Should anyone be ashamed of their nation's history? Should anyone be proud of it?

"All knowledge is political. How we think about the past, and our relationship to it, reveals profound assumptions about how we treat one another, how we govern society, and what obligation we have to institute change in our present societies."[1] Through national education programs, modern states often present a coordinated narrative of their history. Daniel Sonnenfeld summarizes "History has become a weapon to be wielded in political battle, rather than a source of edification and inspiration. Historiographical debates have transformed from learned arguments among professional historians to public skirmishes between left and right."[2] The reception of this narrative is crucial: do we take it with pride and shame, or do we strive to develop our own understanding and be cautious in devoting our sentiments?

Building on the idea of critical engagement with national narratives, this paper argues that individuals should not automatically feel pride or shame regarding their nation's history. Feeling pride in one's national history offers clear benefits: joy and pride in being a citizen, a sense of unity, and national cohesion. Shame possesses similar power; during times of national crisis, past disgraces can easily unite citizens for collective action. However, the strong emotional pull of these national historical sentiments brings more harm than good. Instead, individuals should have the autonomy to direct their pride and shame toward the broader history of the human race, transcending national boundaries and state-constructed narratives.

Following the widespread establishment of mandatory public education systems in the 19th and 20th centuries, a standardized historical narrative began to be taught to every individual, primarily focusing on the nation's past and its particular interpretation of

international events. These national histories thus became carefully crafted narratives, often bending the truth to serve the political needs of the state. As George Orwell states, "Who controls the past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past."[3] Consequently, politicians manipulate an idealized or selective version of the nation's past, strategically omitting unpleasantness or inconvenience, to evoke specific emotions like nostalgia, pride, or shame. Ultimately, this approach to history functions as a powerful tool for state control, shaping collective memory for political ends.

What makes history such a diverse area is its openness to interpretation and narration. "History is work in progress, a constant writing and rewriting as opposed to museum-quality sculpture in milk-white marble."[4] This inherent flexibility means that national history can serve as a powerful force for unity, particularly during times of crisis. For instance, shared narratives of past achievements can inspire collective pride and resilience, rallying a populace toward common goals. Conversely, confronting historical disgraces can also forge a powerful sense of collective responsibility and a common resolve to rectify past wrongs, mobilizing citizens through a shared sense of shame or a desire for justice.

A powerful illustration of this lies in China's emphasis on the historical analogy of the "century of shame". Starting after the first opium war with "devastating foreign invasions, a series of unequal treaties, and deep internal turmoil"[5], this is a crucial part of the narrative of Chinese modern history. Instilling shame in the Chinese people, this historical analogy propelled the new nation towards development and prosperity, they were powered by the firm belief of not letting history repeat itself and the shame ensue. It united the nation through the cold war and arduous path of development. However, nowadays it has come somewhat of a

doctrine behind aggressive international policies of the government and increasing xenophobia of the Chinese people. As Michael Zhou states “Chinese view the current geopolitical landscape through the lens of this century of humiliation, foreign criticism is perceived as international bullying and American naval operations in the South China Sea trigger memories of imperial gunboat diplomacy. As a result, Chinese leaders and diplomats feel compelled to take a more assertive, even aggressive posture, lest China’s foreign policy be criticized as a political sell-out by the people.”[6]

While national history can inspire collective action to rectify past wrongs, its deliberate manipulation by states often yields catastrophic consequences, as exemplified by Nazi Germany. This regime represents one of mankind's most significant failings, bringing out the worst in those who conformed blindly, committing what Hannah Arendt termed the “banality of evil.”[7] It vividly demonstrates the disastrous outcomes of directing our sentiments at state-crafted historical propaganda. Heinrich Himmler explicitly stated, “We will rewrite history from the standpoint of the race... History must be the weapon of our struggle.”[8] Undoubtedly, the distortion and recrafting of history were central to Nazi propaganda and national mobilization, exploiting symbols from the Roman salute to the Teutonic cross, and incorporating figures like Wagner, Heidegger, and Nietzsche to remind Germans of “the struggle against foreign enemies and Jewish subversion.”[9] In his speeches, Hitler extensively exploited history to evoke both pride and shame. As Laurence Rees's book *Nazi Mind* discusses, by drawing on history to encourage sentiment directed at the Jewish people, Hitler inadvertently tapped into the amygdala's survival mechanism, subduing the parts of the brain that offer logical analysis.[10]

Individuals possess the agency to develop historical understandings that transcend national

narratives, embracing the experiences of groups often overlooked by state-sanctioned accounts. This includes examining the often-forgotten histories of groups without nations, as well as the experiences of immigrants and refugees. No national narrative adequately emphasizes their contributions, yet these groups have significantly shaped many great nations. Be it the Chinese immigrant workers who built the transcontinental railroad in The United States with a 10% fatality rate[11], or the gypsies who spread their unique culture around the world despite overwhelming discrimination, or the one and half million Armenians massacred by the Ottoman empire in a forgotten genocide.[12] Their stories deserve to be told and viewed as a reflection of the best and worst in humanity.

