The War That Never Ends: Britain's inability to move past the myths of the Second World War

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"*I trust that a graduate student someday will write a doctoral essay on the influence of the Munich analogy on the subsequent history of the 20th century, perhaps in the end he will conclude that the multitude of errors committed in the name of Munich may exceed the original error of 1938*"[1] – Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Introduction:

It is striking that still, in the 21st century, the language of the Second World War is so visible in our contemporary political discussions. Although it has been over 75 years since the end of the war, narratives of appeasement, victory, and Britain 'standing alone' remain an inescapable presence in today's politics. Just in 2016, the Brexit campaign was plagued by numerous anachronistic comparisons on both sides of the debate. Those voting to leave the EU celebrated the 'Dunkirk spirit' of Britain and boasted their historical ability to stand alone from Europe.[2] Conversely, those voting to remain, rendered the referendum another 'Eden moment', drawing on the failures of Prime Minister Eden who mishandled the response to Egyptian dictator Nasser and thus met the humiliating consequences in the 1950s.[3] The loud obsession with the war also created bizarre campaigns such as the Leave poster exclaiming 'halt ze German advance! Vote Leave', and the bus blaring the tune of the 1955 war film, The Dam Busters.[4] The abundance of comparisons to the Second World War in the example of Brexit, demonstrates how widely such analogies, of varying credibility, can be made, and also that "remembering World War Two requires no immediate experience of those years".[5]

Even more recently, Covid-19 has elicited endless comparisons to the war: food bank support has been compared to the 'Blitz spirit', private labs to 'Dunkirk little ships', and even the Queen has drawn parallels between the experiences of isolation and wartime evacuation.[6] Boris Johnson has, to no avail, aimed to emulate "the Churchill of his imagination", stepping up to lead a nation at a time of

[1] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., in. R.G Hughes, *The post-war legacy of Appeasement: British foreign policy since 1945*, (London, 2014), p. 177

[2] Example: A. Pearson, 'For Brexit to work, we need Dunkirk spirit not 'Naysaying Nellies'', *The Telegraph*, 1 August 2017

[3] Example: S. Hall, 'Brexit: 60 years on and the ghosts of Suez have come back to haunt the Tories', *The Conversation*, 6 July 2016, https://theconversation.com/brexit-60-years-on-and-the-ghosts-of-suez-have-come-back-to-haunt-the-tories-62061 [Accessed 14/08/2020]

[4] A. Sims, 'Anti-EU billboards reading 'Halt ze German advance' placed on M40', The Independent, 29 May 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/anti-eu-billboards-reading-halt-ze-german-advance-placed-m40-a7055186.html [Accessed 10/09/2020]

[5] G. Eley, 'Finding the people's war: film, British collective memories and World War II', *The American Historical Review*, 2001, Vol. 106, Issue. 3, p. 818

[6] J. Tapsfield, 'Boris Johnson is FINALLY set to U-turn and overrule control-freak public health chiefs by asking independent science labs to join 'Dunkirk-style' bid for mass coronavirus testing', *Daily Mail*, 2 April 2020; S. Shearman, ''Blitz spirit': Britain's ethical businesses fight hunger during coronavirus outbreak', *Reuters*, 19 March 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-food-britain-idUSL8N2BB421 [Accessed 14/08/2020], M. Holden, ''We'll meet again': Queen Elizabeth invokes WW2 spirit to defeat coronavirus', *Reuters*, 5 April 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-britain-queen/well-meet-again-queen-elizabeth-invokes-ww2-spirit-to-defeat-coronavirus-idUSKBN21N0TQ [Accessed 14/08/2020]

crisis.[7] Consistently giving speeches loaded with wartime references: we are in a "fight", needing a "wartime government" and with multiple references to the "enemy", Johnson's leadership has drawn upon the memory of the Second World War, despite dealing with a profoundly modern medical problem.[8] This juxtaposition between a distinctly contemporary medical problem and a seemingly unrelated historical event, highlights the prevalence of this problem. The cultural memory of the Second World War in Britain is notable for both its durability and flexibility. Although there are other historical analogies that may fit better – such as the 1918 pandemic – as a nation we are seemingly preoccupied with the memory of the Second World War.

