists in a fundamental tension between world-productive and world-dissolving forces, and politics is essentially concerned with the production of a world, then violence subsists on neither side of politics. Violence only resembles politics to the extent that it involves an intention directed at reconfiguring the world, yet it is thoroughly apolitical in so far as that intention aims *only* to negate. This has the contra-intuitive consequence that the organized lie and the detonation of the atomic bomb cannot in themselves be considered as political acts.

The task of historiography cannot be merely to record the history *of* violence, but also to articulate the violence *towards* history. In the case of the RAF bombing campaign, it does not suffice to merely sum up the damage; what is

needed is primarily a reconstruction of the initial aim and its manifestation: to destroy the city of Hamburg, to reduce it to nothingness. Similarly, one does not understand Stalin by reconstructing his role in the history of the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. Instead, historiography has the task of recording the Stalinist project of annihilation. It suffices to compare the different ways in which historiography has handled Russia's past and that of Nazi-Germany, to see that the historical reconstruction of the Nazi project of destruction is an anomaly in historiography's general style of reconstructing past violence. Despite the extensive efforts on part of the Nazis to destroy all evidence of their violence, historiographers generally managed to aptly capture and reconstruct it. Today, we know what Hitler, Himmler, Eichmann and others did, and we can see why the nature of their actions is fundamentally misunderstood if one interprets those actions as world-productive. We know that something is wrong when anyone is willing to negotiate the Nazi crimes by referring to the historical end for the sake of which they were committed. In reality, our reason for condemning Nazi violence never entails our political disagreement with it; rather, we condemn it because of its fundamental contradiction with the concept of world and history – or politics – as such, which is also something that Hannah Arendt saw very well. Whoever is not willing to acknowledge that contradiction has only one alternative: to treat Nazism as if it were a legitimate political position. As Arendt correctly suggests, only worldless extremists are willing to commit to such belief.

But although Nazism does not have a monopoly on violence, it nevertheless remains an exception in the way historiography relates to that past. That exceptional position should be extended to all violence outside of Nazi-Germany's past. The violence of Stalin and the NKVD, of Turkey against the Armenians, the Americans in Vietnam, the Russians in Chechnya and Ukraine, of the IDF in Palestine and West Bank, the scientists who built the atomic bomb, to name a few – is yet to be emancipated from perspectives that focus on politics and world-production.

Notes

[1] For a detailed analysis of "historization of the ahistorical," see Elad Magomedov, "Arendt's Modern Lie Through Sartre's Imaginary: A Phenomenology of the Phantasm in Digital Propaganda," in Arendt Studies, published online on June 11, 2025.

[2] For an elaborate version of this argument against the phenomenological objection, see Breeur, R. & Magomedov, E. (2025) E.N.D.: Exploring Nuclear Disaster. No Index Press.

[3] For a detailed analysis, see Magomedov, E. (2026). Repetition of the Nameless Presence. Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities (31:6).

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Conflict of Interest
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

Historia: philosophy & theory, 2025, Vol. 1, pp. 41-58
doi: 10.46991/hpt.2025.1.04

THE DUAL REALITY OF DESTRUCTION: THE DISSIMULATION AND SIMULATION OF THE ARMENIAN-ASSYRIAN GENOCIDE

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Abstract

The paper examines the denial of the Armenian-Assyrian genocide of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire, situating it within a broader discussion on state-sponsored historical manipulation and genocide denial. The Turkish state's politics of denial strategically exploits ambiguities in the legal definition of genocide and is simultaneously embedded in the Turkish national identity. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's concept of the *organized lie,* I argue that Turkish genocide denial operates as a *propagandistic myth.* This propagandistic lie dissimulates historical facts and simulates alternative facts, an alternative history, through denial of factual evidence, censorship, school curricula, and even scholarly research that lacks intellectual integrity.

Within this denialist narrative, the Assyrian genocide plays a disruptive role. The Assyrian genocide took place at the time of the Armenian genocide but is remembered differently and is largely transmitted through oral history. This difference in remembrance and transmission disrupts the coherence of the Turkish denialist narrative, exposing its contradictions. Far from being a marginal manifestation of the concept of genocide, the Assyrian Genocide transcends something local and uncovers something structural about genocide and truth. The Assyrian genocide reveals the internal mechanism of the genocidal machine, demonstrating how denial is an extension of the genocidal process itself.

This disruptive role opens a broader reflection on genocide. Building on Marc Nichanian, Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze, I conceptualize genocide as a limitless, absolute destruction that operates on different levels; the physical extermination of the group, the erasure of the genocidal event and the undermining of the fact itself. The absence of evidence can paradoxically serve as evidence, while traces such as oral transmission and suppressed memories, can function as signs that compel interrogation of the denialist narrative. Genocide is rooted in material reality but necessarily exceeds it and must be understood both as fact and as sign.

Keywords: Armenian-Assyrian Genocide, Hannah Arendt, Marc Nichanian, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Turkish propagandistic myth.

Received: 01.10.2025
Revised: 03.12.2025
Accepted: 12.12.2025

Introduction

Genocide is the most destructive and foundational event in human history. It challenges our conventional categories of truth and reality. The existential question that initially drives this article is deceptively simple, even banal: "Why does the average Armenian have a strong memory of the Armenian Assyrian genocide of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire? And why don't I?" While this personal question remains central, the article develops its inquiry through a series of more academic and philosophical investigations. The first chapter explores Hannah Arendt's concept of the organized lie. Here I examine the denial of the Armenian genocide and argue that Arendt's framework of the organized lie is useful in understanding the Turkish state's propagandistic relationship to its past.

In the second chapter, I shift the focus to the Assyrian Genocide *(Seyfo/Ferman),* which remains largely overlooked in dominant historical narratives. Placing Arendt's conceptual framework in the background, I argue that the Assyrian Genocide plays a crucial and disruptive role within the broader context of Turkish denialism. The everyday continuity of life of Assyrians in western cities today, stands in stark contrast to a silenced, destroyed, un-mourned, unprocessed, and unspeakable past, a world that was annihilated. There is a tension between the naturalness and spontaneity with which life, and thus the world, continues to move forward, and the almost un-discussable, almost vanished past. This tension is philosophically significant. What happened to the Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire and how this genocide has been transmitted reveals something about how history works, about how genocides are carried out, remembered, and repressed. The *Seyfo,* the Assyrian Genocide, exposes a crucial Christian dimension of the genocide and acts as an embodiment of truth in the denial of the Armenian narrative. From the concrete example of the Assyrian genocide, we can learn something about genocide and its essence in general, which ultimately escapes all example.

In the third and final chapter, I engage with philosophical writings of Marc Nichanian, Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze. Nichanian breaks with the historiographical tradition that treats the genocidal event as a historically verifiable fact, as an event that can be proved with documents. Nichanian's idea invites a reconceptualization of genocide, I will built on his argument and distinguish three levels of destruction, apart from the physical killings. I also propose that Deleuze's concept of a sign is philosophically complementary with what Nichanian writes. Where Nichanian opens the space for understanding genocide beyond the fact, Deleuze allows us to think genocide as both fact and sign. This dual perspective is grounded in both material reality and invisible absences produced by denial. It offers a more nuanced account of genocide. Ultimately, the article seeks to build a bridge between traditional

historical evidence and the fragile but powerful ways truth and remembrance manifest themselves in the genocidal process as a whole.

Turkish Denial and Hannah Arendt's organized lie

In the essay 'Truth and Politics', included in the bundle *Between Past and Future,* Hannah Arendt makes a distinction between the traditional lie and the modern lie. First, the traditional lie differs from the modern lie in terms of transparency. The traditional lie is concerned with secrets in the common sense meaning, the lie is about information people did not have access to. The modern or organized lie, on the other hand, is about things everyone knows (Arendt, 1994, p. 150). Second, the traditional lie is a local lie; it wants to deceive the enemy or specific persons, and it is never the aim to mislead 'everyone' or an entire population (Arendt, 1994, p. 151). The liar still refers to the truth even when he is lying. The liar is aware of the truth, knows exactly what the truth is, but consciously prefers to say something other than that truth, the non-truth. The lie opposes the truth but continues to acknowledge it (Breeur, 2019, p. 37). The latter is not longer the case in the organized lie, which alters the entire context, the very fabric of reality itself. It is not a lie that is inserted into a web of truth, instead the whole web is recreated, an alternative reality is fabricated (Arendt, 1994, p. 151). Reality, facts, what is true, is destroyed, annihilated, nullified, and replaced by an alternative reality. Reality is dissimulated and a substitute reality is simulated (Breeur, 2019, p. 19). This substitute for truth functions autonomously; it works and has real effects. The organized lie functions like a web that multiplies itself and sustains its own life. The opposite of truth, then, is not misunderstanding, mistake, illusion or fiction but the (organized) lie (Arendt, 1994, p. 147). The organized lie is yet never a flawless simulation. Factuality has something imperturbable. Truth always resurfaces. Arendt speaks of a stubbornness that is intrinsic to truth. There is a perseverance, an element of compulsion to truth that ruptures the simulated narrative (Arendt, 1994, p. 139). There is a reciprocity, a kind of interplay, in which the simulated sheet of fabric continually tries to stich itself shut, only to be torn open again by the stubborn nature of fact. One can nullify truth, but there is no completely successful substitute for it (Arendt, 1994, p. 157). Truth is resilient and flexible, like a plant growing in the cracks of walls. The vulnerability of truth is, as is often the case with vulnerability, both a weakness and an unyielding strength.

Factual truth differs from mathematical truths and axioms because it is always at risk of being destroyed. If a mathematical formula or law of nature were to be forgotten for some mysterious reason, it could, at the very least, be rediscovered (Arendt, 1994, p. 129). This is not necessarily the case for

historical truths. Once destroyed by an organized lie or propagandistic myth, they may be wiped from the face of the earth forever (Arendt, 1994, p. 129).

There are some fundamental problems inherent to historiography. One of these is that brute facts must be interpreted and turned into historical facts (Arendt, 1994, p. 139). Historical facts are constructed with documents, witnesses, testimonies. Another inherent problem is that testimonies can always be suspected, no matter how numerous testimonies may be. After all, it is possible for thousands of testimonies to be fabricated (Arendt, 1994, p. 141). Yet Arendt argues that these challenges do not undermine the notion of factuality itself. Nor does this imply that historical facts are merely interpretations, to be manipulated at will (Arendt, 1994, p. 136). This is precisely what the propagandistic lie does. The organized lie gnaws at facts in the writing of history. Historical facts are contingent, things could have happened otherwise. It is precisely this contingency that does not prevent us from producing alternative facts and falsehoods (Arendt, 1994, pp. 149-150; Breeur, 2019, p. 13). Historical facts, such as the occurrence of a genocide against the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire can be denied. A propagandistic myth is a form of an organized lie where sometimes very fundamental historical facts are being denied. The way Turkey handles its own genocidal past can be understood as such a myth, and thus as a manifestation of what Arendt calls the organized lie.

In what follows I will argue in more detail how the Turkish propagandistic myth can be seen as Arendt's organized lie. Like it is stated above, the organized lie is not about secrets in the traditional sense (Arendt, 1994, p. 150). The facts are known. Even though Turkey censors and manipulates information; the facts are accessible. There is so much fact present, yet almost nothing is capable of having an effect. Truth is impotent. Lies are potent. It makes no difference that large numbers of Armenians, Assyrians and Pontic Greeks were massacred; an alternative explanation is invented. Truth no longer holds power, while lies and alternative versions of history have more impact (Pomerantsev, 2020, p. 153).

A second difference between the traditional lie and the organized lie is that the organized lie aims to deceive a large audience. In the case of genocide denial, this 'large audience' are the Turkish citizens, but also the international community, or in other words 'everyone' (Arendt, 1994, p. 191). The discussions on whether or not the Armenian genocide amounts to genocide sows doubt and suggests that there is something fundamentally open to debate, while in reality the matter is clear.

A third aspect, which ties in with the first, is that the element of contingency is almost entirely missing from the propagandist's narrative (Arendt, 1994, pp. 149-150). Lying may require effort, but the propagandist can align perfectly

with what the listener wants to hear; everything is seamlessly woven together. The repulsive, the 'accidental', the improbable, that which does not fit the narrative, the event that only had a tiny chance of happening but nonetheless did, is much harder to comprehend (Arendt, 1994, pp. 148-149). Something else could always have happened, yet this "something else" is replaced with something more probable and less shocking than genocide. For that reason, the philosopher, writer, journalist, historian or academic that approaches thought or research with integrity is always more vulnerable. The speaker of truth is because of the element of contingency *by default* in a weaker position.

The forth aspect concerns the core of the organized lie, the idea that the organized lie manipulates the whole context and is not a lie injected the context of an acknowledged truth (Arendt, 1994, p. 151; Breeur, 2019, pp. 18-19). Mass killings and deportations are not denied outright, instead, they are carefully integrated into an alternative context and historical narrative, one that no longer appears to be genocide. An entirely simulated reality is constructed, in which basic historical facts are denied on the basis of in principle dismantlable arguments. Legal loopholes in the definition of genocide are exploited, and Armenians are framed as mere casualties or traitors. What elevates the denial to the level of the propagandistic myth is the far more subtle manner in which history is rewritten. One strategy is to simply claim that what is true is fake, for example by dismissing the testimonies in *The Blue Book* as forgeries. Another strategy is to sow doubt by flooding the information space with plausible sounding alternatives. The boundary between truth and falsehood becomes blurred and this is enough to render truth impotent. A third strategy is to modify the material reality itself, by destroying mass graves and testimonies. This interplay between, on the one hand, denying information and on the other hand, producing alternative information, is precisely what the propagandistic myth does. The dissimulation and simulation of the genocide may be separated for pedagogical reasons, but these are two operations of the lie that happen simultaneously. The genocide is denied, while at the same time a past without genocide, and thus a present without any memory of the genocide, is simulated.

A propagandistic myth is not sustained by occasional lies. The myth can only succeed if countless documents and narratives are both dissimulated and simulated. It is an extensive process (Breeur, 2019, p. 24). Moreover, new lies are constantly being produced to patch up the cracks that facts create in the simulated narrative. Uğur Ümit Üngör writes in his article "Lost in Commemoration: The Armenian Genocide in Memory and Identity" that Turkey denies a genocide its own people remember. He refers here to elderly Kurdish villagers who retain vivid memories of the events (Üngör, 2014, p. 147). There are also other material traces of the past, such as half-destroyed monasteries and Armenian inscriptions that are now only partially legible. The testimonies in *The Blue Book*, which must be repeatedly and spontaneously framed as

fiction, also illustrate the compelling force inherent in factuality. At certain moments, the stubborn truth breaks through, thanks to thinkers who engage in genuinely honest scholarly research.

One final key aspect of the Turkish propagandistic myth relates to the myth as a form of false memory. There need not be an active liar involved; the myth operates on its own and produces real-world consequences. Ordinary Turkish citizens are not deliberately lying in the manner of a traditional deceiver, they sincerely believe that no genocide occurred (Arendt, 1994, p. 147). In her essay Hannah Arendt also refers to Plato's well-known allegory of the cave, in which no one inside the cave actually despises the truth itself (Arendt, 1994, p. 127). The reference to Plato's cave highlights the important role of self-deception in the organized lie. People who actively contribute to the lie are not enemies of the truth, they are convinced that the shadows in the cave are reality. They believe that the myth is not a myth, that the myth is reality. Specifically in the case of Turkey his means that for them, the genocide never occurred. The memory they hold and that is being worked on is one of a non-genocidal past. The propagandistic myth is, of course, not simply the result of the spontaneous clash of memories or ignorant citizens unaware of what is happening. On the one hand, the majority of citizens are simply ignorant; on the other hand, within this ignorance lies an element of self-deception. At certain moments, a person may notice that something does not add up, that is the truth revealing itself. Despite the discomfort this causes, this person continues to live within the propagandistic myth. The myth, the lie, in which genocide deniers live, functions because, and as long as, it allows them to deny the truth. It requires enormous effort to maintain the myth, but it succeeds and becomes easier as the events recede further into the past. The Turkish propagandistic myth has a solid foundation, this cannot be overstated. From the very beginning, the Turkish memory of the Armenian genocide was shaped by a propagandistic myth and has no basis in truth. This narrative is perpetuated spontaneously and smoothly; the fabricated past is a fact.

The Assyrian Genocide, Seyfo, Ferman

Within the context of this denialist narrative, the Assyrian genocide plays a crucial, disruptive role. The Assyrian genocide occurred simultaneously with the Armenian genocide but is remembered differently and is largely transmitted through oral history. Through the case of the Assyrian genocide, I wish to understand the essence of genocide.

Assyrians are a Semitic people originating from Mesopotamia, the region surrounding the Euphrates and Tigris rivers (Atto, 2017, p. 181). Assyrians refer to the genocide of 1915 with the emblematic name *Sayfo*, meaning "sword" in

Aramaic (Yacoub, 2016, p. xi). Both Assyrians and Kurds also use the word *Ferman*, meaning "official decree", this emphasizes that the mass killings were ordered from above (Talay, 2017, pp. 136-137). During the genocide, approximately 250,000 Assyrians were killed, this is more than half of the population. A way of life and entire sets of skills and traditions were lost (Yacoub, 2016, pp. 88-89). Despite later-emphasized differences in the diaspora, Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire were seen as a single ethno-religious group, which is important for meeting the legal definition of genocide (Yacoub, 2016, p. 5).

Although the Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Pontic genocide occurred simultaneously, literature on the Armenian genocide is far more extensive and detailed. The Assyrian genocide is transmitted and remembered differently, it is also far less known than the Armenian genocide. There are several reasons for this.

First, the Assyrians were smaller in number and financially less powerful. Second, there was no significant intellectual elite. The local clergy were educated but the general population was not (Yacoub, 2016, p. 22). Third, after the genocide, there were few survivors left to represent the events through written testimonies, literature, or art, due to ongoing repression. After the genocide, the Assyrian survivors returned to their destroyed villages, where they lived withdrawn, isolated, and anonymous lives (Atto, 2017, pp. 282-283). The local clergy prioritized the survival of their people above all else. The genocide was not spoken about publicly; writing about it was discouraged. From a socio-political perspective, there was no space for writing or publishing about what had happened, such actions were interpreted by the Turkish government as an act of treason (Atto, 2016, p. 186). The Assyrians assimilated in order to survive, which resulted in only a handful of written testimonies and monographs (Talay, 2017, pp. 132-133).

Fourth, in contrast to the Armenians, the Assyrians did not flee Turkey after the genocide. As a result, there was no Assyrian diaspora capable of drawing international attention or publishing freely (Atto, 2016, p. 184). The written testimonies were only edited and published once later generations of survivors lived in the West, meaning that Assyrians began constructing a memory only around the 2000s (Atto, 2016, p. 141). The Assyrians' drive to assimilate created a gap in knowledge among the descendants of survivors. What was passed on to the next generations was a traumatic distrust toward Muslims, along with platitudes such as "they-killed-us." Memories of the past are transmitted orally, often in the form of laments (Atto, 2016, p. 185). There is, however, no supporting narrative within the Assyrian diaspora. Assyrians do not have a clear understanding of what happened in the past. Most cannot read or write in their mother tongue and are unfamiliar with their own history. On the one hand, illiteracy, and on the other, ongoing repression and the lack

of freedom to mourn the genocide, have resulted in a void in Assyrian collective memory. Today, descendants struggle to access the specific events of the past. Their ancestors, unintentionally, repressed a memory that they themselves now try to recover. In this sense, one could say that the Assyrian genocide is a 'more successful' genocide, a completed forgetting.

The remembrance of the *Seyfo* is a relatively recent development, and so is its denial. The denial of the Assyrian genocide occurs in much the same way as the denial of the Armenian genocide. For example, Bülent Özdemir claims that the Assyrians were neither deported nor exterminated, which contradicts historical reality. Another way the genocide is denied is by labeling the Assyrians, like the Armenians, as traitors to the country while simultaneously erasing the Christian dimension of the genocide (BarAbraham, 2017, pp. 135-136, 224-225).

