

The uses of history¹

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The past once destroyed never returns. Its destruction is perhaps the greatest of all crimes – Simone Weil

Samevatting

Op drie maniere kan die studie van geskiedenis tot nut van mense wees. In die eerste plek kan dit hulle help om 'n behoorlike besef te kry van hul onderskeie afkoms en erfenis. Geskiedenis leer mense nie hoe om op te tree of suksesvol te wees nie, maar wie hulle is. Die artikel onderskryf hierdie standpunt maar ondersoek ook ander moontlikhede om die waarde van geskiedenis te bepaal. Die een is dat die geskiedenis politici kan help om hardnekkige probleme op te los wat hul wortels in die geskiedenis het. Die probleem hiermee is dat maghebbers die geskiedenis verwing om hul eie siening van historiese probleme af te dwing. Historici moet hierdie taktiek aan die kaak stel. Derdens is daar die geloof dat geskiedenis kan help om beter toekomstige ontwikkelinge te antisipeer. 'n Studie van die geskiedenis kan ook mense help om meer voorbereid vir die toekoms te wees. Die geskiedenis is egter nooit voorspelbaar nie. Mense word telkens verras deur onverwagte wendinge. Die bespreking wil hierdie hindernisse in die waarde van geskiedenis uitlig.

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Introduction

The study of history is commonly associated with three uses. The first is the development of a distinctive sense of origins and heritage. The great Polish-born Oxford philosopher, Lezek Kolakowski, formulates it best: “We learn history not in order to know how to behave or how to succeed, but to know

¹ The concept “history” in this discussion don't explicitly refers to the discipline History but to history in general as representing the “past”.

who we are”.² Secondly, people believe that a study of the past can help the present generation to deal with intractable problems their society faces and also to become good citizens. A corollary of this is the view that communities that do not heed the lessons of history are bound to repeat past errors and blunders. There is, thirdly, the belief that a deep understanding of history helps us to discern the shape of the future.

To summarise the three claims briefly:

- History tells us who we are and where we came from;
- It helps us to deal with the problems we currently face and to become good citizens; and
- With a good grasp of history we can anticipate the future.

This article attempts to assess these claims critically.

Anticipating the future

Let us start with the third proposition – that historians can anticipate future developments. This can only be accepted on condition that we grasp that it is only exceptional historians who can catch glimpses of the future, and that such historians tend to be modest about their ability to predict the future. One such historian is JM Robbins, whose *The Pelican History of the World* (1976) deals with history from the beginnings of civilization three millennia ago to the Cold War in the 1960s:³

At the end of the day the only advantage of being a historian is that one may be a little less surprised by the outcome, whatever it is. Only two general truths appear from the study of history. One is that things tend to change much more, and more quickly than one might think. The other is that they tend to change much less, and much more slowly, than one may think. Both truths tend to be exemplified by any specific historical situation, and so, for good or ill, we shall always find what happens somewhat surprising.

The French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry (1875 – 1945), stated: “The past acts upon the future with a violence equalled by the present itself ... the real nature of history is to play a role in history itself”.⁴ If this is true, we

² *The Economist*, 1 August 2009, p. 72.

³ JM Robbins, *The Pelican History of the world* (London, Penguin Books, 1976), p. 1076.

⁴ DC Gordon, *Self-determination and history* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 1.

can assume that the study of history makes us more aware of the degree to which historical forces and processes constantly shape the systems in which we live. It gives exceptional historians a sense of the drift of things, which can in some cases be projected into the future. Studying the French revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville came to realise that the most dangerous moment for an authoritarian regime is the point at which it starts to reform. It is also De Tocqueville who observed that minorities become part of the majority only if they abandon the things that are really important to them.

Historians who study colonisation are very aware of the fact that a liberal democracy and liberal capitalism go together awkwardly and sometimes very badly in deeply divided societies. Lewis Gann long ago sounded an appropriate warning to South Africa academics not to think, as liberals tend to do, that South Africa would democratise along the same lines as Britain. The difficulty in South Africa is that while the unskilled and semi-skilled workers belong to the majority, the higher ranks of labour and the entrepreneurs are part of different racial groups.⁵ After a democracy has been established, the middle classes in the indigenous majority, originally seen as being in the vanguard of the modernization process, invariably become the very people who reinvent old ethnic prejudices as a way of advancing their specific interests to get what they believe they are entitled to.⁶ Empowerment can often lead to aggressive policies of confiscation and revenge.⁷

Missing turning points

But all too often historians miss key turning points. No historian or political scientist that I know of anticipated the most important development of the last three or four decades, namely the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the rapid disintegration of the Soviet empire and the abrupt end of the Cold War. It is not as if there is something wrong with historians. Virtually no economist predicted the sudden financial crisis that hit the Western world in 2008-09, although there had been grave signs of something seriously wrong since approximately 2001, with the sub-prime housing loans going bad across the United States. In a speech to the London School of Economics in 2008 Queen

5 L Gann, "Liberal Interpretations of South African History", *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, 25 (1959), pp. 40-57.

