



**LEGACIES OF 1918 IN 2018:
The Role of Historians and Heads of State**

**A lecture by President of Iceland
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A century has passed since the end of World War I. That war is long over, and memories have been overlaid with the veil of passing years. Anger, grief and rancour no longer possess the minds of the peoples and rulers of Europe, as was widespread in the aftermath of the war. Memories of the years of World War I, and its conclusion, also differ from country to country.

The same is true, of course, of individuals – and not only those who served on the front line, but also those who came along later to study past times. For instance, a historian may have a different perception on the First World War than a head of state. In the unusual circumstances that they are one and the same person, problems may arise.

It is from that dual perspective that I consider memories of World War I, the objectives and role of historians and heads of state – then and now. What were national leaders doing in the prelude to the conflict, during it, and at the end? Was it not Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany who was largely responsible for the outbreak of war – in his nationalist extremism? And was not the Versailles Treaty largely determined by French leader Clemenceau – resentful and vengeful? Or were they and others simply floating along in the currents of history? Are even the most powerful leaders simply pawns in the game of history, sleepwalkers of a kind?

And what about the historians? Does their work matter? “History is more or less bunk,” said Henry Ford at the height of World War I. Was that really so? Prior to 1914 the majority of historians saw themselves as working in the interests of their nation, state or empire. In Iceland, for instance, the nation’s history was generally recounted in three acts: an early Golden Age of independence and our own Commonwealth, followed by centuries of foreign oppression, after which the Icelanders reawakened to consciousness of their glorious past and their right to stand on their own feet. Narratives of that type naturally inspired the people of Iceland.

Of course, Icelandic historians can never be accused of contributing to war hype – and nor indeed can those who created comparable origin stories within the Habsburg empire, although a growing sense of national identity was no doubt a contributory factor in the events leading up to World War I.

But what of the responsibilities of historians in more powerful nations? The writings of many French historians were characterised by hostility towards Germans and love for France; adherents of the “Prussian School” of scholarship developed an aggressively nationalistic view of history in their homeland; in Britain, Whiggish historians lauded the British Empire and the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. To take a specific example: the German Kaiser, and the architects of British foreign policy, were demonstrably impressed by Alfred Mahan’s writings on the importance of displaying one’s might and power on the oceans. “Thus, once again an historian has helped to make history as well as to record it,” wrote G. P. Gooch in his book about historians and 19th-century historiography.

Then war broke out, and everybody was recruited, in one way or another. The past was “weaponised” for warlike purposes. In a recent review of history-writing in the last few centuries, Georg Iggers and Q. Edward Wang maintain that never before had governments enlisted historians as effectively in their propaganda efforts.

At the end of the war the history was, as usual, written by the victors. The Allied powers published documents intended to corroborate the story that the war had been sparked by bellicose elements in Berlin and Vienna. Admittedly, German authorities had in fact started the process by a similar effort, intended to disprove such allegations. At the same time, there were historians who took a broader view. In 1928, delegates at the International Historical Congress in Oslo spoke of the need to review and

write new history textbooks, to use the past to advance peace and international collaboration.

After the Second World War, historians continued to explore the causes of the First War; Fritz Fischer propounded the theory, still widely accepted, that the main responsibility lay with the Kaiser and German government. However, in Barbara Tuchman's gripping account of events leading to the war it is striking to observe how far powerful individuals appear to have been at the mercy of fate, how they were taken by surprise in August 1914 when the guns started firing. Tuchman's book is known to have influenced President John F. Kennedy's thinking during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962; and here we have an example of historical writing about a previous war having a beneficial impact – unlike the abortive plans to proselytise for peace during the interwar years.

In our own time, German Chancellor Angela Merkel too was won over by a tome by her fellow countryman, historian Jürgen Osterhammel, about the globalisation of the 19th century, which was sadly brought to an end by World War I. That message is said to have influenced her position on international affairs and immigration – to some degree at least.

Besides, international bodies and institutes are still striving to advance history that advocates peace and collaboration, rather than chauvinism, xenophobia and conflict. Let me give you some telling examples. The Council of Europe runs an intergovernmental project, "Educating for diversity and democracy - teaching history in contemporary Europe." An e-textbook, published by the Council, is called "Shared histories for a Europe without dividing lines". Its latest publication, "Quality history education in the 21st century", has the following description: "History education has an important role to play in confronting the current political, cultural and social challenges facing Europe; in particular, those posed by the increasingly diverse nature of societies, the integration of migrants and refugees into Europe, and by attacks on democracy and democratic values."

Yes, history can shape people's minds. Let's be careful, however, not to exaggerate the influence of historians in that regard. It can easily be argued that the poets and storytellers had and have more power, Wilfred Owen or John McCrae, or Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* and Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, not to mention the British *Blackadder* series; presumably that satirical comedy has done more to demonstrate the horrors of the trenches than any textbook.

We must admit that despite good intentions and specific examples, historians and public or international bodies have not been that successful

in shaping people's collective memory, or in fighting the abuse of history for political and chauvinistic purposes. We also must admit that full peace has not reigned in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Within the borders of former Yugoslavia, to take the most violent example, civil conflicts raged where distorted versions of the past and ethnic hatred were powerful weapons. "Usable History?", is the apt name of a work on that topic by the Danish historian Tea Sindbæk Andersen, one of many in that field.

So, let us recall in the end Henry Ford's words in the First World War about the uselessness of history. At the start of this century you could hear an echo of these words. One of the US President's top advisers told a journalist who was working on a book about the White House that "We're history's *actors* . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just *study* what we do."

With full respect for historians, should we conclude that it is not history which is bunk, but the historians? If so, would this lack of influence necessarily be a bad thing? It would then primarily be caused because historians in today's world do not consider it their duty to work for the people in power and their definition of the national cause.

In the hands of others, however, history remains a powerful weapon. Now that we remember the end of the First World War we should rather direct our attention to leaders of states, big and small. How do they recall this tragedy? On the 11th of November, Armistice Day, many leaders convened at a Peace Summit in Paris. Those who spoke honoured the memory of those who lost their lives in the conflict. They promised to work for the cause of peace. They rejected chauvinism, extremism and ethnic hatred.

All spoke on behalf of their own state. "Long live France!" were Emmanuel Macron's concluding words. People must be able to express and demonstrate love for their country and its heritage, learn about its unique history, become filled with pride, sorrow or anger as they do so. At the same time, it is vital to introduce people to the history of other nations and states, learn about the common developments and threads that have shaped every nation's past. In Paris, I put it thus: "We should foster positive patriotism. That sentiment has nothing in common with fear and hatred towards others, an embellished image of one's own nation. We must avoid the evils of chauvinism and xenophobia, lest they lead to similar horrors which we now recall at this meeting."

This I would also have said as a historian. We historians can have an impact! We should want to have an impact, for the better. And we must

be allowed to have an impact, write history and tell our tales as we deem fit, enjoy our personal, academic and press freedom, even if the authorities or sections of the public do not like what we have to say, here in Iceland or in other countries.

Let us all — historians, heads of state and others — therefore continue to recall the horrors of the First World War, mindful of what tragedies can happen but optimistic as well. In life, it is always better to be optimistic than fearful. But it is also better to be aware, be on guard, rather than suffer the fate of the sleepwalkers.