A third way in which the Assyrian genocide is being denied, differing from the Armenian genocide denial, is by framing it as a complete myth created by the Assyrian diaspora. Salahi Sönyel, in *The Assyrians of Turkey – Victims of Major Power Policy,* argues that Assyrians migrated for economic reasons rather than persecution by Turkish authorities. He claims that any links drawn between Assyrians and the Armenian diaspora, or claims of shared suffering, are propaganda and lobbying efforts (BarAbraham, 2017, p. 220). Özdemir, in turn, claims that the Assyrians assert a genocide experience in order to construct an identity around it (BarAbraham, 2017, p. 225). He writes the following about oral transmission: “telling from father to son within the family” has, over time, developed into an important element in the diaspora and helped to “construct a myth” (BarAbraham, 2017, p. 228). Özdemir also calls the oral transmission of the genocide unreliable. The issue of oral transmission and testimony, is an inherent methodological problem in historiography but does not diminish the authenticity of the testimonies themselves. The main reason for the oral transmission, as previously stated, is ongoing repression. This form of denial ignores that the oral dimension of the Assyrian genocide actually demonstrates the mechanism of genocide. The fact that these accounts have been passed down orally is not a weakness but rather shows how intense the repression has been. There are sufficient writings, but if they are scarcer, it is because the genocide carefully erased its traces. The lack of documentation itself serves as evidence. Around the year 2000, when Assyrians began (re)writing and remembering the events, there was no established framework for denying the Assyrian genocide as there was for the denial of the Armenian genocide. Few historians were sufficiently trained in Assyrian history, and as a result, denying the Assyrian genocide was a difficult task. There was not enough knowledge about the Assyrian communities and villages. The gradually growing awareness within the Assyrian diaspora, or put differently, the delay in Assyrian remembrance, exposes the strength and

durability of truth. Cracks appeared at certain moments in the Turkish narrative. For example, when a mass grave is uncovered, material reality breaks through the lie. Or when a new document surfaces that must be incorporated into the organized falsehood. In the case of Turkey, however, a crack emerges not only in the form of isolated facts but in the form of another genocide, the Assyrian genocide. The Assyrian genocide creates a rupture in Turkey's lie about the Armenian genocide. The concealment and simulation of the Assyrian genocide was a new challenge; suddenly something new emerged. The Turkish Historical Society only established a department in 2007 to be able to take an official stance on the Assyrian genocide (BarAbraham, 2017, p. 223).

It is remarkable how a well-executed genocide, whose descendants have barely any memory of it, can reemerge almost a century later as a huge rupture. This rupture is a repercussion of the contentless but consistently repeated and transmitted phrase, "they-killed-us." This very vague and sparse phrase, orally passed down by the Assyrians, reveals the power of truth. The Assyrian genocide dismantles itself in the same way an organized lie expands. The vulnerability of truth, which, is always both a weakness and a strength, reveals its strength here. Truth may seem less potent and credible than an organized lie, but at the same time it possesses a stubbornness. In the case of the Assyrian genocide, that stubbornness is very clear. A minimal oral transmission of a genocide, without any substantial form of historical narrative, still manages to shatter the seemingly web-like structure of the organized lie, even if only briefly.

Genocide as a fact and a sign

The question of whether genocide can be classified as a historical fact is methodologically and philosophically challenging. Armenian-French philosopher Marc Nichanian takes on this challenge and explores it through a conceptual argument. It will be explored how genocide is not merely the destruction of a group. Different levels can be distinguished beyond the physical annihilation of the group. The first level is the destruction of specific facts, the second is the destruction of the genocidal fact itself, and the third is the destruction of factuality as such. This new exploration of the concept of genocide will lead to a reflection on what genocide structurally entails and what it reveals about our philosophical understandings of truth and falsehood. Then, the ideas Giorgio Agamben on the evidentiary dimension of genocide will be discussed. Both attempt to render genocide factual despite its inherent denial. Finally, Deleuze's concept of signs is used to reflect on genocide as both fact and sign.

Is genocide a fact? According to Nichanian, genocide is not a fact (Nichanian, 2009, pp. 1-2). It may seem counterintuitive when Nichanian, who is Armenian himself, repeatedly states that (the Armenian) genocide is not a fact. Of course, he does not mean this in a denialist way. According to him, something may very well have taken place, something may have happened in history, without it being able to attain the status of a historical fact. (Nichanian, 2009, p. 2) In genocide, *the genocidal will* destroys the genocidal violence itself, preventing the event of genocide to become a fact (Nichanian, 2009, p. 9). The genocidal will destroys itself as a fact, but does so through, by means of, and thanks to the archive. A crime can only qualify as genocide if there is a specific intent to destroy the group. Perpetrators often destroy evidence. In the Armenian genocide, documents were destroyed before any trial had taken place. However, beyond this literal, material destruction, which makes it difficult or even impossible to trace intent, the "specific intent" will almost never be explicitly stated in a document. Nichanian refers to these two aspects of the archive when arguing that genocide can never be a fact. Yet historical facts are supported and constructed based on archival material. Genocide is the destruction of the archive in the sense that it annihilates the very conditions needed for an event to be recognized as genocide in the first place (Nichanian, 2009, p. 12). The same holds for testimony. The major problem with testimonies is that they are archived to prove genocide took place. As a result, witnesses are expected to prove their own death in the most truthful way possible, ideally stripped of trauma and emotion (Nichanian, 2009, p. 28). In short, Nichanian argues that despite testimonies and documentation, genocide should be seen as a sign rather than a historical fact. The standard process by which events become facts fails in the case of genocide. The problem of "specific intent" in genocide is supposedly “solved” by examining patterns of action and context through source material, including testimonies. However, this enters the domain where interpretation of “bare events” within a “historical narrative” occurs, which is also where the seeds of genocide denial are planted. While examining context may seem to offer a solution, it simultaneously carries a superficial yet real danger. Interpretation as solution is also the very space and moment where the propagandistic myth can emerge and live on as an alternative, coherent, and seemingly valid version of history.

Genocide inherently contains its own denial; denial is both the core and the continued manifestation of the genocidal act (Nichanian, 2009, p. 72). The genocidal will concretely persists in denialist discourses and propagandistic myths. Genocide, then, is not merely the physical extermination of a group of people. In addition to the actual killing of the targeted group, three further levels can be distinguished. The first is the level of specific facts. Genocide destroys this or that particular fact, for instance, a telegraphic document or a mass grave. The propagandistic myth operates on this level in various ways:

lies about material remnants and broader historical distortions aim to destroy concrete facts.

On the second level, genocide destroys itself as a fact. This is the core of Nichanian's argument. Within this second level, several branches can be identified, all of which are forms of destruction that contribute to genocide's self-erasure as a fact. The first branch is that genocide, along with the archive, also destroys testimonies. This can occur literally, through the destruction of documents, or figuratively, by instrumentalizing the witness (Nichanian, 2009, p. 101). A second branch is the destruction of memory. At a later point in time, genocide often attempts to erase the memory of the survivors. In the case of the Assyrian genocide, this effort has, without doubt, been entirely and absolutely successful. The forgetting of the destruction becomes part of the destruction itself. Genocide annihilates the culture and history of the targeted group. It is as if they never existed, as if they never died (Nichanian, 2009, p. 55).

At the third level, and in connection with the previous two, genocide destroys factuality itself. Genocide can only destroy this or that particular fact, because it destroys itself as a fact and it can, only destroy itself as a fact because it ultimately undermines factuality in general. (Nichanian, 2009, p. 70). Factuality is destroyed not because the perpetrators or genocide deniers reject the notion of factuality. On the contrary, the fact is destroyed from within precisely because perpetrators, victims, historians, and genocide deniers all share the same understanding of what a fact is: something that can be proven through documents and archival evidence. There is a consensus on what constitutes a fact and how a historical fact is constructed (Nichanian, 2009, p. 141). In the propagandistic myth, the dead or the deportations are not always denied. One common strategy is to acknowledge all the facts yet still claim that it was not genocide (Nichanian, 2009, p. 22).

One could argue that genocide is an event that escapes the network of facts, or the truth-network. It is never fully absorbed; the process never completes itself, remains resistant, and is always overshadowed by denial. The genocidal event is a bare fact, balancing on the boundary between the truth-network and the network of lies. It is not elevated to the status of a fact and thus does not fit into the web of facts, while being forced into the network of lies. Genocide is the collision of these two worlds, their meeting point reveals something more fundamental about the way we structure reality. The genocidal event, as a borderline case, exposes the fragility of our categories of truth and falsehood. The challenges of truth are real. Falsehood cannot simply be corrected by truth (Nichanian, 2009, p. 72). Genocide is the event that reveals to us, more than any other event, that our categories of truth and falsehood are inadequate. Its roots reach deep into our fundamental philosophical concepts.

We must come to understand the deeper structures of genocide, the penetrating and absolute destruction that manifests on multiple levels. It is crucial to realize that falsehood is not merely the negation of truth, as in a local or incidental lie, falsehood is a fabricated, internally consistent lie. This lie is flexible, self-expanding, and self-replicating. Similarly, truth is not fixed or stable, contrary to our commonsense understanding of it. Truth, like falsehood, is dynamic. Historical truths can vanish. As Arendt writes, and as previously discussed, there is a difference between mathematical truths and historical truths. Historical truths can simply disappear if they are not remembered. Perhaps the dynamism present in the organized lie, and equally present in truth, offers a way to rethink our ideas of truth and falsehood. Do we need to rethink facticity itself? Or do we simply need to find a way to rescue facticity from the grip of what Nichanian calls historiographic perversion? How can we ensure the propagandistic myth ceases to exist? We must find a way to once again say, collectively, in full consensus, that what happened, took place; that what took place is a fact. The following section will attempt to seek a way out of the denial that is inherent to genocide.

Agamben's paradox of the witness in *Remnants of Auschwitz* attempts to escape the framework of genocide denial. His argument unfolds as follows: the survivor, the one who testifies, is not the ultimate witness, because the true witness is dead. The survivor does not testify to the event itself, but rather to the impossibility of bearing witness to it. Based on this paradox of the witness in spite of himself, Agamben argues that Auschwitz is irrefutably proven (Agamben, 2018, p. 180). Agamben refuses to accept the unprovability and undecidability of genocide. He makes an internal shift, a redefinition of what testimony means. Agamben saves the witness from being reduced to a functional role in constructing evidence for the fact. He leaves no room for historiographic perversion. The impossibility of testifying becomes the very proof of genocide; unprovability itself is the evidence (Nichanian, 2009, p. 17). Agamben succeeds in offering a philosophically and conceptually valid argument that cleverly disarms genocide denial. However, his argument can be seen as somewhat outdated; he may not possess the "ultimate" witness, but he does rely on an ideal witness. Primo Levi is one of the rare survivors whose testimony is widely read and who, in doing so, escapes the grip of archival instrumentalization. Not all genocides, however, have such visible and recognized witnesses. Many fall under the radar simply because they are less well documented or even almost undocumented. This is especially true in the case of the Assyrian genocide. Yet, the more critical question remains: is it really about documentation at all? Even with abundant archival material, as in the Armenian case, genocide still falls prey to a structural discourse of denial. Despite this wealth of evidence, there never seems to be enough to irrefutably prove genocide. Both Agamben and Nichanian's argument have a

similar structure. Agamben claims that the impossibility of testimony is the very testimony. Nichanian similarly argues that the absence of a document that explicitly states genocidal intent is not accidental but a product of the genocidal will itself. That absence is not a gap in the archive but an essential characteristic of genocide. It is not a weakness in the evidence but part of the evidence itself. Genocide includes a total destruction: the killings, the testimonies, the suffering, the physical and immaterial remnants, the erasure of memory and history. The genocidal will aims to destroy all of this. The missing document, the erased witness, the forgotten memory – as in the Assyrian case – the propagandistic myth that replaces reality and ultimately erodes truth: all these voids and silences are not marginal but central to the operation of genocide. This should not be misunderstood as a mere negative definition of genocide, where lack becomes proof in itself. Traditional historical research remains valuable. But it is equally vital to grasp genocide's essentially destructive nature, one that operates on multiple levels and always includes its own denial. Genocide gives birth to its own myth of negation. Any serious conceptualization of genocide must reckon with this auto-negating core. The destruction, and what is destroyed, are intrinsic to what genocide is. The absence is not just a void, it is evidence. The death that has been murdered must be restored as death, so that mourning becomes possible again. Only then can there be a burial to attend, a space to grieve, and a fragile memory to preserve.

If genocide is not a fact, then what is it? - is the next urgent question. According to Nichanian, genocide is a sign (Nichanian, 2009, p. 81). Nichanian remains unclear about what he means by "sign", he does not elaborate further on what genocide as a sign entails. What is clear, however, is the absence of a philosophical and moral-speculative dimension in genocide understood as a fact. Both the sign and the fact refer to the naked event, but a sign is not understood as something that can be validated in the way a historical fact is, with documents and 'impartial', 'objective' knowledge. Genocide as a sign, therefore, encompasses an ethical and philosophically more speculative dimension that genocide as a fact does not (Nichanian, 2009, p. 89). A broader understanding of genocide is necessary. The concept of genocide currently suffers from internal contradictions, has become politicized and diluted, and is increasingly appropriated by both legal and historical frameworks. While expanding its definition is legally and politically delicate, a philosophical rethinking of genocide is essential in order to arrive at a deeper and more meaningful understanding. We accept Nichanian's argument that genocide is not a fact; philosophically, this is an important and valid claim. However, his analysis ultimately ends on an unproductive note, offering only the suggestion that genocide should be understood as a sign, without elaborating on what this entails.

Genocide as a sign might be better understood by approaching the notion of the sign through a Deleuzian lens. In *Proust et les signes,* Gilles Deleuze distinguishes four types of signs: worldly signs, signs of love, sensuous signs, and signs of art. While these specific categories may not directly apply to the concept of genocide, what is relevant in this context is Deleuze's more general view of signs: for Deleuze, a sign is that which provokes thought, something that compels us to think (Deleuze, 2008, p. 12). "There is always the violence of a sign that forces us into the search, that robs us of peace" (Deleuze, 2008, p. 11). A sign challenges us, it lures or provokes us into understanding. A sign is a kind of violence upon thought, an impact on our thinking. It is not something explicit that floats on the surface of conventions; a sign is ambiguous, and it requires interpretation, effort to be grasped. It is through the violence of the sign that we approach its essence. We arrive at the truth of a sign by cultivating a certain kind of sensitivity and receptivity, much like someone who, over time, masters a craft (Deleuze, 2008, p. 4,10-12). The sign overtakes us thus in a violent and unwelcome manner. In the context of signs, Deleuze also speaks of "involuntary memory"; the kind of memory that is triggered by a sensory experience (Deleuze, 2008, p. 14). Why a (material) thing has an effect on us is unclear and contingent. Suddenly, through a sensory experience, one remembers the past splintered, fragmentary and in a fleeting way. A past, that existed but was not visible. The truth of genocide is revealed. A sign can be anything: a mass grave, a testimony, an old inscription, a passed-down platitude. They all compel us to remember genocide and to perceive its essence. This essence includes, among other characteristics, absolute and continuous destruction, as well as inherent denial (Deleuze, 2008, p. 35,37-38). It is only in genocide as a Deleuzian sign that one can come to understand that absence functions as evidence. Genocide as a sign still refers to materiality; to the archive, to the mass grave, to genocide as fact. The archive as fact, the literal archiving of documents, still serves a purpose. There are always material traces that do not disappear, and we must preserve them somewhere because they may one day compel thought. These elements that do not vanish are manifestations of the stubbornness of truth, they are the cracks in the fabric of the propagandistic myth, the dents in our thinking. The elements that are remembered have always been repressed without resistance but suddenly can no longer be repressed. This does not necessarily mean that whatever violently strikes our thinking is immediately meaningful; it must still be incorporated into a historical discourse.

The sign, in a Deleuzian sense, reveals the workings of genocide more precisely than Nichanian's notion of the sign, which merely points to the absence of a moral and philosophical dimension. In this sense, Deleuze offers a valuable addition to Nichanian's open-ended conclusion. Genocide, in the Deleuzian sense, is a sign that is, on the one hand, connected to materiality;

the sensory experience strikes at spontaneity and evokes the repressed past. On the other hand, genocide transcends this materiality and refers to more than just the mass grave or the source stored in an archive. Genocide as a sign points to something deeper. In this depth, through that disruptive and violent moment, one discovers the denial that is inherent to genocide. The truth of genocide imposes itself involuntarily, in the form of facts. Facts, material remnants, can suddenly function as signs and challenge the lie. They break through the dominant simulated narrative. The notion of violence also returns; it is violence that frees us from the violence of oppressive domination and ongoing destruction. It is through Deleuze's compelling sign that we are able to enter, discover, and create Nichanian's moral-philosophical dimension of genocide. Approaching genocide as a sign through Deleuze's perspective allows for a better grasp of the complexity of the idea of genocide, which is both everyday and theoretical, both material and moral-philosophical.

In this idea of genocide as a sign, the related concepts of archive and testimony also function as signs. The archive as fact refers to the depot, the storage facilities specifically set up to preserve testimonies. The archive as sign aligns more closely with a broader and more affirmative vision of the archive, as briefly discussed by Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. The archive is not merely the depot, but extends to everything that is unsaid yet sayable, everything that seeks and is able to make visible the event that, within the perverse logic, appears to be invisible and unprovable (Agamben, 159-62.; Nichanian, 95). The witness as sign can and may express the experience of genocide as something personal, local, fragmented, and meaningful. This broader understanding of the archive also concretely includes the oral tradition of the Assyrians and their platitude. "They-killed-us" functions as an archive in the sense of a sign. This can be converted into a factual archive, but it does not need to submit to the logic of denial. In the same broad sense, this article is also a form of testimony and an expression of the Assyrian archive as a sign. The unsaid is always on the verge of being said, and the archive that no one dusts off will one day be dusted off. What is invisible, but exists, will eventually become visible, whether through an article like this one, or through an Assyrian mother in a flowered skirt and a white headscarf who gently begins to clean in her memories.

In short, genocide is therefore not, as Nichanian claims, merely a sign. Thanks to Deleuze's concept of signs, as discussed above, one can argue that genocide is both fact and sign. Genocide as fact and genocide as sign are two dimensions of the same bare event, of the same reality. These two dimensions, which exist alongside and through each other, never fully overlap and always retain a minimal gap in reality. This gap persists because genocide denial, whether structural or not, continues to exist to varying degrees. Once both dimensions are active, they become difficult to disentangle. It is essential

to consider both the destruction and the absence of evidence – which functions as evidence in itself – as integral parts of genocide. There is a reality that surpasses the objective reality of the historical fact. We reach this reality when we see through the phenomenon of genocide denial, through the propagandistic myth, and thus when we fully undergo the violence of the sign. This means that genocide unfolds and is absorbed juridically, ethically, philosophically, in relation to material reality, and immersed in trauma. It implies that genocide is both fact and sign, that genocide is not always drowned by the propagandistic myth, that we do not have to fight for breath while already having drowned long ago.

Conclusion

This article has shown, through Hannah Arendt's concept of the organized lie, how Turkey upholds a propagandistic myth surrounding the Armenian Genocide. Historical facts are denied, and alternative facts are manufactured in service of the organized lie. The Assyrian Genocide, largely transmitted through oral tradition and only recently receiving efforts toward recognition, further reveals the dynamics of genocide and denial. While Turkish historians often use this oral tradition to discredit the Assyrian testimonies, it is precisely this mode of transmission that discloses the workings of genocide. The oral memory is a result of continued oppression and marginalization in the aftermath of genocide. The Assyrian platitude "they-killed-us" embodies the destructive force of genocide and the stubborn persistence of truth, it functions as a rupture in Turkey's propagandistic myth. In the last chapter, the question was raised whether genocide is a fact at all. Drawing on the work of Marc Nichanian, I argued that genocide cannot be reduced to a verifiable historical fact, since the document proving intent will always be absent. Building on Nichanian's notion of unlimited destruction, I have described genocide as an absolute and total annihilation that unfolds on three interrelated levels. First, genocide destroys specific facts; the level at which the propagandistic myth operates. Second, genocide annihilates itself as a fact, this is the level targeted by Nichanian's argument. Third, and in relation to the first two, genocide undermines factuality itself, attacking our most fundamental philosophical categories of truth and falsity.

Because genocide involves not only the physical destruction of a group but also its denial, I invoked both Agamben's paradox of the witness and Nichanian's framework to argue that absence and denial can function as evidence of genocide. In the final section, I turned to Gilles Deleuze's concept of a sign to formulate a response to Nichanian's open-ended question of how genocide might still be understood beyond traditional historiography. For Deleuze, a sign is something violent that compels thought, it disrupts the present and

triggers an involuntary memory. In this same way, the repressed memory of genocide breaks through the dominant narrative: a document resurfaces, a mass grave is unearthed, the Assyrian platitude is passed on. These material remnants function as signs that pierce through the reigning interpretation, allowing genocide to be grasped as a sign. Genocide as sign enables us to comprehend it as absolute destruction, including the inherent denial that follows. Genocide is both fact and sign: it relates to material reality, but understanding it fully requires looking beyond that materiality. Beyond the instrumentalized witness, beyond the literal destruction, beyond the source in the depot, toward the meta-reality, toward the destruction of destruction, toward the Assyrian platitude and a deeper understanding of the Armenian drive to archive.