6 D Horowitz, *Ethnic groups in conflict* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985), pp. 95-140.

7 A Chua, *World on fire: How exporting free market democracy breeds ethnic hatred and global instability* (London, William Heinemann, 2003).

Elizabeth asked a group of economists: “How could you miss the financial crisis that would hit the banks and the insurance companies due to bad debts? It was so huge.” The economists’ written reply was far from convincing.

In South Africa virtually no one predicted the rapid disintegration of apartheid and National Party (NP) rule, and of the NP itself. When someone asks me why no historian predicted these things, my reply is that without the fall of the Berlin Wall a multiracial oligarchy dominated by whites might have lasted two or three more decades.

While South Africans fondly believe that they always decide for themselves on their political destiny, all the big political realignments of the twentieth century in South Africa were the result of unexpected developments in Europe. The outbreak of the First World War led to the NP taking power ten years later, the outbreak of the Second World War paved the way for the NP assuming power nine years later, and the end of the Cold War led to the African National Congress (ANC) coming to office six years later. So much for the myth of heroic leaders, changing the very course of history.

‘The annihilation of distance’

I nevertheless believe that gifted historians working on a very big canvass, like the history of the world, or a “civilization” or a country, can discern some broad truths about what is in store. JM Robbins, cited above, writing in the 1960s and early 1970s, could already see the world economy was experiencing a fundamental shift from the developed to the developing world. He also sensed that accelerated technological change was outpacing the capacity of mankind to produce answers to the ethical challenges that some of the breakthroughs brought in their wake.⁸

In his *A study of History* the historian Arnold Toynbee tried to establish common patterns in, and even laws on, the rise, flowering and decay of some twenty-six civilizations since the beginning of recorded history. Initially his work was received almost in a spirit of awe and in 1949 *Time* magazine put his photograph on its cover as its “Man of the Year”.

Toynbee once made a comment that showed what value lies in what one can call the long view. In 1952 he responded to a letter from Piet Meyer,

⁸ JM Robbins, *History of the world*, p. 1018.

who would later become chairman of the SABC Board. Meyer had asked the historian what challenges confronted the Afrikaner nationalists who had just captured power with their radical programme of apartheid. I cite Toynbee's reply at some length:⁹

My personal feeling is that the Afrikaner nation is confronted with a most difficult and at the same time most important spiritual task, which it is bound to undertake, without having any choice of refusing.

It seems to me that, in South Africa, you are faced already with a situation that very soon is going to be the common situation of the whole world as a result of "the annihilation of distance" through the progress of our Western technology... There will never again be room in the world for the different fractions of mankind to retire into isolation from one another again.

Now, in South Africa, the accident of history has put the native, coloured and white people of the country into this difficult situation at an early date: so history — or God — has given you the honourable mission of being the spiritual pioneers in trying to find the solution of a spiritual problem that is soon going to face the rest of the human race as well.

How pregnant with meaning is the term "annihilation of distance"! Apartheid was in many ways an attempt to forestall the annihilation of distance – the streaming to the cities and towns of poor black and coloured people, and their movement up on the labour ladder and into the so-called grey or white residential areas, universities, schools and onto the fields or courts of white organised sport. Apartheid crumbled above all because of what John Kane-Berman called the "silent revolution" – the inexorable breaking down of almost all forms of racial exclusivity in the urban setting.¹⁰ What the ANC did was to declare victory for itself.

'Demography is destiny'

To get children and students to become absorbed in reading or studying history it is good policy to discard the obsession with dates, laws and speeches.

9 PJ Meyer, *Nog nie ver genoeg nie: 'n Persoonlike rekenskap van vyftig jaar georganiseerde Afrikanerskap* (Johannesburg, Perskor, 1984), pp. 64-65.

10 J Kane-Berman, *South Africa's silent revolution* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1990).

“I know all the dates, I just don’t know what happened on them” – so did the Afrikaans writer CJ Langenhoven mock the obsession with dates. The game is to get people to understand the underlying processes and forces that shaped the political context and forged the future.

