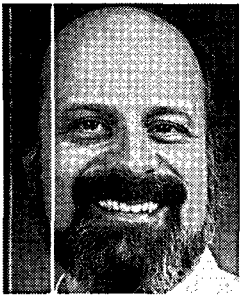
ISAAC DEUTSCHER LECTURE

HARVEY J KAYE



Why do ruling classes fear history?

1989 was the two-hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution, and — contrary to the schemes of the governing classes, West and East — developments of that year seemed to provide dramatic living proof that the grand ideals of 1789 were not just remembered but still inspiring and informing action. Across Eurasia and beyond, struggles for liberty, equality and democracy asserted themselves. Rebellions claimed control of public spaces and toppled rulers and regimes. There were triumphs like the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, and there were tragedies like the Tiananmen Square massacre. But, together, these events reminded people globally of the popular desire for freedom and the demand for power to the people! There was reason to celebrate and to believe more was yet to come.

And yet, within just a few years the hope and sense of possibility engendered by those events and the end of the Cold War have been overtaken by other, darker developments and the spiritual order of the day has become one of despair and cynicism. Emulating the most brutal traditions of this 'age of extremes' (as Eric Hobsbawm has dubbed the twentieth century), the politics of the new world order are apparently dominated by greed, hatred, and mass murder — sadly, I need merely mention Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda. European life is marked by resurgent nationalisms, fascisms, xenophobia and, most bizarrely, in view of the tragic success of the Nazis to rid the continent of Jews, anti-Semitism.

At the same time — and surely contributing in massive proportion to

the reinvigoration of the former — the market now rules globally, North and South, subsuming everything and everyone to the command of capital, intensifying already gross inequalities as the rich grow richer and working people poorer, and ever threatening to completely destroy the western labour movement and its finest twentieth-century achievement, social-democratic government. It becomes less and less possible to gain a hearing for the 'public good' or 'commonweal'.

Public discourse and private thoughts across the political spectrum seem to accept — as the US neo-conservative, Francis Fukuyama, put it — that we are at 'the end of history'. With the global triumph of capitalism we are believed to have arrived at the terminus of world-historical development, the culmination of universal history, entailing not only the collapse of the Soviet Union but the consignment of *all* varieties of socialism (assuming you could ever call the Soviet system socialist) to the graveyard of history. Fundamentalisms and particularisms may arise to challenge liberal capitalism as is already happening — but there is no universal alternative to it now or in the future. In fact, Edward Lutwak's recent survey of the world makes Fukuyama's own thesis seem downright optimistic for, in place of liberalism, he sees 'Fascism as the Wave of the Future'. In any case, radical-democratic possibilities are finished; the further progress and development of liberty and equality is foreclosed, forever. To think otherwise is declared, and widely perceived to be, not just utopian but dangerous.

I do not accept that assumption, and I will not defer to it. We are not fulfilled and our requirements and satisfactions are not simply material. History and its progressive political possibilities are not resolved.

Still, I take the 'end of history' most seriously. I do so not merely because the appearance of Fukuyama's audacious work was a smartly-timed literary and commercial coup orchestrated with the financial support of a corporately-endowed New Right foundation, but because — however illusory a notion it really is — it has articulated anew the perennial ambitions and dreams of the powers that be to make their regimes and social orders not just omnipotent and universal, but immortal. And, at least for now, it does seem to capture in a single phrase the dominant historical vision.

To those of us who still aspire to advance the critical and democratic ideals of the Enlightenment and Age of Revolution, the old question — *What is to be done?* — continues to present itself. And yet, there would

Movable icons, Berlin 1945: Stalin's portrait replaces Hitler's throughout East Germany

seem to be an even prior and more urgent question: from where can we draw sustenance, hope, and a sense of possibility when, admittedly, there are substantial reasons to be pessimistic? Most immediately, I can do no better than to quote the great socialist intellectual, Isaac Deutscher: 'Awareness of historical perspective seems to me,' he wrote, 'to provide the best antidote to extravagant pessimism as well as extravagant optimism over the great problems of our time.'

... It is my contention that however imposing their power, and however acquiescent may seem the people over whom they exercise it, the eyes of the ruling classes reflect not surety and confidence, but apprehension and anxiety. *What* is it that they see? *What* is it that they recognise? *What* is it that they know?...

In the looks and actions of the powerful, we may discover what exercises them so and, at the same time, be reminded of what we appear

to be on the verge of forgetting. Ultimately, we will have to ask: *Why do ruling classes fear history?*

... Clearly distinguishing between 'the past' as ideological construct and 'history' as critical knowledge, in *The Death of the Past* J H Plumb succinctly summarises the parade of ruling-class elaborations and uses of the former from ancient to recent times: 'The past was constantly involved in the present; and all that enshrined the past — monuments, inscriptions, records were essential weapons in government, in securing the authority, not only of the king, but also of those whose power he symbolised and sanctified...'