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Conflict of Interest
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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Historia: philosophy & theory, 2025, Vol. 1, pp. 59-71
doi: 10.46991/hpt.2025.1.05

SCREEN MEMORY OR MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY? THE HOLOCAUST AND THE BRAZILIAN MILITARY DICTATORSHIP IN *THE GERMAN BROTHER*

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Abstract

This article examines how Holocaust memory enters into productive interplay with other historical and cultural memories, focusing specifically on its relationship to representations of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985) in Chico Buarque's novel *The German Brother* (2014). I argue that the novel mobilizes Holocaust memory not merely as a distant historical reference but as a framework through which Brazil's unresolved dictatorial past can be narrated and confronted. To illuminate this dynamic, the article brings together Sigmund Freud's concept of screen memory and Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory. While screen memory is often understood as a mechanism that obscures access to repressed experiences, I propose that it can also function as an enabling structure that opens pathways to engage difficult or silenced histories through mediated or displaced representations. This does not imply a harmonious relationship between memories; rather, it acknowledges ongoing political disputes and tensions in the field of remembrance. Drawing on multidirectional memory, I explore how such displacement may not only produce competition for space among traumatic pasts but may also generate new, overlapping interpretive possibilities. The article unfolds across three interconnected sections. First, I define screen memory and analyze its relevance for understanding the often indirect and fragmentary nature of Holocaust representations. Second, I consider the theoretical convergences between screen memory and multidirectional memory, showing how both concepts challenge linear or hierarchical models of historical remembrance. Finally, I demonstrate how the novel deploys Holocaust memory as a metaphorical and narrative tool for grappling with the dictatorship's legacy of state violence, institutionalized torture, and persistent national memory disputes within Brazil's contested historical landscape.

Keywords: Holocaust, Brazilian military dictatorship, screen memory, multidirectional memory.

Received: 18.08.2025
Revised: 10.11.2025
Accepted: 08.12.2025

Introduction

The interconnections between memories and manifestations of different historical traumatic pasts remain a frequent theme in post-World War II studies. Comparisons between the Holocaust and other historical traumas are common, even when such comparisons prove objectively and historically imprecise. In this article, however, my objective focuses specifically on examining the deployment of screen memory and multidirectional memory concepts to analyze the relations between Holocaust memory and memory of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985), as represented in Chico Buarque's novel *The German Brother* (2014). For this purpose, I will undertake a conceptual reflection on how to analyze these intertwined memories, considering both the pervasive presence of Holocaust memory in the Western world and the memory conflicts surrounding it.

The end of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985) represents a case of negotiated political transition, where military elites controlled and orchestrated their own departure while securing amnesty, thereby maintaining significant influence over subsequent political developments. The work of the National Truth Commission only began in 2012, yet it established no legal punishment for crimes committed during the Brazilian military dictatorship. The historical oblivion of the political past in Brazil is not natural but produced by deliberate policies and practices through the erasure of traces. The events of the military dictatorship period remain recent, yet still unclear. Official information about the military regime contains significant gaps: many victims and disappeared politicians still await clarification and remembrance of their stories.

Thus, in Brazil's case, it is not so much in physical sites of memory but specifically in literature about the military dictatorship that Holocaust memory plays an important role. It is particularly after periods of silencing and denial that these distant histories of violence interconnect and reemerge in this specific context. The history of both the Shoah and antisemitism features prominently in literature dealing with the dictatorship (Costa Braga, 2024), typically serving as a metaphor for working through the recent (and still open) wounds created by institutionalized torture and murder of specific groups.

The article is divided into three main sections, excluding the introduction and conclusion. First, I examine Freud's concept of screen memory and analyze its applications concerning Holocaust memory within global memory studies and media representations. Second, I explore the relationship between the concept of screen memory and multidirectional memory. Finally, I present a case study of *The German Brother* to discuss how Holocaust memory functions in this novel's treatment of the Brazilian dictatorship.

The Holocaust as a Screen Memory

In 1899, Freud developed the concept of the screen memory (*Deckerinnerung*). A screen memory appears as a fragmentary recollection that persists from the early years of childhood. At the time, Freud already recognized that the impressions and experiences from our first years could hold great importance for our psychic functioning as adults. However, when confronted with recollections from this period of life, the content of these memories may be considered enigmatic, to say the least. Since people are simply unable to remember everything, we tend to assume that what is retained in memory must have a clear link to the significance of the experience. What first struck Freud, then, was not the phenomenon of forgetting, but rather the act of remembering something apparently indifferent (Freud, 1981, p. 303).

Thus, Freud took an interest in the content of the earliest memories of childhood. In dealing with adults, one might expect that the experiences chosen as worth remembering would have aroused powerful emotions or had significant consequences soon afterward. According to Freud's findings, this is usually the case with children as well, except for a fraction of memories that defy these expectations: recollections of childhood focused on everyday life, incapable of producing much emotional impact, yet remembered with unusual clarity and in great detail at the same time that important events were not retained in memory. This can be explained in terms of a relevant scene being only incompletely retained in memory, while the parts that have been forgotten (or rather omitted) contained what really made the experience worthy (Freud, 1981, p.305).

The question of why what is relevant is suppressed while what is irrelevant is remembered remains. Freud's answer to this was that it results from a compromise between two opposing forces involved in the creation of a memory: the first seeks to preserve an experience because of the importance of the scene, while the second resists and attempts to prevent its recollection. The outcome, according to Freud, is that "what is recorded as a mnemic image is not the relevant experience itself […]; what is recorded is another psychical element closely associated with the objectionable one" (Freud, 1981, p. 307). In other words, the mnemic image is produced through association. That is, a case of repression accompanied by a displacement or substitution that turns from a conflict into a compromise.

The use of the concept of screen memory in relation to the place that Holocaust memory occupies in transnational contexts was recently revitalized by debates surrounding the so-called *Historikerstreit 2.0*. In these discussions, the dominant Holocaust memory regime – especially in Germany, but not exclusively – was called into question in light of the connections between colonialism and the Holocaust, racism and antisemitism, and the ongoing cri-

sis in Israel and Palestine. The argument that fascination with the Holocaust may function as a screen memory, concealing other traumatic events, is not a new one, however. In this sense, the Holocaust would often be used as a screen memory, being remembered in order to repress or displace other local events and histories, usually those having their history still under political dispute.

Although not employing the Freudian concept, David Stannard, for example, in somewhat unwary wording, argues that a "handful" of Jewish scholars and writers have devoted their professional lives to defending the idea that the Holocaust was a unique and unprecedented event. For him, the thesis of uniqueness is not only an erroneous and exclusivist notion, but also "willingly provides a screen behind which opportunistic governments today attempt to conceal their own past and ongoing genocidal actions" (Stannard, 2001, p. 250).

Andreas Huyssen (2003, p. 11) argues that, since the 1980s, the contemporary focus on memory reflects a shift from "present futures" to "present pasts." In Europe and the United States, this shift was driven primarily by debates about the Holocaust, including the role of the first *Historikerstreit* in 1986. The predominance of Holocaust memory was not at all isolated; rather, the Holocaust as a universal trope for historical trauma and genocide was reinforced by genocidal politics around the globe in the post-Second World War period. Huyssen (2003, pp. 13-14) notes that the emergence of the Holocaust as a universal trope enabled its memory to be invoked in connection with events that are historically, geographically, and politically distant. Therefore, while the Holocaust functions as a metaphor for other traumatic histories, it could also serve as a screen memory, blocking insight into specific local histories.

Drawing on cases from post-dictatorial societies in Latin America, Huyssen (2003, 15-16) reminds us that, while discourses of memory may appear to be global through the lens of the Holocaust, the political sites of memory are not global but remain tied to the histories of specific nations and states, as in the cases of Chile or Argentina.

> Although the Holocaust as a universal trope of traumatic history has migrated into other, nonrelated contexts, one must always ask whether and how the trope enhances or hinders local memory practices and struggles, or whether and how it may help and hinder at the same time. National memory debates are always shot through with the effects of the global media and their focus on themes such as genocide and ethnic cleansing, migration and minority rights, victimization and accountability (Huyssen, 2003, p. 16).

This raises the question of how to reflect on comparisons and global tropes of historical trauma while, at the same time, addressing the urgent demands of different societies for the recognition of their own national memory. For Huyssen (2003, p. 19), explaining why the years following the 1980s, in particular,

are marked by an obsession with memory and a panic over forgetting requires examining the influence of new media and the spectacularization of the Holocaust in an era in which traumatic memory and entertainment memory occupy the same public space. But beyond the place the Holocaust occupies in the entertainment industry at large, official Holocaust memory could also function as a "comfortable horrible memory." This is the concern Edward Linenthal raises in his study on the creation of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. According to him, Holocaust memory in the US might allow "Americans to reassure themselves that they are engaging profound events, all the while ignoring more indigestible events that threaten Americans' sense of themselves more than the Holocaust" (Linenthal, 1995, p. 267).

Enzo Traverso (2005) also raised the concern about the political uses of the memory of the Holocaust by comparing the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz – then in a newly unified Germany – with those of the 60th anniversary. According to him, after fifty years, the prevailing fear was one of oblivion, of a renewed silence surrounding the crimes. But this fear of forgetting would no longer persist; instead, the concern would have shifted to a supposed "excess of memory." He argues that the risk is not the erasure of the Shoah but rather the misuse of its memory: a misuse of the past that neutralizes memory's critical potential. Or, as he puts it, an apologetic use of Shoah memory, one that serves to justify everything that politically, economically, and culturally defines the so-called West. In this framework, remembering the Holocaust would function to affirm the (Western, liberal) world as the best of all possible worlds. In a sense, relentlessly invoking absolute evil would serve to reinforce the conviction that one system embodies absolute good, which would require overlooking the ambiguities within this system.

One key aspect of defining Holocaust memory as a screen memory is that, although it may sometimes appear "comfortable" by diverting attention from other traumatic histories and their accompanying responsibilities, the content of this memory is not merely trivial, like the childish memories Freud described may look on a superficial level. There is an interchange between two disturbing memories. While the concern that emphasizing the Holocaust's singularity might overshadow other historical tragedies is understandable – and while political conflicts over memory do exist – the Holocaust's memory remains (not rarely directly) linked to the histories of various societies. Moreover, even if we consider that it serves as a diversion, addressing this particular choice of focus may still shed light on other silenced histories of victimization.

Screen Memory or Multidirectional Memory

At the same time that Freud (1981, p. 320) describes screen memories as well-remembered yet indifferent in content, he emphasizes that their significance

does not lie in the content itself, but rather in "the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed". Building on this premise, Michael Rothberg (2009, pp. 12-16) proposes a rethinking of screen memory. The fascination with Holocaust representations does not merely compete with the memory of other traumatic events, but also generates displaced referents linked to other traumas seemingly unapproachable directly. In that case, it may become possible to draw attention to the connections between different traumas. Thus, even if the content of the memory of the Holocaust is not a banal one per se, sometimes it may be more valuable to make noticeable the relation between this content and a suppressed one.

This potential lies at the heart of Rothberg's interpretation of the Freudian concept. In his framework, the notion of screen memory becomes integrated into his broader model of multidirectional memory. By developing this concept, Rothberg challenges the assumption that Holocaust memory necessarily overshadows or displaces memories of slavery and colonialism. This makes it possible to establish relationships between memories of apparently incompatible legacies – that is, it allows us to consider how different narratives of victimization interact in the public sphere without framing them as competing for space.

Rothberg conceptualizes contemporary multicultural societies as spaces where memory does not obey a logic of scarcity. On the contrary, collective consciousness emerges through the formation of group identities that arise from interactions between different pasts. In this sense, what Rothberg (2009, pp. 4-6) calls multidirectional memory represents an intercultural dynamic that does not draw a direct line between remembrance of the past and identity formation in the present. Instead, it operates through connections with others' pasts that are often perceived as foreign and distant.

Methodologically, this approach enables analysis of how different historical memories interact, revealing the processes through which multiple traumatic pasts converge in a heterogeneous, ever-evolving post-Holocaust present. Consequently, the Holocaust's pervasive cultural presence can function less as an obscuring force and more as a discursive platform for articulating diverse traumas. This dynamic operates reciprocally: just as the Holocaust created conditions for other traumatic narratives to emerge, so too has its public memory been shaped (and reshaped) through engagement with seemingly unrelated postwar events.

The examples Freud provides to illustrate the function of screen memories depict recollections of mundane impressions that would hold little or no emotional significance even for a child. Through psychoanalysis, it may become apparent that such a memory served as a screen, standing in for a more distressing or painful memory that was not forgotten but displaced. In this way,

screen memories act as substitutes for other, genuinely significant impressions whose direct recollection is obstructed by resistance (Freud, 1914, p. 58). Building on Freud, Rothberg (2009, p. 12) conceptualizes screen memory itself as an associative process that inevitably operates through negotiation and substitution, making it, in his terms, structurally multidirectional. Within this multidirectional framework, the displacement inherent in screen memory can function both to open pathways of communication with the past and to foreclose them.

The temporal relationship between a memory and its screen memory counterpart is inherently complex. Freud (1914, p. 58) categorizes screen memories as either "anticipatory," "retrospective," or "simultaneous" – indicating that the repressed event may have occurred before, after, or concurrently with the consciously remembered one. For Rothberg (2009, pp. 13-14), this temporal complexity serves to reinforce how screen memories both conceal and expose suppressed content, thereby confirming his argument about their inherently multidirectional nature. This perspective enables us to consider Holocaust memory not just in terms of memory conflicts, but as part of a "remapping of memory in memories" that redistributes recollections between conscious and unconscious domains.

Rothberg (2009, pp. 14-16) examines the distinctions between multidirectional memory and screen memory through the lens of collective versus individual memory. While the concept of multidirectional memory was purposely developed to address collective phenomena, could we analyze a collective memory as a form of screen memory? To explore this possibility, we must recall that even Halbwachs' foundational work acknowledged the inseparability of individual and collective memory. Conversely, Avishai Margalit would later coin the term "shared memories," a form of collective memory where all remembering exists simultaneously as both individual and collective as an aggregation of different perspectives. For Rothberg, multidirectional memory is collective memory and aligns with notions of shared memory in its requirement for communicative exchange between diverse perspectives. Yet it simultaneously diverges from these concepts by emphasizing what he describes as the "inevitable displacements and contingencies that mark all remembrance."

Thus, the concepts of screen memory and multidirectional memory are not mutually exclusive when we recognize that a screen functions not merely as a barrier to remembrance, but equally as a surface for projecting other memories. Both possibilities are inherent to multidirectional memory's model, since the articulation of memories remains fundamentally unpredictable – shaped by intersecting social, political, and psychic forces. But how does this multidirectionality materialize across different forms and formats? How will it manifest within *lieux de mémoire*? How might it be negotiated through remembrance

policies? What role does it play in fictional representations? These kinds of questions about multidirectional manifestations cannot yield uniform answers, precisely because memory's articulations remain fundamentally heterogeneous.

The German Brother

Chico Buarque's *The German Brother* (2014) occupies a liminal space between reality and fiction, blurring the boundaries between autobiographical truth and literary invention. The novel employs autofiction – a narrative mode that diverges from traditional autobiography by prioritizing imaginative freedom over strict chronological or factual accuracy – to explore the tension between lived experience and artistic creation. This deliberate ambiguity invites readers to interrogate the interplay between history and storytelling, particularly those familiar with the public lives of the author Chico Buarque and his father, the renowned historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda. In 1930, during a stay in Berlin, Buarque de Holanda fathered a son, Sergio Ernst, with Anne Ernst, a German woman. The child was later adopted by another family under the name Horst Günther, only to rediscover his origins as an adult and reclaim his birth name before he died in 1981. The brothers Sergio and Chico never met.

The autobiographical underpinnings of *The German Brother* are reinforced through the inclusion of archival documents, some of which were uncovered during Chico Buarque's real-life search for his lost brother in 2013, aided by historian João Klug (Neher, 2014). Yet even as these documents anchor the narrative in verifiable events, they also underscore the elusiveness of historical truth. Confronted with irreparable gaps in the record, Buarque turns to fiction as a means of negotiating the unknowable. From the outset, the novel signals its resistance to strict factual fidelity: names are altered (Sérgio Buarque de Holanda becomes "Sérgio de Hollander"), the family's residence is in a different city, and entirely invented characters (such as Ciccio's Brazilian brother Mimmo) are introduced. Moreover, the novel's autobiographical dimensions are complicated by the dissonance between Chico Buarque's public persona and that of his fictional alter-ego, Ciccio. While Buarque himself is celebrated as an artist (more known as a musician than a writer) who resisted Brazil's Military Dictatorship and was forced into exile for his activism, Ciccio remains strikingly passive in the face of authoritarianism and even seems to be in denial during the advance of violence.

The narrative begins when Ciccio discovers an old letter in German among his father's books. Though his comprehension of the language is limited, the letter revives a childhood rumor about his father having a son in Berlin. With the help of a drunk friend of a friend after a visit to a local German immigrant

bar, Ciccio obtains a rough translation, which confirms that his father had indeed fathered a child during his time in Germany.

This discovery propels Ciccio into an obsessive quest to uncover the truth about his lost brother, a journey that unfolds alongside his fraught relationship with his Brazilian brother, Mimmo, with whom he competes for the affections of women and their father's approval. The German brother becomes, for the somewhat resentful young Ciccio, an imaginary projection of his own traumas and desires. Finding him would be to solve something that his father could not. In his search for his lost brother, Ciccio constantly fables about possible lives for his brother. These ramblings, however, are much greater than the concreteness of the clues he follows, which causes him to constantly dream of tragic fates for his unknown brother (Buarque, 2014, p.108).

While examining his father's papers, Ciccio stumbles upon correspondence related to his brother's adoption, including requests for documentation proving the child's lineage, that is, proving that the child was not Jewish and therefore that he could be given up for adoption. He gets to know that Nazi-era restrictions prevented Sérgio from maintaining contact with his son, leaving the boy's fate shrouded in mystery. From these fragments, he creates a narrative in which his brother, imagined as Jewish, was murdered during the Holocaust, in a gas chamber. Though there is no evidence to support this conclusion, Ciccio clings to it with a fervor that borders on delusion, as if the magnitude of the Holocaust could lend meaning to his own familial ambiguities. Tellingly, this fixation coincides with his willful indifference to the political repression unfolding around him. When a friend compares Brazil's dictatorship to Nazi Germany, though, Ciccio dismisses the analogy as hyperbolic (Buarque, 2014, p.133).

This is how the relationship between the two, at first very distant events, is established in the book: Ciccio refuses to deal with the frightening present events and ends up turning to the trauma already recognized historically. About the Holocaust he has a lot of information, he can read it, as he reads so many stories and so much history in his father's endless books. Being able to know so much, he can imagine that in some way his particular story meets that history of recognized absolute evil. Meanwhile, in Brazil, in his city, another type of violence is unfolding in the shadows and he prefers not to look at these signs, represented, among other things, by the cockroaches that occupy the bookshelves at home. The cockroaches run free over the books and nobody takes action.

The narrator of *The German Brother* clearly has no Jewish ancestry, but this does not stop him from insisting on fantasizing about a Jewish past for his unknown German brother. If their shared father was not Jewish, the mother of the German brother could be, he imagines. At the same time that he goes on

with this projection, his other well-known Brazilian brother disappears during the dictatorship. By the end, he even considers the possibility of his brothers being the same person, bringing together both historical traumas.

In the last chapter, we discover that the story is narrated by Ciccio in 2013, many years after Sergio's death and Mimmo's disappearance, when he goes to Berlin in search of his German brother. This is not a novel that aims to elucidate a mystery, but rather the narrator's search for his own identity, which he projects (even if as an opposite) onto his brothers and their father. When these answers are not found, they need to be created, as years after Mimmo's disappearance, Ciccio invents stories about Mimmo's location to ease his sick mother's suffering (Buarque, 2013, pp.192-194).

In an interview, Chico Buarque, at the time of the book's release, states that two stories happened simultaneously: that of the book, on the level of imagination, and that of the search for his brother in real life. This is a story that could not end, since the initial question "who was this brother?" remains open (Chico, 2015). What is known about this mysterious brother is that he lived in a reality completely different from that of Chico Buarque and that, even with the help of documents and historians, any attempt to seize his existence can only be a fictionalization.

Conclusion

The German Brother, drawing from real documents and photos of one of Brazil's most famous artists, leaves readers with mounting suspicions rather than answers: the narrator's attempts at clarification only generate more doubts. The novel traces a man's obsession with a little-known brother from whom he expects much, yet the final chapter reveals Ciccio's own limited knowledge (or memory) of his Brazilian brother. Ciccio speculates that Mimmo was mistakenly arrested through association with an Argentinian activist woman, as he was so engrossed in fabricating stories about his German brother that he entirely overlooks his Brazilian brother's actual political activities. Ultimately, the German brother was neither Jewish nor a Holocaust victim, disproving Ciccio's most compelling hypothesis. The family's tragedy resonates not with the vast collective memory of the Holocaust, but through its own private suffering – a trauma Ciccio might prefer remained unknown.