One such a force is demography. Nearly two centuries ago August Comte summed up its impact succinctly: “Demography is destiny”. Recently Peter Drucker formulated the same truth as follows: “Demography is the future that happened.”

When the South African government began implementing apartheid in the early 1950s, the whites formed just under 20 percent of the population. That proportion shrank in little more than 50 years to 9 per cent. Apartheid collapsed not because of speeches or marches or strikes, but because of demographic pressure. The shrinking white base was unable to provide all the necessary skills and to maintain stability. From the early 1970s the lack of skills began to strangle the economy. From the early 1980s the state of relative stability began to unravel. By 1980 whites in South Africa, who controlled all the factors of production, formed approximately 15% of the total population. Their birth rate had plummeted to below the replacement rate. The highest birth rates occurred in the “Bantustans”, where people were poorest.

The historian CFJ Muller, editor of *500 years*, a general history of South Africa that appeared in 1968 at the apogee of apartheid, anticipated the political upheaval that the country would soon experience. He wrote in a remarkably prescient statement that despite the apparent strength of the whites, their lack of numbers meant that that they could not be assured at all that they would still be living under a white government on a black continent by the year 2000.¹¹

Microcosm of the world

The processes that started in South Africa in the mid-1950s represent a microcosm of what the world is experiencing today. The world’s thirty high-income countries are home to only a sixth of the world’s population, but these countries are responsible for five-sixth of the production. In most of

¹¹ A Grundlingh, “History on the hill: Aspects of scholarship and scholarly life at the Unisa History Department, 1968 – 2000”, *Kleio*, 38(2), 2006, p. 130.

these countries the birth rate is below the replacement level. Nearly 90 per cent of the increase of the world's population presently is taking place in the developing countries.¹²

There is an unprecedented push from poor people of the so-called Third World to the First World, which will have profound political consequences. There is great political popular pressure to stop immigration and deny immigrants the vote. But this is like trying to plug a leaking dam wall with your finger. In Europe Toynbee's annihilation of distance will not occur as fast as in South Africa, but the process is accelerating every day. Sluggish economic growth compounds the problem. By 1976 South Africa was well on the road to becoming a successful state. On the world rating list it had the 18th largest economy and it was the 15th largest trading country. A year or two ago, it fell to 28th and 37th respectively on the list. Europe is also lagging behind economically in the world, which makes the task of absorbing the poor into the job market much harder.

A good grasp of history, particularly South African history, will help to develop a sense that the present order of things is transient: societies do change, sometimes unexpectedly fast, and sometimes painfully slow. Good teachers or lecturers can alert their audience to the possibilities of what a book half a century ago called "Future Shock."

History as grounding for citizenship and policy-making

It is possible for school history to supplement and reinforce a sense of national identity in countries that are not too big or too powerful, or where the upper class ceded its privileges long ago. The problem starts when history is used to defend the power or wealth of a country, class or an ethnic group. Such nations are wounded nations, where the powerful steal the history of the powerless. Almost always there is a challenge from below that seeks to overthrow the existing order peacefully or violently.

When in power the Afrikaner nationalists projected the key concepts of their history onto the history of other communities. Every group was deemed to be a nation or a nation in the making, defined not by the people themselves but by God, the Voorsienigheid or "history". They were all supposed to be craving

¹² F Smit, "Demografie: Die toekoms wat reeds gebeur het – wêreldtendense met spesiale verwysing na Suid-Afrika", HF Verwoerd Gedenklesing, Orania, 2010.

to learn their “nation’s” history and to be taught in their mother tongue.

In the present era there is an attempt, particularly by bureaucrats in the education department, to depict the whites as merely fringe figures in a scene dominated by blacks. I hear that in a draft history syllabus circulating at the moment there is a ridiculous attempt to describe the Great Trek as a “white *difaqane*” and to present the military battles between the Boer commandos and British army as a sideshow of the black experience of the war.