The story of the Hmong people, often ignored by national historical narratives, offers profound insights into human suffering and resilience, prompting reflection on human nature that should not be erased. Initially settling the Yellow River valley, the Hmong faced repressive policies from the Ming and Qing dynasties, leading to armed conflict and their migration to modern Laos and Vietnam. In the 18th and 19th centuries, their Manchu overlords even targeted them for genocide. Later, during the late 1960s, war and strife again struck as communist regimes rose in Laos and Vietnam. The CIA recruited the anti-communist Hmong to serve as a "secret army," with roughly 60 percent of Hmong men, totaling around 30,000, joining[13]. The US's extensive bombing of Laos devastated Hmong agriculture, forcing reliance on food drops that the CIA used as blackmail. With a mortality rate ten times that of American soldiers, nearly half the Hmong population perished by the war's end[14]. Once the US withdrew, relief programs ceased, and the Lao People's Party declared the Hmong enemies of the state. Forgotten in the narratives of national history, through traversing national boundaries, historians and society in

general have come to know their story as an important part of the legacy of the cold war and struggles of ethnic minorities. This has brought widespread efforts for repatriation and international aid for the Hmong people as well as those groups with similar experiences who have been ignored in the sweeping narratives of national history.

The recent global response to the humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian territories clearly illustrates individuals' resistance to state-fueled historical narratives. An international coalition of labor unions, solidarity movements, and human rights organizations from over 50 countries marched into Gaza, with even UN Secretary General António Guterres confronting Israeli soldiers at Rafah to demand aid access, while protests reverberated worldwide. This global solidarity emerged despite authoritative narratives emphasizing Israeli security concerns, which often downplayed the humanitarian crisis and Palestinian rights. The movement draws strength from historical struggles against foreign occupation and domination, tracing its lineage from Nasser's support at the Bandung conference to Che Guevara's visit to Gaza and the SNCC's backing after the 1967 war[15]. In 1970, 56 Black activists published "An Appeal by Black Americans Against United States Support for the Zionist Government of Israel"[16] in *The New York Times*, declaring solidarity with Palestinians struggling against racist oppression. This demonstrates how common history can unite diverse nations and communities, reflecting shared virtues and morals. The Palestinian people's struggle has become a worldwide symbol of liberation for the oppressed, a common piece of history worth acknowledging regardless of nationality.

There are crises that pride and shame derived from national history simply cannot tackle; only with an understanding of human suffering throughout history can we unite as the human

community to solve global problems. Consider, for instance, the escalating climate crisis and the profound implications of the Anthropocene. These challenges, by their very nature, disregard national borders and affect all humanity, rendering solutions rooted in nationalistic pride or shame utterly insufficient. Addressing such existential threats demands unprecedented global cooperation, requiring a collective identity that extends beyond state boundaries. "What brings people to engage in collective political struggle across long distances, hard borders, and perceived boundaries?"[17] It is the virtues reflected in our shared human history, the human nature that instinctively leads us to empathize and aid our fellow humans in plight regardless of national boundaries.

An understanding of shared human suffering throughout history can lead to collective actions that ultimately change the course of history for the better. Apartheid was one of the first humanitarian concerns addressed globally. The policies of racial segregation practiced by South Africa united the global community across national boundaries and political standings. America and Britain saw the birth of divestment and boycott movements aiming to destroy the South African economy to force reforms. Reminded by their historical struggles for civil rights, "Thousands of people who never attended a meeting or demonstration showed their opposition to apartheid by refusing to buy goods from South Africa."[18] 155 American universities joined the divestment movement in the same way their students once protested for civil rights of their own, the movement gained momentum on the "federal, state, and local level as well as in private corporations and the education system."[19] These efforts would eventually culminate in the 1986 Anti-Apartheid Act and the end of apartheid.

Nelson Mandela, the face of the anti-apartheid movement, took lessons and strength from

history as well. Harris Majeke, South Africa's ambassador to India, said: “Mandela was inspired by the Satyagraha campaign led by Gandhi. It was a compelling act of passive protest against oppression. This would later inspire the African National Congress and strengthen Mandela's belief in our shared humanity.”[20] The shared virtues of humanity in history traversed the national borders or the two countries. What Mandela learned from Gandhi was “the essential virtues of forgiveness and compassion, values that served him and his country very well.”[21] It is evident that the inspiration of former social movements devoid of national and political narratives aided society’s progression towards equality. Pride and shame derived from non-national historical narratives encourage us to confront the full spectrum of human capability. This understanding inspires actions benefiting society, from Gandhi's calls for equality to the Holocaust's stark warning against alienation and hate.

The Luba people of Africa use a Lucasa, or memory board, to recount history. An elder holds the board in his hands and retells past events as he touches the beads embedded in the board of varying size and color. The beads are different and are constantly replaced in the same way, each and every one of us understands and is influenced by history in different ways. However, the beads will mean nothing without the board, and to every person that board is internally the same yet yielding infinite possibilities. Human nature is that board. As we take pride and shame in it, we learn the capabilities of mankind. With each historical story we touch a bit of that board, eventually we will understand it as a whole and discover who we are and know our path forward.

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