In this context, the concept of screen memory is useful to reflect on the Holocaust's role in the narrative. While Ciccio isn't entirely oblivious to his surroundings, the story primarily focuses on his search for his German brother. Merely by being German and distant, this brother becomes the screen for Ciccio's various projections. The military dictatorship forms the backdrop of the protagonist's life during this period, yet it remains largely unaddressed –

except when its consequences intrude upon the search for the lost brother. Drawing on Rothberg's reading of Freud's screen memory concept, I argue that the novel presents Holocaust memory as present yet – if not the character himself, then for the reader – fundamentally displaced: particularly in the crucial revelation that the German brother was not Jewish. While this memory functions as a cover, it nevertheless (like a screen) reveals much about how both Ciccio and some real-life Brazilian counterparts process dictatorship history.

While testimony as a historical source predates the Shoah, Annette Wieviorka (2006) and Shoshana Felman (2001) identify the post-1970s "era of the witness" marked by testimonies transcending archival confines to enter public discourse through written, recorded, and filmed formats. Buarque's fictionalization exemplifies this relentless quest for answers when confronting historical trauma. The working-through process often appropriates existing frameworks, making Holocaust memory an available pathway – despite its temporal and experiential distance from events like Brazil's dictatorship – due to its established narrative conventions for addressing trauma.

Thus, Holocaust literature functions as a trope or archetype for trauma narratives. Distinctively, its power stems not from conventional narrative arcs but from memory's fragmentation – what Aarons (2014) terms a "genre of rupture," extending Berel Lang's (2000) observation about Holocaust literature's "blurring of traditional genres." This generic instability reflects language's failure to conventionally represent trauma, producing texts that straddle reality and imagination. Historical verisimilitude emerges precisely through linguistic absence and discontinuity, forging a literature of destruction whose narrative strategies, via multidirectional memory, reverberate across other traumatic histories.

If we acknowledge the trope of traumatic literature as an attempt to work through the past, the concept of multidirectional memory becomes particularly suitable for analyzing the literary experimentations in *The German Brother*. As Hayden White (1986, p. 5) observes, understanding involves an attempt to render the *unheimlich* familiar – that is, to situate something within the realm of the known through associative frameworks. In the novel, the unknown manifests not only through the elusive whereabouts and mysterious history of the German brother but also in the novelty of the escalating violence that disrupts the protagonist's family life. This unknown further resides in the impossible mourning of those who disappeared during Latin America's dictatorships.[1] Within this narrative context, Holocaust memory emerges as a platform for articulating these distinct yet interconnected traumas.

When we consider the Holocaust as a paradigm for how memory circulates across different locations and historical periods, we can begin to address how competing narratives of victimization interact in public discourse. The central challenge involves ensuring that the concept of multidirectional memory avoids

depoliticizing effects – whether by glossing over actual conflicts between memories in favor of an ideal harmony, or by automatically filtering all traumatic memories through the Holocaust framework while overlooking the specific political contexts of different memorialization processes. As Assmann and Conrad (2010, pp. 9-11) demonstrate, the globalization of Holocaust memory is often perceived globally as a form of Euro-American cultural imperialism in memory studies.

Lastly, the role of the multidirectionality of memory in the book can also be indicated by its reception in the German press. In a review published in *Die Zeit* about the book that was translated as *Mein deutscher Bruder*, Jens Jessen (2016) classified Chico Buarque's work as *Weltliteratur* (World Literature). The term *Weltliteratur* was coined by Goethe to refer to an overcoming of national literature in the name of a literature with a cosmopolitan character of the emerging global modernity. Despite the complexities surrounding the definition of the term in a rapidly expanding world, the concept suggests that literature is more than just a representation or reflection of particular realities. *Weltliteratur* can be understood as both a concept and the literature itself capable of creating worlds and shaping realities. Thus, if Chico Buarque's book represents a very particular national reality, it is also capable of reaching a much wider audience precisely because of its dialogue with memories that go beyond the national scenario and unite the Brazilian military dictatorship with the set of catastrophes in Contemporary History.

Notes

[1] See Dulitzky, Ariel E. (2019). The Latin-American Flavor of Enforced Disappearances, *Chicago Journal of International Law:* Vol. 19: No. 2, Article 3. Ulster University Transitional Justice Institute. *Disappearance and state responses in Latin America* [Research project]. Ulster University. Retrieved from https://www.ulster.ac.uk/transitional-justice-institute/our-research/disappearance-and-state-responses-in-latin-america

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

Historia: philosophy & theory, 2025, Vol. 1, pp. 72-79
doi: 10.46991/hpt.2025.1.06

E. P. THOMPSON'S HISTORIOGRAPHIC AGENCY IN *BEYOND THE FRONTIER*

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Abstract

This article examines how *Beyond the Frontier* (1997), a hybrid work of commemoration, investigation, and political intervention, redefines the practice of historiography. I argue that the book is driven by what I term historiographic agency: the historian's capacity to mediate between past and present, to resist ideological distortions, and to construct meaning through evaluative and interpretive judgment. For Thompson, such agency entails a dual responsibility: to recover the irreducible complexity of past lives and simultaneously to intervene in the political dilemmas of his own time. By confronting state-sponsored myths in both Britain and Bulgaria, and by resisting the abstraction of lived experience into rigid categories, *Beyond the Frontier* foregrounds the tension between agency and structure that had long preoccupied Thompson's political, pedagogical, and historiographic practice. Rather than a pessimistic break with his earlier romanticism, the work reflects a strategic shift: from celebrating the agency of historical actors to emphasizing the historian's own role in negotiating between events, myths, and lived experiences. In this sense, Thompson's mourning becomes historiography, and his historiography itself a form of political engagement.

Keywords: E. P. Thompson, Beyond the Frontier, historiography, agency, structure, political engagement.

Received: 19.08.2025
Revised: 23.11.2025
Accepted: 05.12.2025

When an engaged historian writes to mourn, what kind of historiography emerges?

In *Beyond the Frontier* (1997a) – one of E. P. Thompson's least studied yet most personal works, originally delivered as the 1981 Harry Camp Memorial Lectures at Stanford University and published posthumously in 1997 – he reconstructs the circumstances of his elder brother Frank's death in 1944

while serving as a British liaison to Bulgarian partisans. What makes the work particularly compelling is its hybrid nature: at once an affectionate commemoration, a historiographic investigation, and a political intervention. At the outset, Thompson states that the book "belongs both to the present and to the past: it is historical, and yet it is not quite 'history'". He grapples with "how the reasons of state are eternally at war with historical knowledge," (p.14) a theoretical concern made all the more pressing by the stigmatized and mystified narratives propagated by both Socialist Bulgaria and the UK regarding the contested causes and significance of Frank's death.

As with nearly all of Thompson's major works – *William Morris* (1955) positioned against J. W. Mackail's *Life of William Morris* (1899), *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963a) against Stalinism and its economic determinism, and *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978b) against Althusserian structuralism – *Beyond the Frontier* likewise engages with clear opponents, if not outright antagonists. I argue that it may be read as an intervention directed against two historiographical adversaries.

First, Thompson denounces the subordination of history to ideological agendas and national mythmaking. In Bulgaria, successive regime changes and Cold War dynamics produced a series of official reinterpretations of Frank's legacy: from national hero, to naïve youth manipulated by imperialists, then to a Byronic tragic figure – embarked on a noble foreign mission yet betrayed by his own evil regime. In Britain, from 1945 to 1981, the government maintained a studied silence regarding Frank's mission, never officially acknowledging its support for the Bulgarian partisans. The archives of the Special Operations Executive – which oversaw Frank's work – remain sealed, and relevant files in the Foreign and War Offices have been deliberately purged by what Thompson calls malicious "anti-historians." Meanwhile, unofficial British myths and anecdotes cast Frank as a stubborn communist who defied orders and acted on his own initiative. This portrayal conveniently turns Frank into a scapegoat, allowing British authority to shirk responsibility. Thompson's mission, then, is to debunk these distorted narratives: narratives in which, as he puts it, "the ideology preceded the history, and invented an anecdote to conform to it" (p.41).

The second, less overt adversary is the tendency to abstract lived experience into impersonal categories of scholarly discourse. Thompson underscores "the endless discrepancies between the trajectories of personal experience, of individuals, and those public trajectories of quantities, of trends, tendencies and process with which historians normally concern themselves" (p. 15). He cautions that rigid theoretical frameworks risk foreclosing inquiry, reducing the complexity of the past to predetermined schemas. By drawing on numerous letters Frank wrote to his family and to his close friend Iris Murdoch, whom he had known at Oxford before the war, Thompson discloses the richness of

Frank's experiences and the delicacy of his emotions. Frank's life, he argues, cannot be captured by any single discipline or doctrine. In the face of tense and rapidly shifting wartime conditions, Frank's careful appraisals and situational judgments were firmly anchored "in concrete historical and personal locations rather than in a priori abstractions" (p. 62). Thompson now insists on approaching his brother's legacy in the same spirit.

The confrontation with these two historiographic adversaries both reflects and amplifies a central motif that recurs throughout Thompson's intellectual and political life: the assertion of human *agency* in resistance to *rigid* structures. By agency I mean the situated experiences of individuals and their conscious efforts to transform prevailing conditions. Structure, by contrast, denotes the encompassing social, economic, political, and ideological frameworks that delimit and condition human action. Thompson's privileging of agency over structure found concrete expression in three of his most significant personae: the political polemicist, the adult education tutor, and the social and labor historian.

Since the mid-1950s, Thompson's paramount political objective as a polemicist was to articulate and defend socialist *humanism* against two opponents: on the one hand, British capitalism and the piecemeal reformism of social democracy; on the other, the abstract, dogmatic, and repressive apparatus of Stalinism. Both, in Thompson's view, imposed profound structural constraints upon individuals: the former denies transformative capacity through the inertia of reformism and political expediency, while the latter suppresses it through teleological determinism and bureaucratic control. (E. P. Thompson, 1957a, 1958, 1959a, 1959b) In opposition to both, Thompson demanded "a return to man: from abstractions and scholastic formulations to real men; from deceptions and myths to honest history." (E. P. Thompson, 1957b, p. 109) During his seventeen years as an extramural tutor at Leeds, he consistently encouraged students to challenge abstract academic theories through their own experiences, rejecting standardized norms imposed on adult learners (E. P. Thompson, 1950, 1997b). For Thompson, a class truly succeeded "when the students, from their memories and from their living experience, revise received academic opinions before one's eyes and reduce the lecturer to the part of saying 'I don't know', or 'the historians haven't looked at that yet'" (E. P. Thompson, 1963b, p. 1). This same commitment underpins the central argument of his magnum opus, *The Making of the English Working Class,* that the process of class formation is "an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning" (1963a, p. 9).

Each of these interventions exemplifies Thompson's lifelong commitment to restoring human agency in the face of structural constraints. In light of these engagements, Thompson advances an *anti-reductionist* historiography that

foregrounds the complexity of historical experience. He aims to rescue his brother Frank's life and legacy from the enormous condescension of state-sponsored, ideologically distorted myths, and from the overly abbreviated categories of academic discourse.

But before turning to Thompson's historiographic approach, it is worth noting a significant shift in tone. He moves from triumphant shout-out to individual agency to a rather somber awareness of structural oppression as a tenacious impediment to change. This contrast becomes especially striking when *Beyond the Frontier* is juxtaposed with Thompson's very first book, *There Is a Spirit in Europe* (1947), which likewise commemorates Frank's life and death. Its title came from a 1943 Christmas letter from Frank, where he expressed optimism that European nations would unite to defeat fascism: "There is a spirit abroad in Europe which is finer and braver than anything that tired continent has known for centuries, and which cannot be withstood" (p. 169). In that book, E. P. Thompson glorified Frank's sacrifice as a beacon of internationalist hope: "It was for this vision of the common people of Europe building, upon their old inheritance, a new creative society of comradeship that Frank gave his life. This is the positive answer which he gave to the negative and defeatist philosophies of our time" (p. 19).

Three decades later, however, the title *Beyond the Frontier: The Politics of a Failed Mission: Bulgaria* 1944 signals the liminal moment when Frank chose to leave Yugoslavia, cross into Bulgaria, and join local partisans – a decision that would ultimately cost his life. Here Thompson no longer affirms the unequivocal significance of his brother's sacrifice. Instead, he laments, "is not history always a record of the supersession and cancellation of individual meanings and motives in the sum which makes up historical process?" (p. 100). This shift alludes to an implicit paradox: if human agency is destined to be subsumed within broader socio-economic and political structures, why does Thompson continue to insist that reconstructing Frank's irreducible personal experience might still serve as an antidote to Cold War ideologies and state-sponsored falsifications of the past?

Rather than indicating a pessimistic rupture in Thompson's thought (Hamilton, 2012, pp. 249-261), I argue that the shift reflects a strategic reorientation. Thompson moves from asserting the transformative potential of *historical* (actors') agency to highlighting the *historiographic* (historians') agency involved in negotiating between personal experience and structural constraint. In this sense, his historiographic agency becomes a springboard from which to resist ideological distortions and to recuperate lost complexities – an endeavor that operates across multiple temporal registers: those of events, myths, and lived experience.

In the first part of the book, Thompson adopts a conventional scholarly approach, using meticulous archival analysis to reconstruct Frank's actions as historical *events*. His stated aim is to offer a "factual answer" capable of countering the myths propagated by both the British and Bulgarian states, whose competing national and ideological interests produced "reprocessing of approved views of the past (or amnesia about the past) and the accretion of new dimensions of myth" (p. 37). Yet the bond of brotherhood precludes Thompson from reducing Frank to a mere object of inquiry. The second section then shifts register, turning to letters, diaries, and poetry to recover Frank's inner struggles, convictions, and wartime *experiences*. "His life," Thompson remarks, "uneasily conforms with stereotypes of either discipline or doctrine" (p.58). The final section, drawing on recollections from British officers and Bulgarian partisans, traces Frank's outlook as he entered Bulgaria and reconstructs the circumstances of his capture and death. More significantly, Thompson ventures what he regards as the most plausible – though ultimately unverifiable – scenario: that Frank was a casualty of history, caught in the late-war geopolitical rivalry between Britain and the Soviet Union, and that his execution was ordered from above. It is this recognition, above all, that lends the book its somber tone.

What Thompson constructs is a polyphonic narrative in which multiple historical temporalities intersect without any single thread subsuming the others. By interweaving events, myths, and lived experiences, he foregrounds the complexity and plurality of historical realities while simultaneously exposing the distortions wrought by *raison d'état* upon both individual lives and the writing of history.

But this is not where Thompson concludes. His ultimate claim is that only historians, writing with the vantage of hindsight, can weave together disparate historical temporalities and, in doing so, endow the past with meaning.

It is we, in the present, who must always give meaning to that inert and finished past (p.100).

The essence of Thompson's historiographic agency then lies in his conviction that narrative reconstructions of the past – when conducted in accordance with scholarly norms and subjected to epistemological scrutiny – can nonetheless exert tangible effects within the socio-political contexts from which they emerge. Thompson's intellectual shift, therefore, consists in discarding the youthful romanticism that the mere depiction of historical figures as active agents would suffice to secure hopeful political outcomes. He no longer believes that cultivating an English "liberty tree" rooted in the late eighteenth century could directly bridge that past to the labor movements of the 1960s, as he had implied in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963a). Instead, he turned inward, foregrounding the historian's own positionality in

confronting the past's otherness and emphasizing the ethical burden of responsibility toward both the dead and the living.

Perry Anderson succinctly captures this reorientation when he observes that Thompson's historiography constituted at once "a militant intervention in the present, as well as a professional recovery of the past" (1980, p. 2). Thompson's subsequent reflections illustrate this shift. He begins to question the legitimacy of applying the concept of "class" to the analysis of pre-class formations in the eighteenth century (1978a). Later, he cautions against retroactively interpreting historical actors through contemporary categories of inequality, insisting that such figures are "proto-nothing" (E. P. Thompson, 1991, p. 320; Levine, 1993, p. 389). Yet historical writing, for Thompson, was never merely an academic exercise conducted among peers. It was also a struggle on behalf of Frank and other "casualties of history" (E. P. Thompson, 1963a, p. 13): an effort to present truthfully a polyphonic past capable of contesting the univocal and ideologically distorted narratives imposed by the state.

A comparable intellectual impulse is discernible in theoretical works produced contemporaneously with *Beyond the Frontier*. Most notably, in the celebrated "intermission" of *The Poverty of Theory* – where Thompson pivots toward what he calls "historical logic," effectively his philosophy of history and theory of historiography – he articulates a similar orientation (1978b, pp. 37-50). Here Thompson shifts from celebrating the agency of historical actors *per se* to probing the ways in which historians themselves might exercise agency. He insists that historical evidence does not "disclose itself involuntarily" (p. 39), nor does it bear an inherent capacity to articulate its own significance: "Only we, who are now living, can give a 'meaning' to the past" (p. 42). Such meaning must be actively constructed through evaluative and interpretive judgments, mediated by historians' hindsight and by their own positionality, whether generational, gendered, or classed. In this sense, historiographic practice itself becomes a form of political intervention: historians cast their vote through the very act of interpretive engagement, just as Thompson aligns his own with Frank's internationalist commitments rather than with the repressive politics of Britain and the Soviet Union. "Our vote will change nothing. And yet, in another sense, it may change everything" (p. 42).

While writing about his brother, Thompson also immersed himself in studying William Blake, the prophetic poet who wrote of envisioning "Jerusalem" in England's dark satanic mills. Blake became the central focus in the last decade of Thompson life (E. P. Thompson, 1993). Blake's famous dictum echoes (Blake, 1794, 1992, p. 262):

> Eternally I labour on.
>
> I labour upwards into futurity.

Might Thompson have seen in Blake a kindred spirit? Might he have felt the need to move beyond analyzing agency in the third person, toward embracing the role of the laborer in the first? Were Thompson able to witness the decline of the global left and the widening gulf between progressive intellectuals and workers in the 2020s – questions he had grappled with since the 1950s through his inquiries into social and labor history – he would, one suspects, have turned once more to the English radical tradition embodied by Blake and Morris, and to a renewed meditation on the role of historians within it. For him, historiography was never merely an academic exercise; it was a mode of engagement with the contradictions of the world, a means of safeguarding truths that power sought to efface, and an insistence on the irreducible value of individual lives against the weight of impersonal structures. In our own unsettled times, Thompson's legacy lingers as both challenge and invitation: to discover agency within our scholarship, to speak in a voice that is at once evidential and performative, and thereby to shape, however provisionally, the meanings of our present in ways that might endure for posterity.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Society for the Study of Labour History for the research bursary that supported my archival trip. I also thank the participants of the conference *State-Sponsored Histories and Historiographic Authority* at Yerevan State University for their valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

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Conflict of Interest
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

Historia: philosophy & theory, 2025, Vol. 1, pp. 80-102
doi: 10.46991/hpt.2025.1.07

TRANSFORMATIONS OF ARMENIAN PRESENCE AND THE "REDISCOVERY" OF THE PAST IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 18TH CENTURY: JOSEPH EMIN (1726-1809)

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Abstract

This article examines transformations in Armenian historical presence and the eighteenth-century "rediscovery" of the past through the intellectual experience of Joseph Emin (1726-1809). Following the fall of the Cilician Kingdom in 1375, Armenian historical consciousness increasingly came to be mediated by ecclesiastical frameworks emphasizing the notion of a "sinful people" and eschatonlogical expectation. The article analyzes how the emergence of cultural and educational centers in the Armenian diaspora – particularly in Amsterdam, Venice, and Madras – generated reformist intellectual currents that culminated during the Enlightenment.

Special attention is devoted to Joseph Emin's role in revaluing the Armenian past and present through his European, especially British, educational experience and engagement with Enlightenment political thought, notably that of Edmund Burke. Emin emphasized education, rational self-government, and the reinterpretation of history freed from superstition and ecclesiastical dogmatism. The article demonstrates how his approach marked a decisive shift away from interpreting Armenian subjugation as divine punishment, instead framing it as the result of foreign domination and structural ignorance. This reconceptualization of the past contributed to a new understanding of Armenian national identity grounded in political interests rather than moral-theological imperatives and inaugurated a tendency toward separating ecclesiastical authority from national liberation discourse.

Keywords: Joseph Emin, Armenian Enlightenment, historical consciousness, eighteenth century, rediscovery of the past, Edmund Burke, Indo-Armenian community, historical memory.