But it is not only wounded nations that suffer from this malaise. A study of American school and university textbooks reveals that history is constantly being rewritten to suit the most recent pedagogical fads and the self-regard of the dominant group. The purpose is not so much to inform as to manipulate children. The author concludes: “Small wonder American school children often find history boring and valueless”.¹³

Radical historians rightly challenge history written in the service of the powerful, but then they go too far: they belittle or ridicule the achievements of those in power. Tony Judt, a most stimulating historian, remarked on this:

The historian’s task is not to disrupt just for the sake of it, but it is to tell what is almost always an uncomfortable story and to explain why the discomfort is part of the truth we need to have to live properly. A well-organized society is one which knows the truth about itself and not one in which we tell pleasant lies about ourselves. History can show you that there was only one pile of bad stuff after another. It can also show you that there has been tremendous progress in knowledge, behaviour, laws, and civilization. But it cannot show you there was a meaning behind it all.¹⁴

In his book *Possessed by the past*, Richard Lowenthal writes of a “culture of victimhood that haunts the classroom” in the United States. A review remarked that the author objected to “the positive relish for belittlement and a settled determination to debunk on all occasions. To tell people of all the flaws and mistakes without showing that a country or a nation has some remarkable achievements is to fall down on the job”.¹⁵ History offers much that is disturbing and progress is not unbroken. But people also want to look at reassuring precedents, otherwise they feel like the character Stephen in

¹³ F Fitzgerald, *America revised* (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1979).

¹⁴ Cited in *The Observer* (London), “Tony Judt, historian, dies, 62”, 8 August 2010,

¹⁵ R Jenkyns, “Cards of identity”, *New York review of books*, 23 April 1998, p. 50.

James Joyce's Ulysses who said: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."

In editing, with Bernard Mbenga, the *New History of South Africa/Nuwe Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* (Tafelberg, 2007) I saw the task as that of putting our history together in such a way that it acknowledges all the wrongs and blunders, while also stressing our people's ability to survive, adapt and make progress. I indicate some of the main themes below.

We are all out of Africa and we may in fact all be 'inkommers' in South Africa

I have concluded that while most of the future of South Africa is certain – it is and will remain black – its past has become radically uncertain. Over the past fifteen years one of the greatest advances in our knowledge about human beings in South Africa is the new archaeological insights regarding the transition from the Stone Age to the Iron Age. In particular, there is the discovery that the whole of humankind descended from people who had once lived in Africa.

Seven decades ago we thought of the history of South Africa as spanning three hundred years. Then some historians from Unisa thought they would do a really brave thing and publish a history with the title *500 Jaar Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis*. They were upstaged by the *Oxford history of South Africa*, which traced our history back to 2 000 years ago.

As it turns out, the editors of *OHSA* were far too conservative. In the present literature the African Eve hypothesis holds sway. When the manuscript of the *New History of South Africa* was ready but still lacked a title, I was tempted to call it "A history of South Africa: From Eva to Zuma". This was not a reference to Eva, the Khoikhoi woman who once lived in Jan van Riebeeck's Castle, but to the African Eve, who lived some 200 000 years ago on this continent. DNA types found presently in our global human population can be traced back to this single ancestor. We now know that all of humankind happens to be "out of Africa" in a very literal sense of the word.

A quick chronology reads as follows:

- 200 000 years ago: African Eve lived;

- 100 000 years ago: Creatures that looked like us roamed around in Africa;
- 60 000 years ago: A small group of Africans, initially probably as few as 150, left East Africa and populated the rest of the world;
- 50 000 years ago: Language in its modern form emerged in Africa;
- 35 000 years ago: The African migrants displaced and wiped out the only other modern human species, the Neanderthals;
- 25 000 years ago: Some racial variations between modern Africans and modern Europeans began to appear;
- 2 000 years ago: The Khoisan migrated into what is today South Africa; at about the same time the first Iron Age Bantu-speaking peoples settled south of the Limpopo and then moved rapidly into the eastern half of the country. They were settled in what is now KwaZulu-Natal by 400 AD and the Eastern Cape by 600 AD;
- 350 years ago: Some of the descendants of those who left had left Africa 50 000 to 60 000 years ago returned to South Africa;
- 230 years ago: the first intensive interaction between whites and Africans in the area east of the Sundays River.

In Afrikaans there is the word *inkommers* – those who have moved in. All people who live in South Africa today are *inkommers*. The only exceptions are those who are “pure” Bushmen and there cannot be many of them.

We have come a long way very fast

We are all part of a land that has seen great tragedies but also great triumphs.

The history I have co-edited does not have a unifying theme, like the struggle against oppression and injustice (*Readers Digest history of South Africa*). Instead there are several minor themes: The realization of the different peoples that no one living could survive on their own and at the expense of others. Enslaving others also enslaved the owner. The main story is one of continuous adaptation and accommodation.