Plumb may have underestimated the persistence of the past today, and the continuing ambitions and efforts of elites to compose and direct it, but he appreciated its essential significance: 'Myths and legends, king-lists and genealogies... Whig-interpretations and Manifest Destinies... All rulers needed an interpretation of the past to justify [and sanctify] the authority of their government... The past has always been the handmaid of authority.'

Our own century is hardly free of such practices. Subscribing to the Party's slogan in Orwell's *1984* — 'Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past' — totalitarian and authoritarian regimes have ceaselessly sought to dominate and manipulate public and private memory. It was true of Nazism and Fascism, it was true of Communism, and it has been true of a great host of pettier, though not necessarily meeker, dictatorships.

Compared to the devastations of blitzkrieg and conquest and the organised murder of 6,000,000 Jews, book burnings and perversions of the past seem minor crimes, but they should never be discounted, for the Nazis' criminal treatment of history served to rationalise and justify to the German people their later crimes against humanity. Those today who deny that the Holocaust ever happened may be exercising their right of free speech (and demonstrating that ruling classes do not have an absolute monopoly on trying to suppress the past), but they are also committing atrocities against memory and history (see p43). The presence in Europe's streets of neo-Nazis, along with the re-ascendance of fascist politicians, is chilling.

Censorship in the Soviet Union began under Lenin as a 'temporary measure'. However, as David Remnick writes in *Lenin's Tomb*: 'The Kremlin took history so seriously that it created a massive bureaucracy to

control it, to fabricate its language and content, so that murderous and arbitrary purges became a 'triumph over enemies and spies', and the reigning tyrant, a 'Friend to All Children'.

Isaac Deutscher gives accounts in his biographies of Stalin and Trotsky of how, early on in Stalin's campaigns against his rivals, he 'started the prodigious falsification of history which was to descend like a destructive avalanche upon Russia's intellectual horizons' and of how, by the onset of the 1930s, he was requiring falsehoods and cover-ups ever more massive. Show trials, purges, famines, deportations, concentration camps, murders in their millions... Stalin and the Party imposed a grand 'conspiracy of silence'.

'Stalin...started the prodigious falsification of history which was to descend like a destructive avalanche upon Russia's intellectual horizon'
Isaac Deutscher

After more than a quarter century, the horrors and the lies, and the official suppression of any reference to them, were bound together so tightly that Stalin's successors could not afford to loosen the controls too much. How could they when they had all been his 'accomplices'? Krushchev himself fully appreciated the powers of the past and, ironically, offered one of the finest — though hardly universally deserved — tributes to the profession that I have ever come upon: 'Historians are dangerous and capable of turning everything topsy-turvy. They have to be watched.'

While the darkest days did not return, history remained under close supervision and regulation — with occasional 'thaws', followed regularly by 'purges' — until *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the mid-1980s. Yet, Gorbachev was no fool. Even he would have preferred, at least at the outset, not to extend the processes of opening and restructuring to questions of the past; indeed, it was not until he imagined that allowing public re-examination and revision of the historical record would help to undermine the opposition and thereby enable him to advance his bureaucratic and economic reforms that he called for the filling in of the all-too-many 'blank spots'.

Having been so well supervised, professional scholars were themselves at first hesitant about undertaking the now licensed re-examination of Soviet experience. But others were not, and very quickly the historical

past was asserting itself everywhere. I distinctly remember the Soviet government's announcement late in May 1988 that, in view of the great changes underway, school history examinations were being cancelled. In time, more was to be cancelled than that.

Gorbachev's miscalculations — assuming he never actually intended the breakup of the Soviet Union — also invited the renewal and redemption of politics and history in eastern Europe. In 1988, on the twentieth anniversary of the Prague Spring and the crushing by Warsaw Pact tanks of the Czechoslovak experiment in socialist democracy, the dissident group, Charter 77, issued a statement which concluded with the following: 'We call only for truth. The truth about the past and the truth about the present are indivisible. Without accepting the truth about what happened it is impossible to address correctly what is happening now; without the truth about what is happening now it is impossible to substantially improve the existing state of affairs.' In the Baltic republics, political insurgency was accompanied by demands for complete disclosure of the 'secret protocols' of the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact which had sealed their fates. Similarly, ongoing political changes in Poland, pursued for so long by the workers and intellectuals of Solidarity, generated a series of historical 'revelations' regarding Soviet actions before, during and after World War II. And in Hungary, along with popular demands for political reform, a 'Committee for Historical Justice' was organised to pursue, in particular, the recovery of the buried past of the Revolution of 1956. Submerged since 1945, extreme-nationalist and reactionary forces reasserted themselves in each of these instances, threatening in their respective fashions to replace the Communist suppression of memory and history with nationalist repressions. Nevertheless, the importance of history to the liberation movements of 1989 authenticated the words of the Czech novelist, Milan Kundera, that 'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of man against forgetting.'