Received: 30.09.2025
Revised: 04.12.2025
Accepted: 19.12.2025

Introduction

In the period following the fall of the Cilician Kingdom in 1375, the Armenian people gradually lost confidence in their ability to restore statehood and self-governance through their own efforts. Older and newly articulated myths portraying Armenians as a "sinful people" became activated, accompanied by the periodic emergence of Armenian "liberation legends" that had originated during the Byzantine-Arab and Crusader campaigns. A mentality took shape and gained wide circulation according to which Armenians were destined from the past to be governed, while liberation would come through foreign powers (Greeks, Franks, and others). Perceptions of the past were revised, as centers of knowledge through which a coherent narrative was woven – one that organized Armenian collective memory – either did not exist or had fallen into decline. Armenian historical consciousness essentially came to a standstill, and faith in historical meaning gradually faded as well. The absence of historical meaning was filled either by a mentality of relying on the aid of the Christian West (Greeks, Franks, and others) in the liberation of Armenia, or by the concept of a "sinful people": events were no longer signs or allegories of God and Providence, but rather divine punishment that would reach its resolution at the Second Coming of Christ. A distorted perception of one's own past emerged, predicated upon normative discourses of sin and divine retribution, as well as upon myths that naturalized the salvific role of foreign powers, rather than subjecting historical experience to systematic critical analysis. This perception institutionalized ahistorical, syncretic frameworks within collective memory – frameworks devoid of causal comprehension of historical processes and grounded in mythological constructions.

Thus, in the centuries of "anarchy," "chaos," or "wretchedness," when the Armenian nation had "become uncultured and hardened," when "they not only did not read, but did not even recognize books and did not know the power and might of books" (Arakel of Tabriz, 1988, p. 203), the people became self-enclosed within a fabric of prejudices inherited from the past. The majority of medieval Armenian historical writings were consigned to oblivion, while those that remained were fragmentary and virtually inaccessible. Historical knowledge of ancestral heritage (encompassing past glory and heroic deeds) remained obscured beneath a dense veil of ignorance – knowledge that may be defined as an endeavor or impulse toward the pursuit of truth and values, rather than blind imitation of the past. Blind imitation, conversely, entailed the mechanical reproduction of external forms and customs without comprehension of their meaning, historical context, or contemporary exigencies (although such imitative practices could nonetheless play a significant catalytic role in awakening historical self-consciousness).

The situation began to change from the second half of the 17th century onward, when a reformist movement emerged both within the Armenian environment and in diasporic communities, thanks to the impact of the invention of printing – a movement that reached its culmination during the Age of Enlightenment, when interest in history gained new momentum, and as a result of which the historical past was, as it were, "rediscovered." As a consequence of such a revaluation of the past, new concepts of liberation were developed among subjugated or colonized nations. In the case of the Armenians, the liberation of Armenia was at that time considered possible only through external intervention, which was associated sometimes with the West, sometimes with Russia. And it was during that same period – the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – that a group of Indo-Armenians played a decisive role in the enlightenment and development of Armenian national consciousness. With the active involvement of the Armenians of India, the Enlightenment movement gained momentum upon Joseph (Hovsep) Emin's return to India and the founding of Shahamir Shahamirian's printing press in Madras in 1772 and concluded with the closure of the journal *Azgaser Araratyan [The Patriot of Ararat]* (Ghougassian, 1999, p. 242).

Particularly significant in this context was the role of Joseph Emin, one of the notable figures in the history of the Armenian liberation movement and one of the first agents of Armenian enlightenment. He was convinced that individuals like himself, dedicated to a just cause, could bring about great transformations. Joseph Emin was the first to dissociate the question of the Armenian people's liberation exclusively from foreign powers, emphasizing and bringing to the forefront the idea of relying on one's own strength. He was among the first to comprehend the paramount importance of history (social consciousness) and historical memory in the formation and development of the individual and society, of identity or statehood (state formation). Accordingly, by bringing to light the cognitive and functional purposes of historical memory in the national liberation movement and the creation of a new statehood, he thereby "rediscovered" the Armenian past and revaluated anew the present and possible future, linking them with science and education.

Thus, one of the pivotal questions in the discussion concerning the relevance of the Enlightenment centers on the nature of historical consciousness characteristic of the Age of Enlightenment and the role that the Enlightenment played in shaping the modern perspective on understanding history. And this is among the questions to which the present study is devoted. The subsequent question is how Joseph Emin understood the process of enlightenment, conceived of time, defined the essence of humanity, and explained and perceived causal relationships. Therefore, I have kept at the focal point of this study both the history of Joseph Emin's intellectual maturation and its preconditions, which stimulated his activity. Although the Armenian community of Madras in

its entirety – including the activities of Shahamir Shahamirian's printing press (established in 1772), the circulation of Enlightenment texts, and the intellectual networks fostered through Indo-Armenian collaborative endeavors – constitutes a significant chapter in 18th-century Armenian cultural history, the present study focuses specifically on Joseph Emin's individual intellectual trajectory. Emin's case is distinctive in several respects: his direct engagement with British Enlightenment thought through personal acquaintance with Edmund Burke, his travels to historical Armenia and interactions with the local population, and his autobiography, which represents a unique first-hand testimony of intellectual transformation. This investigation adopts a history of ideas approach, analyzing the content and formation of Emin's thought rather than its reception history or subsequent influence. A comprehensive analysis of the Madras milieu and its collective intellectual production – including the ideological orientations of Shahamirian's publications, their organizational structures, and their reception among readers – merits separate scholarly treatment and will constitute the subject of future research. Here, Madras functions primarily as a geographical and cultural milieu wherein Emin's ideas initially took shape, rather than as the central object of analysis.

The Concept of a "Sinful People" and the Transformations of the Present

The intellectual experience of the Armenian people upon entering the new Enlightenment era was deeply shaped by a range of inherited prejudices, most notably the missionary conception of a “sinful” or “punished people.” This conception gradually came to supplant the theological understanding of original (Adamic) sin inherited from Adam. In its formation, Catholic missionary literature played a substantial role, interpreting the historical sufferings and displacements of the Armenian people as manifestations of divine punishment (Leo, 1969, p. 321). 17th-century Catholic travelers, such as Pietro della Valle, explicitly employed this interpretive framework, explaining these tribulations as divine retribution – *“une permission de Dieu, en punition de leurs crimes”* (a permission from God, as punishment for their crimes) (Pietro della Valle, 1745, p. 230). The consequence of this perception of a “sinful” or “punished” people was the internalization of a collective self-image as a “mass of condemnation,” a condition associated with death, ignorance, and concupiscence.

The social process of meaning-making at a certain point seemed to undergo a displacement, not moving beyond the representation and presentation of the theme of persecutions and sufferings. The mentality of firmly preserving existing conditions and things, of avoiding any change in order not to disturb the equilibrium inherited from antiquity, gradually became predominant. *Historical thinking* changed accordingly: under conditions dominated by imitation and reproduction, old and established perspectives on events became activated

in medieval Armenian chronicles. More precisely, there emerged a tendency to interpret or present events through familiar archetypes, templates, and concepts rather than to perceive the new in unfolding events. More figures, episodes, and occurrences than an understanding of the meaning of history. And all this was done, in Ashot Hovhannisyan's apt characterization, "not to create new, secular knowledge and literature, but to revive the stagnant ecclesiastical knowledge and literature (Hovhannisyan, 1959, p. 165). Figuratively speaking, the Classical period was characterized by pouring new wine into old wineskins: any change was fraught with dangers.

Thus, historical consciousness among Armenians became bifurcated: it dissolved on the one hand into *chronicles* (it is not accidental that after the fall of Cilicia until Arakel Davrizhetsi (Arakel of Tabriz), what were written were particularly [minor] chronicles and memorials), and on the other hand into *eschatological literature,* where instead of historiography there are only prophetic allusions and desperate searches for signs of the final end of history, and where, although the actors change, the overall plot (scenario) remains essentially invariant.

The situation begins to shift already in the 17th century, when, alongside discourses of “predictions,” “prophecies,” and “visions,” an emerging aspiration to overcome intellectual impoverishment becomes increasingly evident. This process unfolds in parallel with an intensification of confessional struggle (Mirzoyan, 1983, p. 7), particularly between the Armenian Apostolic Church and Catholic missionary initiatives. This regenerative movement in science and culture found its primary expression in scholastic life: existing educational institutions – mainly monastic and diocesan schools, such as those of Ejmiatsin, Syunik, and Baghesh – were revitalized, while new schools were established both within Armenia, under Ottoman and Safavid Persian rule, and abroad, within Armenian diasporic communities (for further details, see Ayntabyan, 1972, pp. 437-450). Thanks to all this, belles-lettres, art, historiography, linguistics, lexicography, and a number of other disciplines experienced an upsurge (Mirzoyan, 1983, p. 64). Despite this, generalizations concerning the scientific and cultural awakening were mainly moralistic and often derived from the modus operandi of Christianity. They were incapable of resolving the problems of political life.

Thus, from the late seventeenth century onward, the necessity of rediscovering the Armenian past was already being recognized, and steps directed toward this began in a period when the continuity of Armenian coexistence had been abruptly disrupted, and consequently historical memory was also increasingly disintegrating. History gradually returned to its former positions, which until then had been filled with "predictions," "prophecies," or "visions."

In the milieu of the Armenian intellectual movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a necessity arose to turn to history both to glorify and to authenticate being "Armenian." This process was initiated first and foremost within the framework of the expansion of Armenian commercial capital, which was active in almost all routes of the ancient world – from Novgorod to Hyderabad, from Isfahan to Kraków, from Basra to Astrakhan, from China to Amsterdam, London, and even various points in Africa (Braudel, 1979, pp. 167-168; Zekiyan, 1999, p. 54; Hovhannisjan, 2014; Hovhannisjan, 2015; Hovhannisyan, 2017, pp. 49-76). Numerous cultural-educational centers emerged, among which the cultural-educational centers of *Amsterdam*, *Venice (later also Vienna), Constantinople*, and *Madras* were particularly distinguished. All were outside Armenia – in the diaspora world. And these cultural-educational centers are especially memorable for their distinctive contributions to the "rediscovery" of the Armenian past. They turned toward intellectual traditions of the past that emphasized the necessity of preserving *historical continuity* – traditions that were more favorable as means of reviving and reorganizing Armenian identity.

Thus, the first steps toward the "rediscovery" of the past were taken in *Amsterdam*: first*, Voskan Yerevantsi (Voskan of Yerevan)* published *Arakel of Tabriz's* History in 1669, which was distinctive not only because it was the first book published during the author's lifetime, but also the first printed book that discussed contemporary life. Subsequently, in 1695, the Vanandetsi family published *Universal Geography* and Movses Khorenatsi's *History of Armenia.* These publications may be understood as an effort to rearticulate the relationship between "civilizational sign and cultural meaning" (Stepanyan, 2014, p. 35), namely, to restore the link between the material signs of Armenian historical presence – such as ancient texts, chronicles, and territorial heritage – and their semantic interpretation as constitutive elements of Armenian collective identity. Within this framework, Armenianness was presented to European audiences not merely as a religious community, as had largely been the case previously, but as a historical nation: "an ancient people that preserved its independence and political standing, interacting with Assyria, Persia, Rome, and Byzantium" (Leo, 1986, p. 300). In this sense, the Vanandetsis succeeded in establishing a new perceptual framework in which Armenianness, or Armenian identity, emerged as a tangible and recognizable historical reality. At the same time, the broader civilizational contexts to which this identity was linked – Assyria, Persia, Rome, Byzantium, and others – were rendered contemporaneous within early modern intellectual discourse, thereby reinforcing the visibility and legitimacy of Armenianness.

This unfinished project of civilizational self-fashioning initiated by the Vanandetsis found its continuation in the activities of the Mekhitarists in Venice and Vienna. Notably, their work in Venice commenced in 1717 – the very year in which, for reasons that remain unclear, the Vanandetsis' activities were discontinued.

The publications of the Mekhitarists (in the eighteenth century both in Venice and Vienna) were essentially directed particularly toward purifying classical Armenian from foreign elements and forming a rational grammar of Armenian, as well as placing Armenian historiography on a scientific foundation and reviving Armenian culture. The Mekhitarists also stood out for the schools they opened – three in Hungary (1746, 1749, and 1797), one in Constantinople (1773), one in Trieste (1774), and then twenty-three more during the 19th century. And despite such diligent and purposeful labors, their main concern was more the preparation of tools necessary for renaissance than responding to Enlightenment ideas (Oshagan, 1999, p. 162). Ultimately, the breakthrough event was the publication of *Mikayel Chamchian's* three-volume History of Armenia in 1784-1786 (Chamchian, 1784-1786). If for the Vanandetsis the issue was simply having or not having a past, then for the Mekhitarists what kind of past one possessed was also extremely important. Something that became pivotal for Chamchian in composing his *History.*

The next significant step toward the renewal of historical consciousness took place in Constantinople, where publishing activities proceeded in two main directions: first, the publication of ancient Armenian literature, and then the translation of European religious literature. It was within the framework of this Constantinople publishing activity that *Agathangelos's* History (1709), *Zenob Glak's* History of Taron (1719), and *Pavstos Buzand's* History of the Armenians (1730) were published.

Generally speaking, the characteristic feature of the "rediscovery" of the Armenian past was the initiative to break away from superstitious and mythological interpretations, to free oneself from false consciousness – an initiative that presupposed original selectivity with regard to collective memory. That is, events that did not generate positive emotions or feelings among the people were purged from collective memory, while those that opened new horizons were activated. Despite all this, it must be noted that neither the Mekhitarists' nor the Constantinople Armenians' cultural modernization constituted perspectives from which one's own present existence could be affirmed within European (and not only) presence. The fundamental issue was that the present exerted a shaping influence on representations of the past, producing a condition of estrangement from that past – an estrangement that could not be overcome through mere re-presentation alone, but required a dialogical engagement with temporality itself. At this particular juncture, however, neither the Vanandetsis, the Mkhitarists, nor the Constantinopolitans were able to provide such engagement, as their primary concerns remained focused on textual restoration and cultural preservation rather than substantive interaction with the evolving European discourses on statehood, natural rights, and historical progress that were reshaping the intellectual landscape of the era.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Madras had become a vibrant center of Armenian intellectual life in India. The community, composed primarily of merchants relocated following the decline of New Julfa,[1] benefited from its proximity to British colonial administration and educational institutions. This environment facilitated Indo-Armenian engagement with European Enlightenment ideas – an engagement that culminated in Shahamir Shahamirian's establishment of a printing press in 1772 and the subsequent publication of works reflecting Enlightenment political thought.[2] It was the representatives of the Madras Circle who sought to address this lacuna, among whom the contribution of *Joseph Emin* (1726-1809) was particularly significant. While the achievements of the earlier generation of Armenian intellectuals were crucial in ensuring cultural continuity, Emin represented a fundamentally different mode of engagement – one defined by the appropriation of European Enlightenment concepts and their deliberate adaptation to an Armenian emancipatory project. Armenian modernity originated within the context of colonial modernity, taking form through the structures of British colonial administration, bureaucratic rationality, and commercial regulation in India, which provided both the institutional framework and the conceptual apparatus for Emin's reformist thought. In this regard, Emin was the last significant figure to "mobilize both Armenians and Europeans for the liberation of Armenia" (Panossian, 2002, p. 115) and to pursue the modernization of the Armenia he sought to liberate.

The Eminian Experience of the "Rediscovery" of History

> "You, Christians, what is the reason of your objecting, if any of your countrymen should take a fancy to be a warrior? And why are you not free? Why have you not a sovereign of your own?" The answer they made was, "Sir, our liberty is in the next world; our king is Jesus Christ. " Emin said, "How came that about? Who told you so?" They answered "The Holy Fathers of the Church, who say, the Armenian nation has been subject to the Mahometans from the creation of the world, and must remain so till the day of resurrection; otherwise, we could soon drive the Othmans out of our country. " [...] He then said, "You must have heard of the Christians of Frankestan, who, if they had listened to their priests, and had understood the Gospel in the manner in which our holy fathers have explained it to us, (which may God avert!) they would have been as great slaves to the Mahometans as we are now. The meaning of shouldering the cross, is the ensign which the brave soldiers carry against the Infidels, to fight and die under it; those being the true Christians, who can inherit the kingdom of God; and not they that lead a lazy cowardly life, like us, who are become cattle, devoured by wolves."
>
> Joseph Emin, *The Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin* (Emin, 1792, pp. 141-142).

If an Armenian of the mid-eighteenth century had been asked about his history, he would probably have begun his history with the Creation, described the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, recounted the stories of the Flood and the Dispersion, and brought his history up to the birth and death of Christ. He would then narrate the tribulations of the “sinful people” under Muslim rule – sufferings believed to persist until the Day of Resurrection. Joseph (Hovsep) Emin similarly observes this in his memoirs when he first traveled to Western (Ottoman) Armenia and sought to assess the situation on the ground. Such a perception of past and present, combined with expectations of the future, reflected a limited framework for understanding historical events and contemporary realities. The Armenian people's faith in such a historical "fate," coupled with religiosity, undermined traditional values and moral imagination, which could not fail to trouble Joseph Emin. The question arose: why had this come about, why had the Armenian people reached such a degraded state? Of course, the situation was first and foremost a result of ignorance.

Thus, in the early eighteenth century, as the prominent Armenian colony of New Julfa declined amid political instability in Safavid Persia, most Persian Armenians gradually migrated to India, reinforcing Armenian communities that had existed there since the 16th century. As a result of such a change in circumstances, the Armenian colonies of India (Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, and others) experienced an upsurge in the second half of the eighteenth century. This coincided with the final establishment of the British in India, which resulted in the activation of Armenian contacts with England, and Indo-Armenians gradually began to "engage with and participate in the social-cultural life of Western European countries" (Barkhudarian, 1989, p. 191). And thanks to connections with European countries, the influence of Enlightenment thinkers' ideas had revolutionary significance. It may be argued that, under the influence of these ideas, the concept of Armenia’s political liberation was revaluated, and that for the first time within Indo-Armenian diaspora communities there emerged an imperative to examine Armenianness in historical terms. This intellectual imperative arose from a profound identity crisis, stemming from prolonged separation from historical Armenia, progressive integration into British commercial and administrative networks, and the erosion of territorial and political continuity. Lacking institutional grounding and confronted with British organizational superiority, Indo-Armenians faced urgent existential questions: What constituted Armenian identity? Could it be sustained beyond religious affiliation? And could it endure in the absence of statehood? These were questions that young Joseph Emin encountered when he settled in the city of Calcutta, India (1744), where he first interacted with Europeans and became acquainted with their advanced technology, military art, and progressive culture (Hovhannisian, 1989, p. 14).

Here he first saw "the Europeans' fortress and the training of soldiers, their ships, and that they are ingenious and perfect in everything" (Emin, 1792, p. 58). On the one hand, the wretched condition of his compatriots, and on the other hand, the prosperous circumstances of the English involuntarily led Joseph Emin to the problem of understanding the causes of these two contrasting situations. Pursuing these and other questions from Enlightenment positions, he "rebelled against the historically formed heavy, unpromising existence of the Armenians" (Topchyan, 2017, p. 4). The manifestation of this rebellion was Emin's autobiography-memoir, *The Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin,* which, in Sebouh Aslanian's characterization, is in many respects about a son's rebellion against his "Asiatic" heritage (see Aslanian, 2012, p. 367). Joseph Emin and those of his contemporaries who had felt the profound "estrangement" from the Armenian past, a radical alienation, felt the need to address the history of the past meaningfully and to revaluate it in accordance with new realities. In short, a certain reorientation was necessary.

Emin's aspiration for a British education brought him to England "to learn Art Military and other Sciences," since he was unable to endure "eating and drinking without Liberty or Knowledge" (Emin, 1792, p. 59). "My Father taught me, like other Armenians only to write and read our own Language, & to get Psalms be heart, to sing them in the Church, but he did not shew me to handle Arms to fight for that Church, as my Uncle, who was killed at his Church Door, nor anything to kindle up my Heart to understand great Affairs," Emin notes in his autobiography (Emin, 1792, p. 86). His aim was to restore Armenian sovereignty (Emin, 1792, p. 446) according to "the admirable European system of wise laws and useful regulations" (Emin, 1792, p. 2). Here, with remarkable determination – barely surviving and earning his living through arduous labor – he managed to some extent to resolve the question of his education. He befriended *Edmund Burke* (1729-1797), *Lord Northumberland (later Earl, later Duke of Northumberland, 1714-1786),* and other noblemen. It was precisely here that he absorbed the ideas of the British Enlightenment. Particularly impressive was the Enlightenment thinkers' faith in the power of reason, according to which humanity could, in principle, overcome all "backward" forms of knowledge on the path to social happiness – a conviction that lies at the foundation of Emin's autobiography: "Thus observing the excellence of true learning, and the horrid misery of ignorance, Emin resolved to put his honest design into execution, of giving an account of his insignificant life" (Emin, 1792, p. xxix). Emin sought education and military training in England, and his lifelong mission became to "give liberty, knowledge and civil arts to his country" (Emin, 1792, p. 85), "to tear off that obscure curtain from before their eyes," and "to rouse them from their innocent slumbers" (Emin, 1792, p. 198). In general, Emin's worldview was formed in harmony with the European

thought of his era, particularly under the influence of English ideas, especially those of Edmund Burke.