It has not been a bed of roses for most. As late as 1941 CW de Kiewiet remarked that South Africa is essentially a country of low-grade gold ore, low-grade land, and low-grade human beings.¹⁶ By the latter term he meant

¹⁶ CW de Kiewiet, *A history of South Africa* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 212.

poorly educated people, which was true for all population groups. Apart from a small upper stratum in the white community, by far the majority of people did not live much above the level of mere survival and had a very rudimentary education. As the character played by Alec Guinness in the movie *Doctor Zhivago* said: “We have come a very long way very fast”.

Although the struggle to gain and retain the upper hand was fierce and unforgiving, there was no serious destructive impulse. In 1949 the elderly Jan Smuts, recently defeated in a momentous election, observed: “The whole world is moving into a Colour phase of history, with results none can foresee and South Africa should dread most. Still, the worst, like the best, never happens [in South Africa]”.¹⁷

This ignores some of the cruellest episodes in South African history – the attempted extermination of the Bushmen, the subjugation of the Xhosa and their national suicide, the suffering of migrant workers on the mines, and the deaths of women and children in concentration camps during the South African War. During the 1930s and 1940s the slums in South African cities were considered to be among the worst in the world. Apartheid destroyed many close-knit communities and closed off career opportunities just when people began to see new horizons.

But the worst did not happen in the 1980s and 1990s; the feared bloodbath did not occur. South Africans proved to be resilient and innovative in finding a new basis for their co-existence.

We tend to magnify our failures and miss the magnitude of our successes

If someone from Mars were to land here without any clue about our history and start reading our newspapers and magazines, he would probably conclude that some major setback had occurred here in the first half of the twentieth century, followed by an unmitigated disaster in the second half. This someone would probably believe that in terms of some key economic indicators South Africa had slumped some thirty or forty places in the world league between 1948 and 1994.

¹⁷ Cited in H Giliomee and B Mbenga, *New History of South Africa* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2007), p. 437.

Such a dramatic decline did indeed occur in some countries. Between the 1930s and 1990 Argentina slumped in terms of per capita income from a place in the top ten in the world in 1930 to fiftieth by 1990. That happens when you get sharp swings from the left to right in government, along with large-scale state corruption and a military that can seize power any time.

In South Africa there has never been a major economic slump lasting for more than three or four years. The upward curve of the economy has been virtually unbroken since the time of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Since 1945 the size of the economy increased threefold.

What were the reasons for the astounding growth of South Africa during the twentieth century? Why did the country not remain a mining camp dependent largely on imports for manufactured goods and food? Why has South Africa grown so strongly? Historians have tended to emphasise the damage the politics of segregation or apartheid did to growth and development, but they have rarely bothered to ask what alternative political system would have produced the high growth we did experience. Is it conceivable that the black miners would have continued to dig for gold at their extremely low wages if they had had the right to strike? Would we have had the high inflow of international capital in fixed investment in the twenty years after the end of the Second World War if there was a real chance of a black government coming into power soon? Let us look for some trends.

Continuity in the civil service

It was that *bête noire* of Afrikaner historiography, Lord Alfred Milner, who was responsible for inaugurating the good and efficient administration that was so beneficial for economic growth. He had this refreshing, if undemocratic, perspective on governance: "All good government is good administration, all the rest is rot." By 1910 South Africa had a far better civil service than any country could expect at that stage of its development. For whites there were proper tax collection, effective local government, and an independent, clean civil service.¹⁸ Although the Afrikaners acquired political power in 1910, the nationalists did not insist on Afrikanerising the middle and top levels of the civil service. In 1960, fifty years after Union, Afrikaners, forming 58 per cent of the white population, filled 57% of the upper levels of the civil service posts.¹⁹ Apart from a few isolated cases, corruption on the higher levels was rare.

18 M O'Dowd, "An assessment of English-speaking South Africa's contribution to the economy", A de Villiers (ed.), *English-speaking South Africa today* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 149.

19 S van Wyk, "Die huidige beroepsposisie van die Afrikaner in die stad" (Ph.D., University of Pretoria, 1967), p. 307.

The government left alone an English business class that was unapologetic about striving for wealth

There is no place in the world where a community of English speakers was so lacking in political power and yet so totally dominant in the economy as was the case with English-speaking South Africans. Yet they did not feel any need to apologize for their economic power or to assist the Afrikaners or any other group in building up their businesses. English-speaking business in fact went on with the business of doing business. Shortly before his death I asked Anton Rupert whether he knew of any cases of Afrikaner businesses being assisted and helped on their feet by English corporations. His succinct answer was: "I cannot think of any and I am grateful for that".²⁰

The politicians during the period of Union had the good sense to start a parastatal sector

One of the strange things about South Africa is that there never was a serious attempt to nationalize industry. The Pact government under Genl. JBM Hertzog established Iscor and Eskom and the Smuts government during the Second World War founded the Industrial Development Corporation, which greatly contributed to the rise of a local manufacturing sector. These corporations provided the main avenue for Afrikaners to acquire managerial expertise and helped to dampen any flirtation with nationalisation.

