

*Revising History to Suit the Present*

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A recent news story headlined In Russia, the past is a constantly moving target focused on Vladimir Putin's rewriting of Russian history in order to justify his "determined rehabilitation of the Soviet period." Similarly, James Wertsch wrote an article in 1999 called "Revising Russian History." His conclusion is encapsulated in an old Russian aphorism: "Nothing is more unpredictable than Russia's past." Wertsch reports that "Soviet authorities viewed history instruction in schools as part of the effort 'to bring up true sons of the Motherland, steadfast ideological fighters.'" This view of history, he acknowledges, is likely true of every nation's approach to teaching history, although has taken on extreme forms in Soviet, and now Russian, education.

The more recent report on Putin's historical revisionism describes his revival of the Soviet era as a way of restoring its authoritarian values in the 21st century. Putin's rewriting of history includes restoring the Stalin-era national anthem. His administration has revised textbooks to re-interpret Stalin's mass murders as good works that advanced the national aim of industrial modernization. This genocide included nearly 4 million deaths from starvation in the Ukraine, and his "purges" in which millions more were executed or sent to infamous labor camps of Siberia or the Gulag, where death often awaited. Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* reviews this period in horrifying detail.

To commemorate the greatness of Stalin's leadership, Putin has added more than 100 monuments to Stalin to the Russian landscape. Dissenters have found themselves imprisoned, adding to Putin's tendency to "disappear" people who do not adhere to the party line. Once again, Russian history has been rewritten to suit the needs of the current regime.

That could never happen here, right?

The year 2020 has produced a historical reckoning in many ways. The issue of statues, whether of Stalin in Moscow or KKK leader John Brown Gordon in Atlanta, provides a win-

dow into historical reconsideration. I'll add revising the names of buildings and institutions, including Henry W. Grady High School in Atlanta, which recently was the subject of an essay questioning whether his name should be removed. Calling him a White Supremacist, argues the author, "pins a 2020 donkey's tail on a man who died in 1889."

The recent U.S. protests have resulted in controversial revisions, such as decisions to remove statues dedicated to Gordon and other Confederate leaders, slaveowners, and KKK members whose actions served the interests of slavery and not those of the United States of America. Although their removal has offended many who see their subjects as heroes, their presence was offensive to those who saw them as racists, traitors, losers, and oppressors.

Putin's restoration of Stalin-era symbols is different from the current movement in the U.S. to remove monuments to racists in a significant way. He is more like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who erected monuments to Southern leaders such as KKK founder Nathan Bedford Forrest many decades after the South had lost the Civil War, or their recent effort to halt their removal. Like Russians, they view the past as a text that can be revised to suit present political ends, to promote a heritage that requires a selective presentation of history.

James Loewen has written about "Lies Across America." He concludes that monuments often provide a distorted view of history. He is particularly concerned with the sort of statue designed to glorify an ideology as embodied in an individual, which he believes amplifies one history at the expense of others. He had previously written "Lies My Teacher Told Me," a critique of history books that gloss the nation's flaws and present a grand narrative of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. Not only do they sanitize history, one book's facts might be different from another's. The students' task is to memorize the facts in the textbook their school uses, even though the same answers might be wrong in a school using a different textbook. Loewen's thesis across these volumes is that the official history taught in the U.S. is superficially designed to present a mythic understanding of the nation as the world's greatest and only moral superpower, while eliding inconvenient details that might contradict that image.

History has always been a malleable topic. It has been subject to the perspective of the historian, given that it is too vast to be comprehensively covered. Well over a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche denied that there is a concrete reality available to account for phenomena. Rather, all we have is *perspectivism*: You see it your way, I see it mine. Postmodernists similarly argued for the decentering of authority, for the need to attend to and legitimize many points of view and avoid official versions of events.

There was a time when certain sources—the mainstream press and media, and the volumes written by historians—were treated by many as authoritative accounts of worldly events. The development of alternative news outlets challenged the primacy of these sources. Some were

liberal, like Mother Jones, the Huffington Post, and the Daily Kos. Some were conservative, like Fox News, Breitbart, and the Washington Times. All stood outside mainstream reporting and opinion-producing. They have proliferated with the development of the internet.

In other words, as much as postmodernity and relativity are despised by many for their rejection of a central, governing, traditional perspective, we are now in a postmodern, relativistic, perspective-driven view of both current and past events. People can choose what to believe about the past and present, and find validation in media sources. To shift that Russian adage: “Nothing is more unpredictable in current US politics than the past.” It is what people want to see in it.

The past is also under continual revision as new information emerges from historical studies. Alexander Hamilton, for instance, has often been viewed as the Abolitionist Founding Father, the one who embodied the traits written into our founding documents. He has been immortalized in a spectacularly successful Broadway musical. But very recently, that image has been challenged by research indicating that he was a slaveowner who benefitted greatly from the forced labor and denial of freedom he imposed on Black people. Some refer to such new documentation as revisionist history, and to the soiling of pristine old reputations as unpatriotic. Yet it’s factual, and worth knowing if we are to have a history in which we trust as complete, warts and all.

People have recently been asking such question as What will history say about Trump? I suspect it depends on which historian you ask. In David Potter’s *The Impending Crisis: America Before the Civil War, 1848-1861*, he refers to his disagreements with “Southern Historians” who interpreted the South much differently than he did. This breed was alive and well in the 1776 curriculum, albeit by ideologists rather than historians, in their production of a version of history that glorified the nation and muted its problems. When I wonder how history will view our current political state, I have to keep in mind that the best-selling history books in the U.S. have likely been written by former Fox News pundit Bill O’Reilly. History is in the eye of the beholder, and readers have the opportunity to read the histories that appeal to their perspectives.

The question, then, is not what history will say about this era. It’s what people will say, depending on what they believe, based on what they consider to be a fact. Many today are quoting the expression, “You are entitled to your own opinion, but not your own facts.” Yet that’s pretty much what history has always been based on: historians’ attention to the facts that shape their perspectives. I think that we would be wise to keep this problem in mind when teaching history and using history to account for the present.