Thus, the idea of Emin's secret mission – to raise a rebellion against Ottoman and Persian rule – was gradually being placed on firm ground. According to this plan, he attempted to answer three pivotal questions: *"1. In what manner can be a country maintained, and depended against a warlike nation. 2. How is to raise money of such country which is totally rained nor has any sort of Revenue. 3. What method he is to take with the people of such Country to reason with and bring them to Industry who are as obstinate as Bares?"* (Emin, 1792, p. 178). These were questions in whose resolution the Irish-born political figure and philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797) made a significant contribution[3]. Burke was greatly impressed by the young Armenian's ardent pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment, for which he had left his paternal home and departed for a distant, unfamiliar country. Burke, with great enthusiasm and willingness, began to guide Joseph Emin in the matter of self-education – not only by advising him to read certain books (Emin, 1792, p. 51), but even by supplying geographical maps (Emin, 1792, p. 394). In another passage of his autobiography, Emin also mentions books "on the Art Military" (Emin, 1792, p. 239).

Soon Emin had the opportunity to become acquainted with his new friend's works as well. Burke was at that time working on his first two publications, which were published in the following years, 1756 and 1757. Burke commissioned Emin to copy them (Emin, 1792, p. 53). These were *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) and *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). According to Emin's testimony, Burke also commissioned him to copy the work of the English political philosopher, statesman, and writer Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1752) (Emin, 1792, p. 53). The seemingly peculiar task of copying actually pursued a specific purpose. The point is that Burke believed that "it is by imitation far more than by precept that we learn everything; and what we learn thus we acquire not only more effectually, but more pleasantly. This forms our manners, our opinions, our lives" (Burke, 1999, p. 45). Moreover, "imitation is one of the great instruments used by providence in bringing our nature towards its perfection" (Burke, 1999, p. 46). At the same time, however, Burke noted that if "men gave themselves up to imitation entirely, and each followed the other, and so on in an eternal circle," they would "remain as brutes do, the same at the end that they are at this day, and that they were in the beginning of the world. To prevent this, God has planted in man a sense of ambition" (Burke, 1999, p. 46), which ensures progress. It was through these transcriptions and readings that Joseph Emin's worldview gradually took shape, profoundly influenced by Burkean theory and best understood within Burke's conceptual framework. Emin's appropriation of Burke's ideas, however,

was neither passive nor literal. Whereas Burke developed his theory of imitation within a British society characterized by stable state structures and established cultural institutions, Emin reconceptualized it as a mechanism of national revival, through which Armenians, by emulating European military and political models, might recover capacities suppressed by centuries of subjugation. This selective reinterpretation is characteristic of Emin's broader intellectual method.

Like any complete system, the 18th-century structure had to satisfy certain fundamental intellectual needs: first, a rational explanation of the human past to replace Genesis; second, a theory and tactics of social transformation; and third, a vision of humanity's future on earth, not in heaven. These were questions that inevitably related to history, which during the Age of Enlightenment was still in its formative stage, and people at that time "naturally [saw] the past with the eyes of the present, without realizing the need for mental adjustments and transpositions" (Butterfield, 1944, p. 33), starting with the simplest of them, the anachronism.

Individuality, freedom of its development, and the description of the human spirit in history now became the chief concern of the new generation. From this arose the Enlightenment attitude toward history. Thus, it was no accident that the eighteenth century brought to life the image of the past, proposed a program of action for the present, and dreamed of future happiness (Manuel, 1965, p. 4). And if until then history had been an art, a discipline, and an amusement (Gay, 1995, p. 369), then the Age of Enlightenment can be called the age of consuming interest in history, especially when history was harnessed to the concept of social progress. Moreover, in the teachings of Enlightenment thinkers (John Locke, Bolingbroke, and others), social progress was closely connected not only with the development of scientific knowledge but also with the spiritual and moral perfection of humanity, the advancement of morality and law, the development of civil society, the flowering of education, the upbringing of people in the spirit of respect for state laws, and the principles of justice, humanitarianism, moderation, and industry.

Thus, for the Enlightenment thinkers, history became extremely important as a means of education (even re-education) for improving human activity and progress. The importance of the connection between education and history did not escape Joseph Emin's notice either: following the example of the European Enlightenment's "reviving" interest in classical antiquity, Joseph Emin attached pivotal significance to the revival of ancient Armenian history, which could break the existing view of history in order to dispel "the obscurity of ignorance" (Emin, 1792, p. 366), so that the Armenian people would be "thus enabled to see and to distinguish good from evil" (Emin, 1792, p. xxix). The influence of Bolingbroke is also discernible here, though transformed

critically. Bolingbroke argued that “an early and proper application to the study of history will contribute extremely to keep our minds free from a ridiculous partiality in favor of our own country, and a vicious prejudice against others” (Bolingbroke, 1967, p. 183). Writing within a context of stable statehood and a well-formed national consciousness, Bolingbroke identified the danger as uncritical nationalist prejudice, which distorted historical understanding. Emin, however, faced the opposite problem: a people whose distorted historical consciousness – rooted in the “sinful nation” paradigm and ecclesiastical fatalism – had produced not excessive national pride but collective self-abnegation. In this inverted context, Emin’s appropriation of Bolingbroke’s historical pedagogy served a contrary purpose: not to temper national partiality, but to cultivate a rational national consciousness where none existed. The goal was not blind attachment to the Armenian past, but informed attachment grounded in accurate historical knowledge – the very approach Bolingbroke advocated. While Bolingbroke sought to temper excessive nationalism through historical education, Emin employed analogous methods to awaken a people from historical amnesia and fatalistic resignation.

What is particularly noteworthy is that Emin's "English program" did not envisage purely military intervention: an important component of his plan was education – "European knowledge" – as a remedy for restoring Armenian autonomy: "it is not so much by strength of arms that these nations are called conquerors, as by wisdom and art. [...] everything is by art and wisdom, for without wisdom a nation is not a nation; and those who compose it are blind and unhappy" (Emin, 1792, p. 110). Moreover, "The table of learning is laid open to every man and every nation, to enjoy and to eat without charge; very different from the ancient Chaldeans, Persians, Greeks, or Romans, whose barbarous jealousy kept learning as a mystery, and deprived the people in general of improvement" (Emin, 1792, p. xxix).

Emin presents his educational program more clearly during his next meeting with King Heraclius II of Georgia (1763):

> "It is impossible for any man, who has been brought up in a wild way, without education or experience of the world, to give just hopes of anything good. The only method will be, to set up two or three common schools, and make their children go to learn the principles of religion, from seven to sixteen, that their faith may be well grounded: when that is done, frame them into companies, to be taught the use of arms, like the Europeans, from sixteen years of age to twenty. Let that be the work of the morning, and about three in the afternoon let heroic lectures be read to them, about three quarters of an hour; short and sweet: then let them go to play. [...] The difficulty is in the beginning [...]. In the meantime, the wisdom that has deserted this fine country

> will come back of itself, and make it flourishing, thus enlightened, as it has all the kingdoms of Europe" (Emin, 1792, pp. 207-208).

What is noteworthy here is that in his educational program, Emin emphasizes the religious and military components, which would become the foundation for the creation of the Armenian-Georgian state of which Emin dreamed ("delivering the Armenians, and forming a respectable alliance with Georgia" – Emin, 1792, p. 211) (Telunts, 1995, p. 32). Religious and military – both of which must be grounded in knowledge, since "what is not built on knowledge, though it is very strong and lofty, is as if it were built upon sand" (Emin, 1792, p. 113). It is precisely in this context that obstacles also emerge: on the one hand, the obstacle of Mohammedan rule; on the other hand, the religious obstacle: "the first take their lives away, the others keep their souls in bondage, resembling exactly the two archangels in the Koran of Mahomed, named Azrael and Asrafil" (Emin, 1792, p. xxx). The point is that the inherited universal history, providential, moral, or dogmatic explanations had already been exhausted and hindered further development. Only through receiving "the bright dawn of true knowledge in their gloomy minds" would it be possible, "after their inexpressible sufferings, to subdue the enemies of religion and liberty" and "to flourish in all kinds of learning, military or civil," to "become virtuous in all respects; to be named free and true Christians" (Emin, 1792, p. xxx). Only after this would the Armenians be saved from "being tossed up and down like a football, and kicked about" (Emin, 1792, p. xxxii).

According to Emin, it is not courage that the Armenians lack. Finding themselves in slavery and ignorance, they have become alienated from themselves and have remained disconnected from liberty, and although some "black Armenians in the Mountains were free, and handled Arms from their Childhood," both they and the Armenians "subject to the Turks and Persians [...] only [fought] with a wild and natural fierceness, and so they have no order and do nothing but like Robbers" (Emin, 1792, p. 59). If only one were permitted to "let them break the chain of superstition and ignorance," it would become clear "how bravely they will attack the enemies of Christ!" (Emin, 1792, p. 287). But such people are "disorderly and ignorant; no good can be expected from them, but only confusion and mischief" (Emin, 1792, p. 207). The point is that "their minds are entirely destitute of all the principles of virtue" (Emin, 1792, p. xxvii). Whereas "Bravery cannot be without Virtue; for as the Son proceedeth from the Father, so Bravery does from Virtue" (Emin, 1792, p. 102), and "more virtue may be found among civilized free men, than among those who only eat, drink, and sleep, in profound ignorance" (Emin, 1792, p. 366).

On the other hand, the Armenians are "an industrious, brave, honest people, and will soon become formidable, provided they can receive the light of understanding" (Emin, 1792, p. 189), but many of them endure hunger, thirst,

long journeys, and all hardships "only for money" (Emin, 1792, p. 91). In other words, "The poor Armenians, good and bad, work and labour, to leave money for others to enjoy; which can be imputed to nothing but mere ignorance" (Emin, 1792, p. 277). Thus their sufferings are in vain and meaningless, since on the one hand "they have not Sowrd in their own Hands; so they labour in vain" (Emin, 1792, p. 68). Added to this is the complex of being a "Sheeplike-Shepherdless Armenian Nation" (Emin, 1792, p. 103). In the absence of education, "wherever learning is hated, and shut up in the dark dungeon of cruel ignorance," a "set of artful people of the same nation, most piously working on their innocent soft minds, have brought them down so low as to be despised by everybody" (Emin, 1792, p. 426).

In short, the loss of ancestral virtues and the acquisition of servile obedience are the result of ignorance and prejudice. These are viewed in Burke's conception as violations of the fundamental principle of civilization – institutions and liberties (Ktchanyan, 2017, p. 152). And so Emin fought against superstition and ignorance masquerading under the name of religion, and against ecclesiastical (clerical) despotism masquerading under the name of church governance, from which all misfortunes stem, since "great is the principle of religion! powerfully affecting the human mind in general; dividing kingdoms, setting brothers against brothers, ready to cut each others throats, and turning their hearts to inveterate enmity from social friendship" (Emin, 1792, p. 381). It should be noted that while severely criticizing the superstitious, egotistical, cunning, and dishonorable actions of Armenian clergy, he simultaneously, albeit abstractly, honors the Christian virtues of both himself and Armenians in general (honesty, truthfulness, and so on) (Panossian, 2006, p. 117).

Apart from the clergy, dangerous obstacles to the rational development of society also include Armenian merchants and "malicious nobles," who, according to Emin, "If [...] had half the attachment to liberty that they have to money and to superstitions, which are ruinous in many respects, they would have been made free long ago" (Emin, 1792, pp. 197-198), and "If they would bestow a quarter of the money upon their own children, to give them a proper education, and enable them to distinguish a rational being from a brute animal, so as to multiply the number of good plants and pluck up the weeds, they will become a free nation" (Emin, 1792, p. 157). The point is that "They actually do not know what liberty is; could they once but taste the sweetness of it, and drive old women's stories out of their good hearts, they would certainly be a great nation" (Emin, 1792, p. 198). Here Emin develops a conception of the necessity and purpose of the state, which in many respects draws on Burke’s framework, according to which the state is one of the contrivances of human wisdom – created both to provide for human needs and to confer the right to life under the rule of law. Importantly, Burke’s reflections on the state were formulated in the context of defending existing British institutions against

radical reform, whereas Emin applied similar principles to justify the creation of entirely new political structures for a stateless people. This adaptation placed Burkean conservatism in the service of revolutionary national aspiration. Accordingly, the existence of "man's true rights" presupposes well-understood liberty (Hovhannisian, 1989, p. 22). Also noteworthy here is that Emin attempts to harness authority and liberty together, just as Burke did, one of whose main aims in political rhetoric was the effort to subject liberty and authority to mutual accountability (Bourke, 2000, p. 454).

If Emin was initially convinced that an insurrection could restore Armenian independence within a short period, his travels throughout Armenia ultimately led him to realize that rebellion was impossible without first overcoming ignorance. The only sensible solution was liberation from ignorance, which was equivalent to liberation from Asiaticism, which in turn meant the greatest desire to become European. And all this through rational self-government or "prudent management" (Emin, 1792, p. 307), since an enlightened society is a coexistence of people based on reason, the absence of which is precisely the result of ignorance (It should be noted here that Burke's influence on Emin is again evident, as Burke in the 1750s had not yet rejected or criticized the rationalist worldview; see Hovhannisian, 1989, p. 22). If until then Christianity had been depicted as "chains […] on his neck and iron cuffs on his wrist" (Emin, 1792, p. 409), this was because ecclesiastical structures had distorted it through the doctrine of fatalistic submission – the "sinful people" paradigm that justified passivity as piety. Emin's critique targeted this institutional corruption, not Christianity itself. Through rational reinterpretation, Christianity could be rendered "natural" and liberating, aligned with reason, promoting active virtue over passive endurance, and consistent with natural law. And any social system based on oppression and violence is unnatural, and "Any law or custom against nature, must ruin cities, depopulate kingdoms, and leave nothing behind but a desert, as wild as if it had never been inhabited by men" (Emin, 1792, p. 396). Whereas the clergy liberated from unnaturalness can do much more "than naming a person prince, - he could make a king of him, or of any man he pleased, provided the party concerned had sufficient talents to deserve it" (Emin, 1792, p. 220).

There was a growing sense that the past could serve as a vehicle for instilling dignified sentiments and ideas. This mentality gave rise to the process of emancipating history from religion and theology, from reliance on miracles, from mythological frameworks of interpreting the past and present, and from eschatological expectations. The moral function of history was gradually being emphasized. For Joseph Emin, however, history and the will of God coincided, since "Nothing in this world can be done without God; nor a single hair fall from our heads without his decrees" (Emin, 1792, p. 206). Thus, Emin emphasized reason similarly within religion and theology. Accordingly, for

Emin, history and religion do not negate each other but complement one another and jointly define the "new" reality. It must be emphasized that Emin did not fully resolve – and perhaps could not have resolved – the tension between Enlightenment rationalism and providential theology. His assertion that "nothing in this world can be accomplished without God" appears, at first glance, to reproduce the theological determinism that had long underpinned interpretations of Armenian subjugation as divine punishment. If all events ultimately derive from divine will, how does Emin's position differ from the providential historiography he sought to overcome?

This unresolved tension is historically significant. Emin stands as a transitional figure at the threshold between religious and secular modes of apprehending history. His intellectual project was not to abolish theological categories but to reorient them – to relocate the center of divine providence from passive acceptance of suffering toward the active pursuit of liberation. Whereas earlier Armenian thought interpreted subjugation as punishment requiring penitential endurance, Emin reinterpreted divine will as a mandate for human agency, education, and rational self-governance. Divine providence, as Emin reconceived it, operates not through miraculous intervention but through the cultivation of reason and virtue in individuals and nations.

In this sense, Emin's theoretical framework reflects a "providential Enlightenment," in which divine will and human reason collaborate in historical progress. This synthesis, though theoretically unstable, performed an important rhetorical function: it allowed Emin to mobilize religious authority while advancing the secularizing principles of education, rational governance, and natural rights. Emin’s incomplete secularizing project renders him a distinctive figure of his era: neither fully traditional nor fully modern, but emblematic of the intellectual dilemmas characteristic of Enlightenment thought across contexts. Similar tensions were also evident in Burke, who sought to reconcile preservation of tradition with the necessity of transformation.

That Emin did not achieve full theoretical coherence should not be read as intellectual failure, but as testimony to the difficulty of transposing Enlightenment categories to a radically different historical context. His achievement lay not in resolving all contradictions but in effecting a conceptual reorientation – viewing Armenian suffering not as divine punishment but as the consequence of ignorance, clerical manipulation, and the absence of rational education. This displacement, though incomplete, opened pathways for subsequent thinkers to develop more fully secularized conceptions of national liberation.

At a deeper level, Emin's conception presupposed replacing the loss of trust in traditional religious-mythological representations with new representations and trust in these representations – constructing a system that was completed by God. Like Edmund Burke, Emin also emphasized in a complex and

multilayered social environment both "human-to-human" relationships and the "human-to-God" relationship.

Until this period, the instrumentalization of history for religious purposes had been predominant, becoming one of the central concerns of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers. Here, the divergence among the English, German, and French Enlightenment traditions becomes most apparent: some currents, particularly the French, attacked institutionalized forms of religious worship; others, especially the English, sought to defend them; while still others, most notably the Germans, aimed to reinterpret religion in light of a transformed religious consciousness.

Over time, however, leading religious thinkers underwent significant shifts. They increasingly abandoned attempts to use history to prove specific Christian doctrines, instead seeking to reinterpret Christianity – and religion more broadly – through historical analysis. Joseph Butler's *The Analogy of Religion* (1736) is characteristic in this respect, defending Christianity not through scholastic theology but through the examination of historical and natural evidence. Such approaches were grounded in pragmatic history, understood as deriving practical lessons from past experience to guide present social and political concerns. Applied to religion, this approach was believed to foster a deeper understanding of social relations (for a more detailed discussion, see Barnett, 2003; Trevor-Roper, 2010; Pocock, 1999; Levitin, 2012).

In Joseph Emin's case, the appeal to the past had exclusively the purpose of making Armenians participants in the Armenian past. More precisely, history was viewed as an expansion of experience, as a means of broadening one's own vision and thereby preparing the way for an improved, rational future. By showing the nation's face in the mirror of the past, it would be possible to educate the rational being, who "ought even to be cautious not to be domineered over by his own fellow-christians; since God has created them all free alike, to be ruled or governed by good laws, with the same justice to the rich or to the poor [...] every man is honourable, otherwise he is no better than a beast" (Emin, 1792, pp. 141-142). With this approach, it would be possible not only to overcome superstition regarding the past and present but also to demythologize conceptions about the future. Thus the "rediscovery" of Armenian history became possible. This presupposed a break from stereotypes of the past and conceptions about the past rather than a simple representation of the past; thus, the past, being reinterpreted, was presented in a new light. The necessity of this was also conditioned by the fact that "if a nation be once subdued, their minds of course will be" (Emin, 1792, p. 192). Highly characteristic is the 1759 meeting with Armenian compatriots in a village in Western (Ottoman) Armenia called Jinis, where to his pressing question – "You,

Christians, what is the reason of your objecting, if any of your countrymen should take a fancy to be a warrior? And why are you not free? Why have you not a sovereign of your own?" – he receives the following answer: "Sir, our liberty is in the next world; our king is Jesus Christ." And to the question of how they know this, they answer: from the holy fathers of the Church, "who say, the Armenian nation has been subject to the Mahometans from the creation of the world, and must remain so till the day of resurrection" (Emin, 1792, pp. 141-142). We can view this meeting as an object lesson against the distortion with which Armenian clergy have presented the texts and subtexts they have studied. To refute the false interpretation of Holy Scripture by Armenian clergy, during his meetings with the people Emin read passages from "the Geographical History of Moses Khorinesis," showed "the genealogy of the kings of the Armenians," and quoted from Holy Scripture, offering an interpretation to counterbalance what the Armenian clergy preached (Emin, 1792, pp. 141-142). And all this for the purpose of sowing "the seed of true religion" and planting "the wonderful martial spirit everywhere."

Concern about what happens to the mind of a subjugated nation lies at the foundation of Joseph Emin's educational vision, which became more defined when in 1759 he traveled to Western (Ottoman) Armenia and attempted to familiarize himself with the situation on the ground. If previously Emin had thought that it was sufficient merely to make the people participants in their own past – with the sense of future time being regulated by the sense of past time – and the rebellion would be ready, the question of liberation solved, then as a result of his wanderings he understood that only continuous educational improvement would lead to the gradual reconstruction of the state and the formation of a mentality of freedom. It should be noted that it was highly symbolic that when traveling to Western (Ottoman) Armenia, Emin carried with him "the instruments of guidance, the fruits of European wisdom, in his pocket, the compass and the map" – "a pair of pocket compasses, and a map of Asia made at Paris" (Emin, 1792, pp. 139-140), as well as "the Geographical History of Moses Khorinesis" (Emin, 1792, p. 142).[4] And throughout that journey he "sowed the corn grain of true religion and planted the admirable zeal of military spirit everywhere he travelled" (Emin, 1792, p. 145). In essence, Joseph Emin's new educational vision in some way approached the cultural vision of the Mekhitarists and presupposed a program of small steps implemented silently, which, nevertheless, was ignored by subsequent figures of the liberation movement.