Having a history of colonisation does not condemn a state to failure

Colonialism certainly was cruel and unjust, but it also created the potential for a successful state. Brazil was also once a colonial state that practised widespread slaveholding, but is now considered a very successful state despite a huge level of inequality almost as wide of that of South Africa. South Africa has never been considered a failed state.

Black and coloured people continued to strive for a better life despite the handicaps imposed on them

A democracy cannot be consolidated, except in specific conditions. What is

²⁰ H Giliomee (Personal Collection), Interview, A Rupert/H Giliomee, 3 May 1999.

required are the following:

- stable middle class in the dominant group based in the private sector;
- urban working class that has established trade unions;
- functioning system of mass education and a reasonable degree of literacy;
- social and political organization in all sections of the population;
- occupational mobility;
- growing degree of house ownership; and
- relatively free press.

Black and coloured people did everything they could to get their children a good education, although they knew it was inferior to that of whites. They built up trade unions despite oppressive measures. They acquired their own homes and became consumers. They became politically active and formed organizations and civic societies. During the 1980s they mustered enough opposition to force the government to fundamentally reconsider its position.

Relatively low levels of political violence

The conflict between white and black in South Africa never culminated in waves of ethnic cleansing of the magnitude of the killing fields of Yugoslavia during the Second World War or that of Rwanda in 1994. In both these cases hundreds of thousands of people died. Such massacres make it impossible for people to live together peacefully together under a democracy.

Between 1984 and 1994 just over 20 000 people died in the conflict in South Africa. As Table 1 shows, this figure is very low in comparative terms. In terms of political deaths as a proportion of the population, it is the lowest of all the major ethnic conflicts in the last sixty years. All over the world ethnic conflicts with high death tolls occur in one of the following two contexts. One is an invasion by an army or irregular forces; the other is when a government loses control over its armed forces or uses such forces to attack communities in ethnic cleansing operations. Neither context existed in South Africa.

Table 1: Deaths in selected ethnic conflicts²¹ (approximate figures)

Country	Deaths	Population (millions)	Years of conflict	Deaths as percentage
Cambodia*	2 400 000	7.2 (1971)	1975–1978	33.3%
Rwanda	800 000	8.0 (1990)	1994	10.0%
Chechnya	90 000	1.1 (2002)	1994–2005	8.2%
Guatemala	200 000	3.8 (1962)	1960–1998	5.3%
Bosnia	200 000	4.0 (2002)	1992–1995	5.0%
Algeria**	300 000	10.0 (1965)	1954–1962	3.3%
East Timor	18 600	1.0 (2006)	1974–1999	1.9%
N. Ireland	3 500	1.4 (1961)	1968–1998	0.7%
South Africa	19 000	26.0 (1988)	1984–1993	0.07%

* The deaths in Cambodia are estimated to be in the range of 1.7 million to 3 million.

** The Algerian government that came to power in 1962 put the death toll at a million.

History tells us where we come from and who we are, and if we are lucky it may teach us a little bit of wisdom

In a country such as South Africa, with its history of division, the question of social identity is often addressed on different levels. Every person is an individual. Most identify with the nation of South Africa, but there are also individuals who at the same time identify strongly with their particular community or a religious group.

How should historians tell their story? Tony Judt, one of the most interesting modern historians, remarked: “History is a story, a story needs a narrator and a narrator needs to be standing somewhere. The view from nowhere does not work”.²² He stressed that the concern with the universal should not obscure the national or the particular elements of a story.

When I began writing a history of the Afrikaners, I saw my challenge as that of writing with empathy for the Afrikaners without condoning or explaining away the injustices that Afrikaners have perpetrated. In the book’s introduction, written late in 2002, I cited the words of FDH Kitto, a historian of Ancient Greece: “To understand is not necessarily to pardon, but there is no harm in

²¹ Table 1 compiled by the author from information as obtained in several sources.

