

# GES1010 Essay 1: The Necessary Tragedy of Forgetting

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## Introduction

Historical amnesia is not only an option in the construction of a Singaporean nation, but quite possibly, a necessary condition of it. All groups, societies, races, and nations have participated in the act of forgetting at some point in their history and it can be argued that the act is inherent to surviving the human condition. However, it is undeniable that there are destructive drawbacks to the practice. This essay will attempt to frame historical amnesia in the light of older cultures and connect the dots against the Singaporean context.

## Historical Amnesia

Historical amnesia, or social amnesia as most of the international literature calls it, is a widespread phenomenon occurring at multiple sociological and societal levels. According to Russell Jacoby <sup>1</sup>, social amnesia can be defined as a society's collective *'repression of*

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<sup>1</sup>Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: a critique of contemporary psychology* (New Brunswick, NJ, U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

*remembrance*’; a forgetfulness of their own historical past. Bakieva et al place a negative emphasis on this act of forgetting by referring to it as ‘*the crisis of memory*’.<sup>2</sup> The authors even go to the lengths of asserting that historical amnesia is a dangerous disease that destroys the foundations of cultures.

The prevalence of the forgetfulness phenomenon can be found in the LGBTQ community<sup>3</sup>, in the attitudes of White Americans towards the slave past of African Americans<sup>4</sup>, or even entire developing countries in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> The ancient Romans practiced *damnatio memoriae*, the punishment of being completely erased from history. In Roman society, this was deemed a fate worse than death.<sup>6</sup>

At times, this historical amnesia is engineered by leaders, politicians, or governments who wish to encourage the repression of recollecting certain events or the recasting of that recollection in a certain light. In the German context, this has been termed *Geschichtspolitik*, or the *Politics of Memory*.<sup>7</sup> This is the form of historical amnesia that this essay will be focusing on.

## To Forget is to Live

Nietzsche wrote in his 1883 article, *On the uses and disadvantages of history for life*, ‘For this reason, it is possible to live almost without remembering, indeed, to live happily, as the beast demonstrates; however, it is generally completely impossible to live without forgetting.’<sup>8</sup> Verily, many individuals find solace in forgetting a painful past; to let a traumatic memory wash away and move onto greener pastures. Why not an entire nation?

In a way, an event at a point in time in history is second in importance to the memories that surround it. Antze and Lambek suggests that these memories carry an impression of the local narratives, biases, and assumptions to develop into remembrances charged with ‘*performative*’ meaning.<sup>9</sup> The truth are not the facts but the fictions that are spun in the heads of the masses.

Germany is one such nation that has been plagued by agonising memories. While much of Europe celebrate the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 on May 8, Germans are conflicted. The

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<sup>2</sup>Gul nara Abduvasitovna Bakieva, Maura Donohue, and John P. Hogan, *Social memory and contemporaneity* (Washington (D.C.): The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>Elijah Adiv Edelman and Ryan Thoreson, “On Queer Amnesia,” *Anthropology News*, , accessed September 17, 2017, <http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2017/08/04/on-queer-amnesia/>.

<sup>4</sup>*Sites of slavery: citizenship and racial democracy in the post-civil rights imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup>Juraga, Dubravka, and M. Keith Booker. *Rereading global socialist cultures after the Cold War: the reassessment of a tradition*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2002.

<sup>6</sup>Eric R. Varner, *Mutilation and transformation: damnatio memoriae and Roman Imperial portraiture* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>7</sup>“Geschichtspolitik: Towards a Responsible Politics of the Past,” *Global Public Policy Institute*, , accessed September 17, 2017, <http://www.gppi.net/publications/rising-powers/article/geschichtspolitik-towards-a-responsible-politics-of-the-past/>.

<sup>8</sup>Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the uses and disadvantages of history for life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>9</sup>Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, *Tense past: Cultural essays in trauma and memory* (London: Routledge, 1998).

day is a symbol of failure for the country, a reminder of the country's dark past.<sup>10</sup> However, sentiment is slowly changing as a result of historical amnesia. Many are beginning to embrace the day as the day Germany was liberated from Nazi dictatorship, an act of turning one's identity into another victim to emancipate oneself from one's past and emphasise the concept of 'otherness'.

Perhaps there is no better way to deal with such a horrific past than to simply forget it.

## White Lies in Schools

After apartheid ended in South Africa during April of 1994, the majority rule government sought to revamp and revise the school curriculum to move past its history of racial segregation and discrimination. It sought to forget and reform the teachings of the recently toppled white supremacist order. The general accepted consensus was that South African society was 'better not to have history at all than to have that kind of history again'.<sup>11</sup>

In China, the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989 is a lethal memory to have. The politicians of the Communist Party of China have gone to great lengths to expunge the protests from the history books, including school textbooks. An informal experiment by Louisa Lim took her to four Beijing campuses in which only 15 out of 100 students could identify the iconic Tank Man photograph taken during the period of unrest.<sup>12</sup> The Internet is heavily restricted and performing searches for 'Tiananmen Square' while in China yields no results about the massacre.

Singapore is no stranger to the concept of letting one's past go in favour of progress. Devan Nair in 1981 explained that holding onto Singapore colonial past was detrimental to the nation as a whole because it was a symbol of discrimination, repression, and poverty. It was a goal of his generation to destroy and in its essence, bring about the forgetting of these old values.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusions

Throughout history, collective forgetfulness, manipulated or otherwise, has been a useful tool wielded by leaders and governments to affect public sentiment towards a less than savoury past. It has been used as a coping mechanism, a political weapon, and a means to progress. While the moral implications of this act may be difficult to think about, it is a natural part of the human condition. Throughout history, humans seek to adapt to

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<sup>10</sup>Michael Sontheimer, "Germany's Nazi Past: Why Germans Can Never Escape Hitler's Shadow - SPIEGEL ONLINE - International," SPIEGEL ONLINE, March 10, 2005, , accessed September 17, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany-s-nazi-past-why-germans-can-never-escape-hitler-shadow-a-345720.html>.

<sup>11</sup>Polakow-Suransky, Sasha S. Historical Amnesia? the Politics of Textbooks in Post-Apartheid South Africa. New Orleans, Louisiana: American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, 2002.

<sup>12</sup>Lim, Louisa. The Peoples Republic of amnesia: Tiananmen revisited. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>13</sup>Chia, Yeow-Tong. Education, culture and the Singapore developmental state: "world-soul" lost and regained? Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

changing environments and one way of doing that is to simply change the way something is perceived or to forget about it.

After all, it is a lot easier to control minds than to build a time machine.

## **Word Count**

This essay is 855 words long.

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## Declaration

I acknowledge that this research essay is the product of my own work and research. All materials consulted - including websites - have been duly cited and credited.

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