Further east, the Communist Chinese leadership, in spite of all their revolutionary designs, actually renewed their imperial forerunners' management of the past and those who studied it. In fact, Mao and his cadres, in the words of Jonathan Unger, were: 'Even more determined to control the messages imparted in works of history — to bend those messages in ways favourable to official policy lines and to extirpate any manifestation of dissent or opposition that might be hidden in historical allegory... Historians, in short, were to serve as handmaidens to the Party

propagandists'.

The degree of control exercised since 1949 has varied, though obviously not as much as the historiographical directions dictated by the government's changing political and economic policies. For their part, Chinese historians and other producers of 'the past' have themselves occasionally, though unsuccessfully, spoken up for the 'right to remember' — as in the spring of 1989 when, in a petition supporting the students and workers mobilising in Tiananmen Square, a group of writers in Shanghai called for the right to pursue 'free historical enquiry'. However, following the events of the night of 4 June there came the predictable ideological backlash, commencing with the government's propaganda machine describing the army's violent suppression of the democracy movement as actions taken against 'counter-revolutionaries'.

Before World War II, Japanese education was an instrument of indoctrination, cultivating in children the belief that the nation's overseas expansion was a sacred campaign to bring the 'whole world under one roof'; and, in order to guarantee that they promoted 'loyalty to the emperor and love of country', all textbooks were subject to certification by the Ministry of Education. With defeat and the ensuing US occupation, educational practices were reformed and, within certain guidelines, teachers were permitted to choose their own texts. But this did not last long. By the 1950s, the conservative, Liberal-Democratic Party government was succeeding in reinstituting state controls on education and the authorisation of textbooks, against the opposition of the Teachers Union. Most problematically, this meant that, in spite of the growing scholarly historiography on the subject, the government was able to have removed from the history schoolbooks, specific references to the atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese military during the World War II, most infamously, the 1937 'Rape of Nanking' (see p68). Due to persistent legal campaigns by liberals and leftists and, perhaps even more significantly, diplomatic wrangles with the governments of those East Asian countries that had suffered Japanese depredations, prohibitions have been reduced or withdrawn, but state control and censorship of the schoolbooks continues.

The distortion and occlusion of the historical past by governing elites has, to varying degrees, characterised public history and historical education in all of the former Axis countries, regularly with the

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Japan surrenders 1945: the hidden face of public history

acquiesence, if not the encouragement, of their former opponents eagerly pursuing Cold War and anti-left ends. Consider the postwar politics of amnesia surrounding the Austrians' image of themselves as simply the 'victims' of German expansionism; and the 'historical' initiatives of conservative German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, ranging from the Bitburg ceremonies in 1985 to his recent plans to commemorate officially the fiftieth anniversary of the plot to assassinate Hitler which deliberately excluded representatives of the social-democratic and Communist anti-Nazi resistance movements. Here, we might also register the half-century worth of political prevarications and equivocations in France engendered by the nation's 'Vichy Syndrome'.

Whereas the archives have been opened in Berlin and Moscow; US and other western secrets about foreign and domestic, state and corporate

crimes committed under licence of the Cold War are only beginning to seep out. Secret deals with Nazis and fascists, domestic spying and red-baiting, atomic radiation tests on military personnel and civilians, assassinations and the overthrow of third-world governments, plans for a first-strike nuclear attack — I will stop before I start sounding like Oliver Stone, producer of the film *JFK*. And yet, there remains the comment by a former US official that 'possibly, one-third of American history is classified.' Not to mention all the Official Secrets squirrelled away somewhere in Britain.

Moreover, perhaps no less so than in Japan, US history textbooks in the postwar decades excluded or limited reference to the darker events and persistent social struggles that had shaped US history and continued to do so. In favour of a Cold-War consensus and the pursuit of anti-Communism at home and abroad, high school history texts unanimously represented America's westward expansion and overseas interventions in terms of Manifest Destiny, the defence of the hemisphere and/or support of anti-colonial struggles. Naturally, democracy was a central theme of their narrative of progress; however, ignoring the persistent limitations, exclusions, oppressions and contradictions, these texts articulated, well before Fukuyama was old enough to think about it, a vision of a postwar liberal and capitalist USA as the culmination of western and world history.