²² T Judt, “The story of everything”, *New York Review of Books*, 21 September 2000, p. 66.

trying to understand”. This statement is not quite the safe position it seems. At the book launch Neville Alexander, a highly regarded literary scholar and political activist, responded to my quote by citing Madame De Stael’s “Tout comprendre rend très indulgent”. The *Oxford concise dictionary of quotations* translates this as: “To be totally understanding makes one very indulgent”. One could also say “too indulgent”. Alexander’s comment highlights this very fine but also very important line between apology and empathy.

An American scholar who had embarked on a study of the Maoris in New Zealand asked a respected Maori leader how to approach the task. He advised her first to write the story of her own people. We understand or judge other people better if we get to know our own community well – warts and all. History is above all about sound judgement. The skill that historians and history educators must impart to pupils and students is that of unlocking history from the sources, asking the right questions from those who have left a record, and making an impartial judgement. In a sense it is the same task as that of a judge. Judging one’s own people is always a good start, for one should be able to separate reason from mere rationalisations. A century ago Rudyard Kipling said after returning to England from India where he grew up: “It is nice to be among your countrymen because you know when they are lying”.

People read history and novels to put themselves in the position of people having to make decisions that test their moral character. The challenge for the historian is to enable the reader to enter into the minds of people on both sides of a conflict and view their fears and aspirations sympathetically.

How it really was

The challenge of history is to respect the integrity of each historical epoch and to refrain from judging people with the benefit of hindsight. In insisting that historians should try to record history *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, the German historian Leopold von Ranke wrote the first and most important rule of history: One must understand past politics in its own context. Each period in history is “immediate to God” and has to be treated on its own terms. The task of the historian is to understand the past, not to change the present political order. Hence, the study of the past should be divorced from the passions, values and motivations of our present conflicts.

The British historian Herbert Butterfield suggested an apt metaphor for an attempt to write history to conform to present prejudices and obsessions: “When we organise our general history with reference to the present we are producing what is really a giant optical illusion.” It is quite wrong to abstract things from their historical context and judge them apart from that context. It is also wrong to see history marching inexorably to its fated outcome. In each generation there is what Butterfield calls “a clash of wills out of which there emerges something that probably no man ever willed”.²³

Yet another challenge is to get students and pupils to grapple not only with what did indeed happen, but also with what did *not* happen and the reason why history did not take an alternative course or courses. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga advised historians to constantly put themselves “at a point in the past at which the known factors will seem to permit different outcomes”.²⁴

Thirteen years ago a book appeared that was edited by Niall Ferguson, a well-known economic historian. It is called *Virtual history: Alternatives and counterfactuals* (Picador, 1997). Among the chapter headings there are:

- What if there had been no American revolution?
- What if Britain had stood aside in August 1914?
- What if Nazi Germany had defeated Britain?

Defending the use of counterfactuals as a heuristic device, Ferguson writes that we constantly ask counterfactual questions in our daily lives and then adds:²⁵

Of course we know perfectly that we cannot travel back in time and do things differently, But the business of imagining such counterfactuals is a vital part of the way we learn. Because decisions about the future are – usually – based on weighing up the potential consequences of alternative courses of action, it makes sense to compare the actual outcomes of what we did in the past with the conceivable outcomes of what we might have done.

Let us take the example of the Munich agreement that Neville Chamberlain signed with Adolf Hitler in 1938 in an attempt to stave off a second European war within the space of twenty years. Was Chamberlain misguided or was he

23 H Butterfield, *The Whig interpretation of the past* (New York, Norton, 1965), p. 28.

24 N Ferguson, *Virtual history: Alternatives and counterfactuals* (London, Picador, 1997), p. 1.

25 N Ferguson, *Virtual history...* (London, Picador, 1997), p. 2.

in fact quite rational in trying to reach an agreement with Nazi Germany? We must try to assess his motivations without bringing into play our knowledge that Hitler was utterly ill-suited as a negotiating partner and that Nazi Germany was bent on going to war.

We can also point out the folly of American politicians waging war in Vietnam on the spurious grounds that Munich taught the lesson that the Free World had to stand up to dictators at an early stage. A study of History as a complex and unique set of events must safeguard us against drawing the wrong lessons from history.

In the case of South Africa we can ask:

- What if the South African War (1899-1902) had ended before the *Bittereinder* phase of the war and before the concentration camps were established?
- What if the Coloured voters had remained on the voters roll?
- What if the United Party won the 1948 election and introduced the qualified franchise?
- What if the ANC chose to organise the workers after 1961 instead of many leaders going into exile and launching the armed struggle?
- What if the Berlin Wall, Communism and the Soviet bloc had not collapsed?