Conclusion

Joseph Emin's European experience – particularly his education in Britain and engagement with Enlightenment political thought – precipitated a fundamental

revaluation of Armenian historical consciousness. Prior to this shift, Armenian collective memory had been mediated predominantly through ecclesiastical frameworks that interpreted subjugation as divine punishment for the "sins of the nation." Emin was among the first to reconceptualize this relationship with the past, foregrounding texts, events, and processes that existed within Armenian collective memory while reorganizing them according to new intellectual frameworks shaped by natural rights theory, rational governance, and Enlightenment historiography.

Emin's project went beyond merely restoring historical memory; it aimed to create a qualitatively new mode of remembrance, one that apprehended the Armenian condition through the prism of political interests rather than moral-theological imperatives. By reinterpreting Armenian subjugation as the consequence of foreign oppression and injustice rather than divine punishment, Emin initiated the conceptual dissociation of ecclesiastical authority from national identity. This reorientation carried profound implications, challenging the legitimacy of conservative clerical structures whose authority partially derived from accommodation with Ottoman or Persian rule, and who consequently opposed emancipatory endeavors threatening their institutional position.

Through this transformation, the Armenian past was effectively "rediscovered" – not as an object of nostalgic veneration but as a source of political claims and rational arguments for self-governance. Emin's achievement lay in his capacity to adapt Enlightenment concepts, developed within sovereign European states, to the circumstances of a stateless, diasporic people. While this appropriation did not yield immediate political outcomes, it opened an intellectual space for understanding Armenian identity in political rather than exclusively theological terms. Emin inaugurated a mode of historical consciousness that would play a foundational role for subsequent generations of Armenian intellectuals confronting questions of identity, autonomy, and political possibility in the era of nation-states.

Notes

[1] New Julfa (Nor Jugha), an Armenian merchant suburb of Isfahan established by Shah Abbas I in 1605, served as the principal hub of Armenian commercial and cultural activity in Safavid Persia throughout the seventeenth century. The community experienced gradual decline following the Afghan invasion of 1722 and the subsequent collapse of the Safavid Empire, leading to widespread Armenian emigration to India, Europe, and elsewhere.

[2] A detailed analysis of the institutional structure of the Madras Armenian community, of Shahamirian's publishing activities, and of the intellectual networks

among Indo-Armenian thinkers will be presented in a separate study by the present author.

[3] It is important to note that Emin's encounter with Burke took place during the early phase of Burke's intellectual career, in the mid-1750s, prior to the formulation of the mature conservative political philosophy articulated in works such as *Reflections on the Revolution in France (*1790). At this juncture, the Burke known to Emin was still engaged with notions of natural right and transformation, as evidenced in *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) – ideas that Emin could more readily adapt to the project of Armenian national revival.

[4] The reference is most probably to Movses Khorenatsi's books printed in Venice in 1752. See Movses Khorenatsi, *Ethnography of the Line of Japheth* (Venice: Antonio Bortoli Press, 1752); Movses Khorenatsi, *A Brief History of Geography* (Venice: Antonio Bortoli Press, 1752).

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

Historia: philosophy & theory, 2025, Vol. 1, pp. 103-122
doi: 10.46991/hpt.2025.1.08

HISTORY AS GATEKEEPER: THE ROLE OF STATE-SPONSORED HISTORY IN CIVIC INTEGRATION IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This article analyzes how civic integration programs in Flanders (Belgium) and The Netherlands have evolved into sites of state-sponsored historical production. Since the turn of the century, both countries developed civic integration trajectories, based on the premise that the integration of immigrants requires mutual effort. Today, almost all non-EU+ migrants in the Low Countries are required to follow these trajectories, which combine language training with courses or tests on societal knowledge. Drawing on policy documents, teaching materials used in civic integration courses, and participatory observation, this article identifies three discernable trends over the past 25 years. First, the scope of mandatory integration has expanded significantly, encompassing an ever-larger population. Second, these trajectories have grown increasingly compulsory and coercive. Third, there is a culturalization of citizenship, particularly evident in the growing emphasis on history. By analyzing the treatment of colonial history within these courses, the article demonstrates how civic integration courses constitute a distinct site of state-sponsored historical production. Unlike the often-implicit influence of states on historical narratives, here it is overt and deliberate. Through selective storytelling, the host society constructs a moralized self-image vis-à-vis the newcomer, reinforcing a "we-they" dichotomy. History thus functions as a community-building tool, though not necessarily to integrate newcomers into that community.

Keywords: Civic integration, state-sponsored history, coloniality, othering.

Received: 09.09.2025
Revised: 01.12.2025
Accepted: 15.12.2025

Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, both Belgium and the Netherlands have become attractive destinations for immigrants. Labor

migration was actively encouraged by the respective governments for an extended period, and many of these labor migrants were later joined by their families.[1] In addition, the number of refugees arriving in both countries steadily increased (Creve et al., 2021, p. 225). Although immigration was initially promoted, there was no official reception or integration policy in place for these migrants. The governments mistakenly assumed that migrants would eventually return to their countries of origin. The limited policies that did exist focused primarily on encouraging and facilitating the preservation of migrants' cultural heritage, based on the belief that this would support their eventual return (Creve et al., 2021, p. 225).

It was only around the turn of the century that policymakers in the Low Countries began to realize that a significant portion of the migrant population would settle permanently. In Belgium, integration policy became a regional competence following the state reform of 1980. However, in the early years, Flanders – one of the three communities in Belgium – allocated very limited funding to this domain (*Geschiedenis van de Vlaamse overheid,* 2024).[2] In the Netherlands, the first civic integration law was introduced in 1998, becoming a pioneer in Europe as the first country to implement such a policy (Wet inburgering nieuwkomers, 1998). Flanders followed five years later, in 2003 (Decreet van 28/02/2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, 2003). In this article, I analyze the civic integration policies of the Low Countries and investigate how they employ the teaching of history as a tool in the civic integration process.

Civic integration policies are based on the premise that the integration of immigrants requires mutual effort: the host society must provide a structured program that 'newcomers' are expected to follow, thereby facilitating their integration (Decreet van 28/02/2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, 2003).[3] The goal is, in their words, enabling newcomers to "adapt to their new social environment" and achieve "full participation" in society (Decreet van 28/02/2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, 2003). These trajectories typically include language classes and a civic integration course or test that imparts knowledge and skills about the host society. In both Flanders and The Netherlands, almost all non-EU+ newcomers are required to follow a civic integration trajectory (Baele, 2024).[4]

This article examines three discernible trends in civic integration programs in the Low Countries. First, it demonstrates that over the past 25 years, the population subject to mandatory civic integration trajectories has expanded significantly. Second, it argues that these trajectories have become increasingly compulsory and coercive in nature. Third, it identifies a growing culturalization of citizenship within civic integration programs, particularly evident in the prominent role assigned to history. Both the Flemish and Dutch governments

have progressively emphasized the historical dimension of the knowledge imparted in these programs. Moreover, this 'history' is being defined with increasing precision, as authorities explicitly determine which historical narratives are to be taught. As such, citizenship no longer concerns formal, practical matters, but increasingly revolves around values and norms, tradition, and history (Duyvendak et al., 2016, p. 3).

Civic integration trajectories thus constitute a distinct site of state-sponsored historical production. While state influence over historical narratives is often indirect or implicit, in this context it is overt and deliberate (Bevernage & Wouters, 2018, p. 5). By selecting specific historical accounts, the state assigns particular moral valences to the past. The integration course thereby becomes a unique, almost tangible space in which the host society narrates its historical self-image to the 'Other.' This process not only reveals what political authorities in the Low Countries wish to communicate to newcomers, but also how these societies choose to represent themselves – and the narrative foundations upon which that representation rests (Grever & Ribbens, 2007, p. 13-14).

As this article contends, such practices reinforce a 'we-they' dichotomy, positioning the host society as morally superior. History is thus employed as a community-building tool, though not necessarily with the aim of integrating newcomers into that community. This dynamic is illustrated through an analysis of the historical narratives surrounding the colonial past in both Belgium and the Netherlands.

Expansion of the Target Group

Over the past 25 years, the target group of civic integration courses has steadily expanded. Initially, civic integration was mandatory for all non-European adults. But the years directly after the implementation of the Civic Integration Law in The Netherlands (1998), they developed policy that was extended beyond 'newcomers' to also encourage 'long-term residents' – which are individuals who had already been living in the Netherlands for some time – to participate in the integration trajectory (Inburgering; Brief minister met de tweede voortgangsrapportage in het kader van het Groot Project Inburgering oudkomers, 2002). In 2006, The Netherlands lowered the minimum age to 16 (Wet inburgering nieuwkomers, 2006).

That same year, the Civic Integration Abroad Act came into force. From then on, individuals seeking to enter the Netherlands for purposes of family reunification or to work as religious clerk were required to pass a Basic Civic Integration Examination in their country of origin (Bonjour, 2010, p. 299). This exam tests reading and speaking skills, as well as knowledge of Dutch society (Wet inburgering in het buitenland; Brief minister onder meer over de evaluatie

van de Wet inburgering in het buitenland, 2006). It is mandatory for all non-European nationals, with exceptions for citizens of Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States (van Helden et al., 2011). These exceptions are made based upon the assumption that these countries are "western" – an assumption that is contrary to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, as ruled by the Dutch court in 2024 *Rechtbank Den Haag, NL23.15395,* 2024).

In Flanders, the target group remained more stable for a longer period. While long-term residents are also welcome to participate in the course, there has been no explicit policy focus on this group. However, concrete plans have recently emerged. Flanders now as well intends to introduce a Civic Integration Abroad program for individuals entering through family reunification, as well as for refugees in resettlement programs. These individuals would be required to complete a course and pass a test – administered by external partners – while still in their country of origin or before being allowed to enter Belgium (*Request for clarification on the evaluation of the pilot projects for integration from abroad and the planned cooperation with Morocco,* 2025). With these plans, Flanders will become only the second (after The Netherlands) government to require exams abroad. Cyprus, Austria, and Germany do require proof of language proficiency, but no other country expects knowledge of the host society (*EMN Nederland – Europees Migratienetwerk Nederland,* 2024).

Moreover, the responsible minister, Hilde Crevits, has explicitly expressed her desire to make at least the language component of the integration course mandatory for European newcomers as well. Although this likely conflicts with EU regulations on the free movement of persons, she has already initiated discussions at the European level (*Request for clarification on the evaluation of the pilot projects for integration from abroad and the planned cooperation with Morocco,* 2025).

In summary, the target group for civic integration in both Flanders and the Netherlands has expanded beyond national borders, the temporal definition of 'newcomer' has been stretched, and in Flanders, even one of the cornerstones of the European Union – the free movement of persons – is being called into question. Of all European countries, Flanders and the Netherlands expect the largest group of newcomers to follow an integration program.

Increasingly Coercive Nature of Civic Integration Policies

A second observation is that civic integration policies in the Low Countries have taken on an increasingly coercive character. Initially, newcomers in the Netherlands were required to attend Dutch language classes and courses on knowledge of Dutch society, and to take exams on both components.

However, these exams were not binding at first. This changed in 2007, when passing the exam became mandatory and subject to a fee of €250. In 2013, the courses were privatized and no longer mandatory (Groenendijk et al., 2021, p. 2723). This meant that newcomers who wished to learn Dutch and acquire Knowledge of Dutch Society in a classroom setting had to independently find a school on the private market and pay a substantial fee for it (approximately 700 euros) (Wet inburgering, 2013).

The Civic Integration Abroad Act introduced an additional mandatory requirement for newcomers wishing to enter the Netherlands – an obstacle that even was condemned by a court in Den Bosch for violating the European Family Re-unification Directive (*Wet Inburgering Buitenland in strijd met Europese Gezinsherenigingsrichtlijn,* 2012). Those who failed to complete the integration trajectory on time faced financial penalties (Wet inburgering in het buitenland; Brief minister onder meer over de evaluatie van de Wet inburgering in het buitenland, 2006).

Flanders, by contrast, long adhered to a model based solely on free courses. Since 2015, three agencies are responsible for delivering these courses (one in Antwerp, one in Ghent, and one responsible for the rest of Flanders). Next to Social Orientation courses, they also offer Dutch classes and provide support in the mandatory work- and participation trajectories. At first, all these courses were taught physically, but since Covid pandemic, about ±60% of the courses are online. About 10% follows a self-study track, working independently after an initial contact session. The assigned case manager determines which trajectory is most suitable for each newcomer (Baele, 2024)[5].

Newcomers were not required to take an exam; mere attendance in the language and social orientation courses sufficed (Baele, 2024, p. 10). In 2022, however, Flanders followed the Dutch example by introducing a mandatory final exam at the end of the courses. Participants must now score at least 70% to obtain their integration certificate. The course and exams together cost €360, and – as in the Netherlands – non-compliance with integration obligations is subject to fines (Baele, 2024, p. 24).[6] As mentioned earlier, a pre-arrival exam abroad will soon be added to the Flemish system as well.

This tightening of civic integration policy can be understood in the context of a growing influence of far-right political parties in both Flanders and the Netherlands. In Flanders, Vlaams Belang ('Flemish interest') is a far-right party that makes migration its main issue. After gaining momentum in the 1990s, the party experienced a decline in electoral support. However, this trend reversed – partly due to the so-called migration 'crisis' of 2015. Over the past decade, the party has tripled its vote share. In Flanders, a 'cordon sanitaire' prevents other parties from forming a coalition with Vlaams Belang, meaning the party must become politically unavoidable (*incontournable*) to enter govern-

ment. Fearing this scenario, mainstream political parties have significantly shifted their programs to the right, particularly on issues related to migration (Abts, 2024). In The Netherlands as well, politics has shifted noticeably to the right, particularly on the issue of migration. Parties like Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) and later Forum for Democracy (FvD) led by Thierry Baudet have significantly influenced political discourse by placing 'mass immigration' at the center of debate. The PVV's electoral victory in 2023, which made it the largest party in the House of Representatives, marked a turning point. In response to these electoral gains, mainstream parties have also hardened their positions, especially regarding migration. Analysts suggest that this rightward turn is driven not only by cultural anxieties and distrust in the political establishment, but also by strategic repositioning among traditional parties seeking to maintain their electoral relevance (De Waal, 2019).

This political shift to the right has not only resulted in stricter immigration policies, but also in an increasing emphasis on identity. Dutch and Flemish 'values' or 'culture' – and the need to protect them – have moved to the fore-front of political discourse, even becoming central themes in recent elections. As I will show in the next chapter, this shift is clearly reflected in the evolving content of civic integration programs, particularly in the course on Social Orientation.

Culturalization of citizenship

In addition to demonstrating proficiency in the Dutch language, newcomers are also required to prove their knowledge of the host society. Over the past years, a third trend has become increasingly apparent: this knowledge component has shifted more and more towards cultural aspects, values, and norms.

History, in particular, has come to play an increasingly explicit role in this process. In Flanders, the curriculum is structured around eleven learning environments, one of which – City and Country – is dedicated to history, traditions, customs, and practices. In the Netherlands, there are eight learning environments, including one specifically focused on History and Geography. Other domains include housing, healthcare, and education.

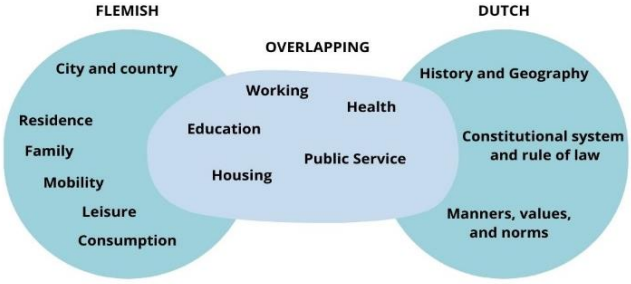

FIG I: Learning environments in Flanders and the Netherlands

In the earliest legislative frameworks in the Netherlands, history was mentioned as a topic to be addressed, but without further specification. As early as 2003, the Dutch House of Representatives called for a stronger emphasis on history in the integration course, and this was implemented in 2007. In the final attainment targets, it was stated that "By acquiring knowledge of Dutch history and geography, the civic integration participant is enabled to engage with the Netherlands and its society in a meaningful way" (Eindtermen KNS 2013, 2013, p. 6).

In 2013, the history component was expanded again: four general themes were identified and further explained: "delving into the history of the Netherlands", "dealing with sensitive relationships and events for the Netherlands", "using geographical knowledge of the Netherlands in daily life", and "Knowing the ideas accepted in the Netherlands (since the 1970s)". The first theme should cover knowledge of the Dutch Golden Age, including wealth, colonialism, shipping, waterworks, and migration in the 20th century, as well as awareness that the Wilhelmus is the national anthem of the Netherlands. The second theme should cover World War II and its effects on daily life in the Netherlands, and the role of the United Staes, Canada and Great Britain in the liberation of Western Europe in World War II (Eindtermen KNS 2013, 2013, p. 19). In 2025, even more detailed learning objectives were introduced (see fig II).

Since participation in a course is no longer mandatory in the Netherlands, it is primarily private publishers who have had to adapt and expand their textbooks accordingly. If you look at the different textbooks from various publishers, you'll see that there are quite some differences between them. Yet all of them do cover the shipping past, the colonies, and the Second World War. Some go further by even talking about the 1800s, others keep it very concise (Bakker, 2014a; Gathier, 2015; Van den Broek et al., 2023).

As described, newcomers who come to the Netherlands through family reunification must already take a civic integration exam abroad. The questions on these exams are asked in Dutch and answers must also be given in Dutch. The exam consists of thirty questions selected from the one hundred questions found in the photo booklet, which can be downloaded from the 'Naar Nederland' (*To The Netherlands*) website. Out of the 100 questions, the section 'Government, Politics, and the Constitution' contains the largest number (24 questions), followed by 'Geography, Transportation, and Housing in the Netherlands' (23 questions), and 'Parenting and Education' (18 questions). History has thirteen questions. These photos are, in turn, stills from the video 'Naar Nederland', which newcomers are required to watch in preparation for the exam (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2014).

The video covers a period of nearly 500 years. It discusses the Eighty Years' War and William of Orange, and highlights the importance of migration and foreigners for the wealth and urban development during the so-called 'Golden

Age'. It also reflects on the Dutch maritime trade and the trade in spices and slaves. Through the example of the French Revolution and the resulting fear of the king, the parliamentary system and the constitution are introduced, which form the foundation of today's democracy. The video also mentions the Netherlands' neutrality during the major wars of the twentieth century, the women's movement in the interwar period led by Aletta Jacobs, and, through Anne Frank, it reflects on the Holocaust and the occupation by Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. Post-war developments include the independence of Indonesia and Suriname, particularly in relation to their migration consequences for the Netherlands, as well as the 1960s and the sexual revolution. The video concludes with the arrival of guest workers and family migration.

Interestingly, the content of the video does not directly correspond with the learning objectives developed by the government for the exam that newcomers *in* The Netherlands must take. In fact, the video that newcomers are required to watch in their country of origin covers *more* history than what is expected to be known in the Netherlands. History extends beyond the story of the current nation state, creating a sense of a shared history that spans centuries. According to the video, this past has shaped today's society in an almost consistently progressive manner.

5.1. Deepening Knowledge of Dutch History

5.1.1 Knows some aspects of Dutch history and can identify certain remnants of this past.

- Knows that the Netherlands experienced economic and cultural development in the seventeenth century through shipping and trade, and recognizes expressions of this in painting and architecture.
- Knows that the Netherlands founded colonies, enslaved people, traded them, and employed them in colonies on agricultural plantations.
- Knows that the Netherlands has a long tradition of living with the threat of water, and that polders, windmills, dikes, and Delta Works are testimonies of this.
- Knows that the Wilhelmus is the Dutch national anthem and what the Dutch flag looks like.

5.1.2 Knows some developments and themes from recent Dutch history and knows that these are still recognizable in society.

- Knows that the Netherlands was occupied by Germany during the Second World War, knows what the Holocaust entails and that many Dutch Jews were killed, and knows that antisemitism is prohibited by law.
- Knows that the Netherlands was liberated in 1945, that National Remembrance Day takes place annually on May 4, and that Liberation Day is celebrated on May 5.
- Knows that since the Second World War, people from former colonies, labor migrants, and refugees have immigrated to the Netherlands.
- Knows that after the Second World War, the Netherlands began intensive cooperation with other countries, including in the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the United Nations (UN).
- Knows that especially since the 1960s, many Dutch people attach great importance to individual freedom, emancipation, tolerance, and self-determination.
- Knows that the right to abortion, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia are legally established.