Not only the schoolbooks, the most official of public histories, but all US mass culture from Madison Avenue to Hollywood projected that assumption. As the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, liberals and conservatives alike seemed to share in the historical belief that, aside from the continuing demands of the Cold War, in the US we were witness to the 'end of ideology'. Those who resisted were effectively marginalised and without credibility. Or so it seemed for a brief while...

Fomented in part by the very contradiction between the history portrayed and the history lived, yet at the same time part of a global democratic surge, US radicalism was renewed in the sixties; and the struggles for the civil rights of racial and ethnic minorities, the social rights of the poor, the equal rights of women and the cessation of imperial wars, along with the much less celebrated but no less remarkable working-class insurgencies demanding changes in industrial life, instigated serious reforms in US polity. These struggles also inspired dramatic revisions in historical study and thought, including the socialisation and

democratisation of the past, the recovery and incorporation into the historical record of previously ignored class, racial and gender experiences and agencies.

Unfortunately, though predictably, these democratic campaigns and accomplishments also provoked profound reactions on the part of the 'power elite' who grew increasingly worried that the several struggles of the day were on the verge of coalescing into a broad radical-democratic movement promising reform on an even grander scale. In public statements and manifestos such as the Trilateral Commission's 1975 report, *The Crisis of Democracy*, the voices of the corporate class declaimed that the liberal polities were facing 'governmental overload', more specifically, a 'crisis' in which the problem of 'governance' stemmed from 'an excess of democracy'. The threat was clearly acknowledged as coming from below — from 'minorities, women, public-interest groups, white-collar unions' — but the real culprits were made out to be university and other 'value-oriented intellectuals' (for which, read historians and their kin).

Thus, for the past 20 years we have been subjected to vigorous and concerted campaigns to reshape historical memory, consciousness and imagination — the climax of which was to be the pronouncement that we had arrived at the 'end of history'.

Strongly encouraged and lucratively bankrolled by the business elites, in the course of the 1970s, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher along with their Republican and Conservative comrades brilliantly articulated mythical renditions of their respective nations' history which served at the outset to weld together their diverse New Right political alliances and, in time, to garner support for their electoral campaigns and subsequent endeavours domestic and foreign.

Gross distortions and occlusions of the past were incessant but, in particular, we might recall Reagan's harking back to a supposedly happier, safer and more economically robust USA existing some time — depending on your preferences and the occasion — before the upheavals and Great Society programmes of the 1960s or the New Deal of the 1930s. In Thatcher's historical memory, the good old days were those when 'Victorian Values' were supposed to have prevailed and the British people were somehow both more self-reliant and kinder and more entrepreneurial and philanthropic (the former or latter combination determined presumably by one's class circumstances).

Completely ignoring questions of exploitation and oppression, both

Reagan and Thatcher spoke of the past as a time of 'shared values' and insisted on the necessity of reinstating them. These were not flashes of nostalgia, but weapons directed against liberals, trade unionists, socialists, feminists, the poor, and racial and ethnic minorities. Each offered a rhetoric of consensus actually intended to bolster a politics of social division and a political economy of capital accumulation and class inequality.

The New Right leaders' ambitions for 'the past' were not merely rhetorical. Declaring in neo-McCarthyite language their hostility for the scholarly and pedagogical labours of the new critical historians, they initiated their 'culture wars' by translating the media-touted 'crisis of historical education' into a major civic, if not defence, issue. Then, under the guise of responding to student ignorance and spreading historical amnesia, Republican and Tory secretaries of education, respectively, introduced unprecedented schemes for 'national standards' and a 'national curriculum' in which history was to be a central subject. And they made every effort to determine that the narratives rendered in those syllabi and curricula would contribute to the development of their aspired-to conservative orders.

In this age of spectacle and entertainment, New Right efforts to subordinate historical education have been enhanced, if not overshadowed (at least in the US), by corporate, especially the corporate media's, reconstructions of history. In film, television, and advertising, past and present are sanitised and commodified; and now we have the proposal by the Disney Corporation to develop a new theme park, to be called 'Disney's America', that promises to create 'realistic renderings of the nation's past', including slavery and the Civil War. In a truly Orwellian fashion, we are to be provided history for the 'end of history'...

Just what is it about history that so distresses the ruling and governing classes that they are driven to control and command it? Inverting Orwell, Kundera writes: 'The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories rewritten.' It is not confidence that authorises such actions, but trepidation; it is not conviction about the course of history which leads them to declare it finished, but anxiety induced by what they see there.