A key question about apartheid that needs to be asked is the following: What were the options open to the government after the Second World War had ended? A look at the three models of socio-political development offered in *No easy choice* by Samuel Huntington and Nelson is instructive. (It must be emphasised that the authors did not write this with South Africa in mind). The book proposes three models to depict different development paths, which I outline below. I am offering the models here as examples of counterfactual history.

Huntington and Nelson call their first model the “vicious circle of the technocratic model”:

- less political participation (i.e. curtailment of the vote);
- leading to more socio-economic development as a result of the suppression of the working class;
- less socio-economic equality;
- less political stability; and

- ending with a participation explosion.

This was the route South Africa followed by and large, except for the fact that after 1975 there was not less socio-economic equality but a gradual narrowing of the white-black gap. The apartheid period can be divided into two: the harsh and rigid first phase, lasting until the early 1970s, and the reformist phase from 1972-1994. By the early 1990s South Africa was spending more, as a percentage of GDP, on social assistance in the form of non-contributory schemes than some developed countries and more than almost any country in the developing South. In 1993 interracial parity was achieved in old-age pensions.²⁶

The second model of Huntington and Nelson is called the “vicious circle of the populist model”:

- more political participation (i.e. extension of the vote);
- leading to more socio-economic equality;
- less socio-economic development;
- less political stability and the flight of capital; and
- a participation implosion (i.e. suspension of democracy).

One could argue that this is more or less what would have happened if the ANC had gained power in the 1950s: A rapid extension of the franchise from the platform of the qualified vote, leading to the implementation of the Freedom Charter and the nationalisation of several industries. As a result of the consequent flight of investment capital, there would be less socio-economic development followed by less political stability (white resistance and urban riots), ending in a “participation implosion” (suspension of Parliament and the rule of law).

Huntington and Nelson also introduced a third model, called the “benign liberal model”. This assumes that broad-based socio-economic development would lead to greater socio-economic equality, producing both political stability and democratic political participation.

The journalistic view of apartheid in South Africa today is a crude amalgam of both the liberal and populist model.

²⁶ J Seekings, “Providing for the poor: Welfare and redistribution in South Africa”, Inaugural lecture, University of Cape Town, 23 April 2003.

Let me outline this view briefly:

The more people were brought into the market and schools after 1945 on the basis of equality,

- the more the economy would open up and the more the labour market would be liberalised;
- the more the economy would expand;
- the more political freedoms would increase;
- the more stable the political system would become;
- the more racial and ethnic tensions would dissolve; and
- the more prosperity and happiness would ensue.

In brief, this adds up to the proposition that liberal capitalism (a free-market economy) and a liberal democracy go together. This is indeed what happened in developed countries that were fortunate enough to have a fairly homogenous population. However, liberal capitalism and liberal democracy have not gone together in countries in South-east Asia and in Africa. People do not compete or vote here on an individual basis, as liberals believe, but as members of a group. The market strongly tends to favour certain ethnic minorities over others.

To understand apartheid one must look beyond the issues of morality and fairness, which are undoubtedly important. We must also ask: what were the alternatives open to those holding power? What would have happened if political and industrial democracy had been introduced at a much earlier stage?...

Conclusion

We study history in order to help us understand the world in which we live. Our world is radically different from the world that past generations had known, but that does not mean that some lessons are no longer applicable. The economic historian Niall Ferguson stressed this recently at the launch of his biography of Siegmund Warburg (1902-1982), who played a major role in the development of merchant banking in London. Asked what was the great moral change between today, with the world facing a major financial crisis, and the days in which Warburg worked, Ferguson replied: Bankers like

Warburg had seared into their memories the lessons of the Great Depression that started in 1929, and particularly the lessons of reckless, speculative banking. They would have scoffed at financial and political scoundrels of today who claim that the systems of the modern era are much more different, are much more sophisticated and can never fail.²⁷ This is where a sense of history comes in. What it says is this: Pride comes before a fall. Systems failed and can fail again. History urges caution.

Pupils, educators and students today face a much more complex world than the previous two or three generations. Yet some things do not change. The best skill a high school education can give a young person is the ability to think independently and to write clearly (the two often go together). To this I would add a *historisches verstehen*, a historical understanding that comprehends the past in its own context. Grasping what made societies change in the past puts one in a better position to make sense of the turbulent politics of today and an uncertain future. At least one is likely to be slightly less surprised by the unexpected twists and turns that lie ahead.

²⁷ N Ferguson, "Men, money and morality: How can trust in banking be restored?", unpublished talk given to St Paul's Institute, London, 6 July 2010.