Fig II: final attainment targets (2021)

In Flanders, the government initially granted teachers of the Social Orientation courses considerable freedom, and history was not explicitly defined. In 2006, a commission led by Marc Bossuyt, under then-Minister Marino Keulen (from the liberal party VLD), identified five core values – freedom, equality, solidarity, respect, and citizenship – as guiding principles for the course (Bossuyt, 2006). In 2008, the learning environments were first operationalized in a teacher's manual developed by pedagogical staff at Karel de Grote Hogeschool. Newcomers were expected to "situate *milestones* in Belgian and Flemish history in relation to broader historical developments". The manual emphasized that comprehensive historical knowledge was not required; rather, newcomers should be able to recognize local or regional events and their traces. No specific milestones were prescribed, and teachers were referred to Wikipedia and the website 'Klean' for support (Baeten et al., 2008, p. 148-151).[7] In 2016, a working group of Social Orientation instructors specified nine historical processes deemed essential for understanding contemporary society, including the Enlightenment, the Congo Free State, and Belgium's political structure (Agentschap integratie en inburgering, 2018, p. 4-5). In 2022, the curriculum was revised again, expanding the historical component to thirteen "processes that had shaped the host society", such as universal suffrage, colonialism and decolonization, and secularization. Notably, with the exception of the Flemish emancipation and language struggle, the list reflects a Belgian rather than explicitly Flemish historical narrative (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering et al., 2023).

As mentioned before, a standardized civic integration exam was installed in 2022. Participants must answer 41 questions (30 on general knowledge, 11 on values and norms). History is included in the second part of the exam, which focuses on values and norms, albeit in an implicit way. For example, candidates are not asked when universal suffrage was introduced, but rather about voting as a principle within a democratic constitutional state.[8]

The introduction of a standardized exam inevitably reduced teachers' pedagogical autonomy. At the end of the course, all newcomers are required to take the same uniform test, consisting of a randomized selection of questions. This meant that all participants have to be informed in the same way about the full range of topics that can appear on the exam. To ensure sufficient uniformity in content delivery – and to guarantee that newcomers were adequately prepared – significant efforts were made to develop online modules. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, a strategic shift toward online teaching was implemented, supported by Google Classroom and interactive slide-based modules.[9] Given the scope of the learning objectives and the need to produce materials in multiple languages, this became a long-term undertaking.[10] Meanwhile, however, another political project was set in motion.

In 2019, the Flemish government commissioned the creation of a Canon of Flanders (Opdrachtbrief commissie canon van Vlaanderen, 2020). Initially framed as a tool to define Flemish identity, it was later rebranded – after heavy academic critique – as a contribution to collective memory and intercultural dialogue[11]. A committee of nine scholars (including two historians) published the canon in 2023, comprising sixty 'windows' on Flemish history (Gerard, 2023). These 'windows' are entry points to historical events that are ought to be important for Flanders' history, and consist of an 'eye-catcher', a theme, and two focal points. Although originally intended as a reference tool for secondary education and Social Orientation courses, the canon now plays an explicit role in civic integration classes (Beleids- en begrotingstoelichting Integratie en Inburgering en Samenleven Begroting 2025, 2024). Even before its publication, the Agency and the canon committee collaborated to make an online module based on the canon (Beleids- en begrotingstoelichting Integratie en Inburgering en Samenleven Begroting 2025, 2024; Gerard, 2023).[12] During my participatory observations in Social Orientation classes, I noted that since 2024, this module has been actively used. It draws on ten canon 'windows', each presented with explanatory text, visuals, and multiple-choice questions. Strikingly, the module is titled History of Belgium, despite being based on a Flemish canon[13].

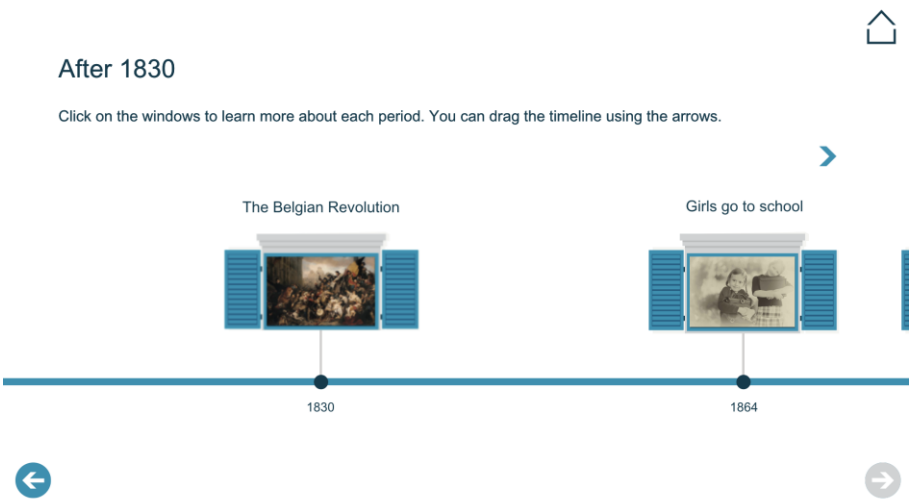

FIG III: Still from the online module based upon the Canon of Flanders

In Flanders as well, newcomers will have to pass an exam in their country of origin. Other than in the Netherlands, this will be based upon the same online modules that were made for the course in Flanders, along with online classes. After passing the exam in their country of origin, they can do an exemption test in Flanders. If they pass, they won't have to follow the course anymore. If

they don't, they still have to follow the complete course (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 2025).

Above, I outlined how over the past 25 years, an increasingly large group of people is required to follow a civic integration trajectory that has become progressively more mandatory and extensive in its testing. In both Flanders and the Netherlands, growing attention is being paid to the historical dimension of this knowledge. Moreover, this 'history' is being defined with increasing specificity, as governments explicitly determine which historical narratives are to be taught.

State-Sponsored History in Civic Integration: Constructing the Past, Defining the Present

The civic integration trajectory constitutes an explicit site of state-sponsored history. Unlike more implicit forms of historical transmission, this context allows the state to actively shape *the* historical narrative of the host society (Bevernage & Wouters, 2018, p. 5). By selecting specific historical accounts, the state attributes moral significance to particular interpretations of the past. This makes the civic integration course a unique, tangible space in which the dominant society recounts its version of history to newcomers. As such, it reveals not only what the political authorities in the Low Countries wish to communicate to newcomers but also reflects how these societies construct and project their collective self-image (Grever & Ribbens, 2007).

Civic integration policy reinforces a binary opposition between 'us' and 'them', positioning the host society as morally superior. I argue here that history is indeed employed as a community-building practice, but not necessarily with the aim of including newcomers within that community. As Blankvoort et al. note, civic integration handbooks in the Netherlands assume the nation-state as a given, promoting a narrative that endorses 'modern values' – such as the 'modern family' or the 'modern woman' – as universal (Blankvoort et al., 2021, p. 3518-3519). The "we" (i.e., the Dutch citizen) is portrayed as the ideal citizen, the embodiment of modernity – "We say U [polite form] to elders, because this is polite." Or "[on a wedding] you congratulate the bride and groom and give a gift. Then you can talk with other guests" (Van den Broek et al., 2023, p. 22-26). Similarly, the Flemish civic integration teaching material emphasizes a set of values and norms explicitly labeled as "Belgian/Flemish." These were defined in 2006 by the Bossuyt Commission, composed of seven academics, and have since formed a central thread throughout the course[14]. In supporting materials, these 'modern' values are consistently articulated in the first-person plural. This "we" often extends beyond Flanders or Belgium to refer more broadly to "the West." This is particularly evident in discussions of

gender roles and family structures, a recurring theme in the course, where references to “Western families” are frequent and “western” gender divisions are explained: “in our western world, gender and sex were considered as a classical binary division” (*fieldwork*, 2024). These values are also placed in historical perspective: Flanders/Belgium is portrayed as having undergone a developmental trajectory toward contemporary values – e.g., from a past without gender equality or social security to a present where these are established. This historical framing is strategically used to create distance between the “We” and the “Other”, based upon a western ideology of progress (*fieldwork*, 2024).

Descriptions of the “We” in civic integration courses implicitly construct assumptions about the “other” as well. The Other is often racialized, implicitly marked as non-white. For example, questions such as “What do we call someone who is not Dutch?” are placed next to images of Black men, or a picture of a black child next to the sentence “I was born in Africa.” The emphasis on ‘modern values’ imply a non-modern participant.

This “we/they” construction is not limited to value discourse but also appears in how history is addressed. It is, of course, no coincidence that history plays a central role in civic integration material. States often seek to shape historical narratives and public memory to legitimize their sovereignty – both internally and externally. History is here used to present the “autochthonous” cultural identity as homogenous and rooted, while the newcomer is introduced to it as an outsider. It binds a specific group to a specific past, thereby implicitly defining who does not belong to that past (Bertossi et al., 2021; Grever & Adriaansen, 2017). Such history lessons offer little space for identification by newcomers. The history presented is a Belgian/Dutch narrative, explaining contemporary Belgian/Dutch society and heritage from a Western perspective. As such, it reinforces a one-way dynamic that sharpens the “we-they” dichotomy between citizen and immigrant (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018, p. 25).

To illustrate this dynamic, I will focus on one particular case: the narrative surrounding the colonial past in both Flanders and the Netherlands.

The Colonial Past in the Flemish Integration Curriculum

Belgium, under King Leopold II and later as a state, colonized what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo for over sixty years. This period was marked by extreme violence, apartheid-like structures, exploitation, and mass atrocities. For decades, Belgium suffered from a form of collective amnesia regarding its colonial past (Bobineau, 2017, p. 108). Public knowledge remains limited, and attitudes toward this history and its legacy are generally moderate (Brouwers

et al., 2022; Verbeeck, 2020). Politically, there is also reluctance: the 2020 parliamentary commission on Belgium's colonial past never had its final report approved, largely due to fears of financial consequences (*Aanbevelingen Congocommissie krijgen nieuwe kans (minus excuses),* 2023). There is still no official policy regarding colonial references in public space.

In contrast, the online module used in Flemish integration courses – based on the Canon of Flanders – presents a different picture, devoting significant attention to the atrocities and the responsibility of the Belgian state. The introduction of the Canon adds a new dimension to the "we"-narrative. This canonized narrative is a textbook example of how history is politically mobilized to construct a particular version of the past with a specific purpose (Boone, 2021, p. 45-47). For this and other reasons, the canon project faced widespread academic criticism (Aerts, Koen et al., 2020; Boone, 2021; Grever, 2006; Paepe et al., 2019). The final version, written by scholars aware of these critiques, aimed to construct a nuanced, diversified, and explicitly non-teleological perspective. By combining thematic windows with emblematic features, the commission sought to incorporate recent insights on agency, gender balance, diversity, and other contemporary concerns. The window on the colonial past, for example, is introduced through Paul Panda Fernana, the first Congolese intellectual to openly criticize colonialism.

It must be acknowledged that the window used in the lessons today, based upon the canon, is indeed more historically accurate than the 'Congo Free State' theme that was to be covered until 2022. That description implied a focus solely on the colonial past during the reign of Leopold II and thus ignored the complicity of the Belgian state. Today, the window provides newcomers with a scientifically substantiated account of the colonial past. However, the explicit focus on diversity and agency remains absent in the version of the canon used in the Social Orientation course. Although one paragraph mentions that "dissatisfaction of the Congolese turned into resistance," the narrative remains predominantly Belgian. Paul Panda Farnana is not mentioned. Thus, the theme of colonialism is not used as an entry point for a global history of colonizers, the colonized, resistance, and revolution. Instead, it reinforces a national perspective, limiting the potential for broader identification and critical reflection.

From another angle, the way colonial history is presented in the Social Orientation course reinforces coloniality. The very fact that it is addressed in detail – acknowledging both Leopold II and the Belgian state – contrasts sharply with the broader societal and political relationship to this past, which is marked by limited knowledge and a lack of consensus on its harmful impact on the Congolese population. The course's educational objectives thus construct a more favorable moral image of Belgium's reckoning with its

colonial past than is warranted by reality. The stated aim of the course and its historical component is to foster understanding of Flemish historical culture and promote a sense of belonging (Adriaansen & van der Vlies, 2021; Grever & Adriaansen, 2017).[15] However, by presenting a narrative that diverges from the dominant historical culture, the course fails to open access to the community (Assman, 2010, p. 40-43). The Flemish government sponsors a version of history that constructs moral superiority, treating the colonial past as a closed chapter, exactly by discussing it so thoroughly. This narrative is not only celebratory ("we, the Flemish, have come to terms with our past"), but also indirectly obstructs the integration of newcomers, by sketching a wrong image of the present historical culture.

The Dutch Case: Silence and Simplification

In the Netherlands as well, debates around colonial memory are ongoing. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, the Dutch transported nearly 600,000 Africans to the Americas as part of the transatlantic slave trade and colonized territories such as Indonesia, Curaçao, and Suriname. Public references – such as statues of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the infamous "butcher of Banda" – continue to provoke fierce protests, both for and against their removal (Balkenhol, 2023). National responsibility for this past remains contested and politically sensitive (Allen et al., 2023, p. 48).

Notably, the colonial past is mentioned only very briefly in the 'Naar Nederland' movie newcomers have to watch before the Civic Integration Abroad Exam. They mention the slave trade and later the independence of Indonesia and the subsequent wave of migration to the Netherlands as a consequence, without addressing the actual process of colonization and its impacts. By immediately shifting the narrative towards the migration wave in the Netherlands, they once again center the Dutch perspective, neglecting the broader, non-Dutch consequences of colonization (Bakker, 2014b).

Once arrived in the Netherlands, however, the narrative changes. In a same way as in Flanders is the case, textbooks for newcomers to prepare for their exam do not reflect the contested memory of colonization. Instead, the materials subtly suggest that the Netherlands has come to terms with its colonial past, as seen in prompts like: "The Dutch are not proud of their history of slavery. Why do you think that is?" In comparison with a survey done in 2021, this is downright misinformation. In this survey, Dutch people were asked "Thinking about the Netherlands' former Empire, would you say it is more something to be proud or more something to be ashamed of, or neither"? more than 50% stated it was more something to be proud of, only 6% that it was something to be ashamed of (Bettache, 2021).

The Dutch case, however, differs from Flanders in an important way: the textbooks are written in Dutch. In Flanders, civic integration material is taught in a contact language, which means the courses are available in over thirty languages. In Flanders, newcomers can take Social Orientation before, during, or after Dutch language classes. This system provides newcomers with greater autonomy in shaping their integration trajectory and enables them to acquire knowledge in Social Orientation classes without requiring prior (extensive) proficiency in Dutch. This flexibility allows for earlier access to SO and deeper engagement, as participants can follow and discuss the material in a language they fluently understand. It also affects the profile of instructors: agencies must recruit teachers fluent in specific languages, many of whom have migration backgrounds themselves.

But in the Netherlands, all material is in Dutch. This implies that newcomers have to follow Dutch courses first and understand Dutch before being able to learn for the Knowledge on Dutch society exam. This has consequences on their civic integration trajectory, but also on the content. Since newcomers' Dutch is still very basic at the time they study the textbooks, the private publishes in the Netherlands adapted their content to this reality. As a result, the narrative is often simplified. For example: "Slaves were not free. They had to work hard and their lives were often difficult. […] In the twentieth century, the colonies became independent. The Netherlands was no longer in charge." Or in another textbook: "They paid nothing at all for the goods they took from the colonies!"

Conclusion

Integration trajectories are increasingly compulsory for an ever-larger group of people. So is the growing role that history plays in this. Civic integration courses are not history lessons in the traditional sense. They are introductions to the host society – its laws, customs, and norms. As such, the role of history here is not only to convey factual knowledge, but to shape how the past is perceived and remembered in the present. One could argue that the Flemish and Dutch governments are offering a scientifically accurate version of history. However, the discussion of how the colonial past in the Low Countries plays a role in integration programs demonstrates how history does not play a purely informative role in the course. The receiving governments, consciously or unconsciously, construct a 'We' group by linking a certain past to them and placing an explicit focus on themselves in their narrative, with very little attention to mutual foreign influences or global evolutions. Moreover, it assumes a homogeneous population that has learned from its past – 'moved forward' – while this does not correspond with reality.

By omitting the contemporary historical cultures of the receiving society, they construct a celebratory, state-sponsored history that does not reflect reality; a reality in which newcomers are expected to "adapt" and achieve "full participation". In doing so, they risk undermining the very goal of civic integration – whatever that may ultimately mean.

Notes

[1] This research is supported by the FWO.

[2] Initially, the Flemish Region and the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) were given authority over integration. After Belgium was divided into cultural communities (Dutch, French, and German), the second state reform of 1980 transformed these cultural communities into 'communities' with powers over matters related to individuals. In addition, a Flemish, a Walloon and a Brussels Region were established, each with authority over economic affairs. From the outset, Flanders chose to merge the region and the community, resulting in a single government (Flemish Executive) and a single parliament (Flemish Council). In the third state reform of 1988, the communities and regions received more powers. Finally, in the fourth state reform of 1993, Belgium became a fully-fledged federal state, and the Councils were renamed Parliaments, which from then on were directly elected. A fifth state reform in 2002 granted even more powers to the regions and communities and changed the functioning of the Brussels institutions.

[3] In this paper, I adopt the definition of the target group used by the Flemish and Dutch government in its civic integration policy. The term 'newcomers' refers to "individuals who have recently, for the first time, and for an extended period settled in Flanders" (Decreet van 28/02/2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid (2003)). This includes persons with a non-Belgian nationality who settle in Belgium for the first time and for more than three months, as well as Belgian nationals who have been registered in the population register for less than twelve months. Similarly, the Dutch government defines newcomers as: "the foreign national who is permitted to reside in the Netherlands, who has reached the age of eighteen, and who has been admitted to the Netherlands for the first time, […] and the Dutch national who was born outside the Netherlands, has reached the age of eighteen, and for the first time has become a resident in the Netherlands." (Wet Inburgering nieuwkomers (1998)). While the term newcomer is subject to critique – such as the question of how long one remains 'new' – I use it here due to its official status and the absence of a more precise alternative.

[4] EU+ refers to nationals of all European Union and EFTA countries: Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

[5] Case managers are in charge of the program of the newcomer. They help the newcomer with all administrative tasks and guide them through the civic integration trajectory.

[6] Exemption tests are, however, available. If their case manager thinks the newcomer is able to, they can do an exam before entering class. If they score at least 80%, they do not have to follow the course.

[7] Today, the website Klean.be is no longer active. It was originally the site of “a young folk music group from the Waasland region.” The SO teacher’s manual referred to a specific page on this website about the Battle of the Golden Spurs, but this page is no longer accessible.

[8] I got this information through my fieldwork, which included numerous conversations with pedagogical staff, teachers and people who have taken the exam.

[9] These online modules were developed by AGII, Atlas (Antwerp), Amal (Ghent), and the KU Leuven Centre for Language and Education with support from European funding.

[10] The Social Orientation classes are taught in a 'contact language' – the mother tongue or a language the participant is proficient in – allowing the courses to be offered in over thirty languages.

[11] For critiques on an historical canon, see for example Aerts, Koen et al., 2020, 2020; Boone, 2021; Grever, 2006; Paepe et al., 2019; Van Doorsselaere, 2022.

[12] Notably, the report published alongside the release of the Canon makes no mention of an online module. The commission merely states that the Canon may be useful 'for teachers seeking information or suitable angles to clarify certain (abstract) processes.

[13] One of the criticisms directed at the canon was precisely that it was a Flemish initiative. Belgium is a federal state composed of three communities, and Flanders is one of them. The Flemish political party that introduced the idea of the canon is the N-VA, a Flemish nationalist party advocating for the independence of Flanders. Critics therefore interpreted the commissioning of the canon as a politically motivated attempt to construct or reinforce a distinct Flemish identity.

[14] These “Belgian/Flemish values” were defined in 2005 by the Bossuyt Commission as freedom, equality, solidarity, respect, and citizenship. The commission consisted of jurist Marc Bossuyt, philosopher Ludo Abicht, senior lecturer in Arabic and Cultural History Abied Alsulaiman, political scientist Naima Charkaoui, anthropologist Marie-Claire Foblets, theologian Rik Torfs, and philosopher Etienne Vermeersch (Bossuyt, 2006).

[15] With the notion of historical culture, I refer to definition of Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, namely people their relationships to the past, which include historical narratives and performances of the past, mnemonic infrastructures and conceptions of history.

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Conflict of Interest
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.