I began by proposing that we look directly into the eyes of the powerful, to discover what they see, what they recognise, what they know. I should have asked: what do they see, but try to obscure? What do they recognise, but attempt to deny? What do they know, but endeavour to conceal?

Russian socialist-democrat, Boris Kagarlitsky, refers us to Marx's own assessment of censorship: 'The law against a frame of mind is not a law of the state promulgated for its citizens but the law of one party against another party... Laws against frame of mind are the involuntary cry of a bad conscience.' Absolutely. But it is not only guilt that obliges proscriptions. Knowing this, Kagarlitsky adds the following: 'Censorship is introduced by those who fear public opinion, the very existence of censorship is a sign that oppositional thought is alive and cannot be eradicated — that alongside the ruling bureaucratic "party" there is also a de facto democratic party.'

Why do ruling classes fear history? Because, beyond their crimes, and beyond the tragedies and ironies which are so demanding of hope and spirit, they see and they know — as did their forerunners — that history has been, and remains, a process of struggle for freedom and for justice — and increasingly, at least since the late eighteenth century, it has been, as the late Raymond Williams once put it, a 'Long Revolution', at the political heart of which is the fight for liberty, equality and democracy.

Moreover, they realise that however many times history has entailed what Christopher Hill calls an 'experience of defeat', for the peoples and classes who have sought to make it otherwise, the Long Revolution has also afforded great victories. In search of reason to hope, Ronald Aronson ventures this: 'The real historical advances in human social morality have occurred through such struggles. Slavery has been abolished, democratic rights have been won, certain elements of dignity and equality promised and achieved, wars ended, other wars forestalled — only because we have acted. Projected now desperately, now with confidence, in collective visions by movement after movement, sacrificed for, agitated for, partially achieved, then legitimised by law and custom, social progress has been made true every step of the way.'

Indeed, it is not only the victories of resistance, rebellion and revolution that weigh in; the defeats, too, have contributed to the making of democracy. The Levellers and Diggers of seventeenth-century Albion and later generations of Radical, Luddite and Chartist artisans and

Tiananmen Square, Beijing 1989: the face that launched 10,000 deaths

proletarians; the Parisian *sans-culottes* and Parisian communards; the rebellious black slaves of the Americas; the radical mechanics, Populist farmers, Socialist workers and Wobbly labourers, native and immigrant, of my own country; the revolutionary *campesinos, vaqueros* and *obreros* of Mexico; the workers defending Republican Spain and their comrades in the International Brigades; the partisans of occupied Europe and Jewish fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto; the anti-apartheid demonstrators at Sharpeville in South Africa; and the Chinese students and workers of 1919 and 1989, have all, in their respective ways, endowed the struggle.

The democratic narrative has long haunted the imagination of the powerful, and it must do so all the more today because it is the very

foundation upon which contemporary political legitimacy stands. However insincere, hypocritical or blasphemous their words, for much of this century, and for far longer in the US, rulers and governors have been obliged to speak within, and to, a discourse of democracy — often, a discourse rooted in a revolutionary moment. However limited, debased or eviscerated the institutions, the idea of 'rule by the people' has become the ideological cornerstone of modern government...

Tormented by what they see in and know about the past and the making of the present, the powerful recognise, as Krushchev did, that, to the extent that they pursue their scholarly and pedagogical labours critically, historians can be 'dangerous people'. They are not only capable of wielding the powers of the past against the powerful themselves, but, by offering historical challenges to despair and cynicism, of making radical contributions to popular memory, consciousness and imagination.

Isaac Deutscher himself once wrote that the 'role of the intellectuals...is to remain eternal protestors.' I like that. However, in acknowledgement and appreciation of the fears of the powers that be, I would take it further — in a way I am sure he would have approved. Poaching a term from my mentor, Victor Kiernan, I would argue that our responsibility and task is to secure, bear witness to, and critically advance the *prophetic memory* of the struggle for democracy. Thus, for radical historians the fundamental project remains: the recovery of the past, the education of desire, and the cultivation, as Gramsci himself urged, of 'an historical, dialectical conception of the world which understands movement and change, which appreciates the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present, and which conceives the contemporary world as a synthesis of the past, of all past generations, which projects itself into the future.'

We cannot know what will transpire, but be assured that our governors fully expect the historic and perennial demand for power to the people to be renewed. It's reflected in their eyes. ❑

This essay is a shortened version of the 1994 Deutscher Memorial Lecture, the full text of which will appear in Harvey Kaye's forthcoming book, Why Do Ruling Classes Fear History? and Other Questions *(St Martin's Press/Macmillan)*