The use of the Second World War in contemporary politics appears to be a uniquely British phenomenon. Other countries, have not approached Covid-19 through the lens of the war – so why has Britain? While it is not uncommon to draw on past events to interpret our present, narratives of the Second World War appear to pervade the fabric of our politics far more than any other historical comparison. There are perhaps two important problems here: Britain's use of the past as a prism to understand present-day problems, and furthermore, that we are not using an historically accurate narrative, but a bastardised and mythologised understanding of the past. Both of course are problematic, but the use of a mythologised past makes the distorting possibilities far greater. It is as Schlesinger Jr. prophesised; it is not the event of the war and its preamble, but its memory and its mythologised identity which continues to affect British politics.[9] The only way to address the repeated intrusion of the past is to discuss it, unpack it, and confront these myths with historical truth.

The Myths of the Second World War

One rather superficial argument as to why the language of the Second World War is so attractive and prominent in our political discourse today, is, as Montlake argues, its simplicity.[10] As depicted in many Second World War films, the portrayal of a 'good guy' and a 'bad guy' is clear. However, while the moral certainty of the war may be obvious, this is where the simplicity of the narrative is limited. The question is not simply, why we talk about, or enjoy cinema depictions of the war, but why a narrative of the Second World War is such a considerable part of our contemporary political conversations. Instead, I would argue contrary to Montlake – that there is no single myth of the Second World War, and it is in fact, the very range of competing narratives which explains the continued resonance of the war in our political discussions. Michael Rothberg, the critical and cultural scholar, coined the term 'Multidirectional memory' to address competing memories, and how they may clash in societies.[11] The use of the Second World War in contemporary politics is a complex and contested process: there is a narrative which appeals to the more traditional Conservative, while also one for the collectivist left. Furthermore, when we do remember the war, we are actually, potentially, thinking about very different historical episodes – the crisis of Appeasement, the disaster (or miracle) of Dunkirk, or the triumph of 1945. Perhaps the term 'simple' could be used, however not in ignorance of the complications. There are a number of simple myths that appeal, but it is not

[7] S. Gaston, 'Global Britain and Reimagining our Relationship to our Past', *British Foreign Policy Group*, 2 June 2020, https://bfpg.co.uk/2020/06/global-britain-history/ [Accessed 14/08/2020]
[8] B. Johnson, *Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19)*, Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 17 March 2020
[9] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., in. R.G Hughes, *The post-war legacy of Appeasement: British foreign policy since 1945*
[10] S. Montlake, 'Battle of Britain's history: How the myth of WWII shaped Brexit', *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 March 2019, https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2019/0328/Battle-of-Britain-s-history-How-the-myth-of-WWII-shaped-Brexit [Accessed 25/08/2020]
[11] M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, (Stanford University Press, 2009)

simplicity which dictates the popularity of the Second World War in politics, but instead the multi-facetted nature of such myths.

One of the most prominent narratives of the Second World War is that of Churchillian leadership. Conservative leader Boris Johnson has famously articulated this, not only likening himself to Churchill and electing him his personal hero, but also writing a biography on the life of Churchill, in which he praises him as a man of "vast and almost reckless moral courage".[12] Unsurprisingly, this myth galvanises Conservative values; upholding the message that the war rekindled ones love of the country, patriotism and valour.[13] This is a narrative of individual 'heroic' leadership, including figures like Churchill himself, but also soldiers like Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, and middle-class scientists like inventor Barnes Wallis. It is also a narrative which celebrates 'the few' such as the pilots in the Battle of Britain, lauded in Churchill's 'never was so much owed by so many to so few' speech.[14]

On the other hand, an alternative narrative, resonating more strongly for those on the political left, is that of the 'people's war' – a narrative of shared sacrifice – and endeavour, culminating with the creation of the National Health Service. This is a 'social democratic" message drawing upon the ordinary men and women who came together and saved the nation from disaster – the antithesis of the Churchillian 'few'. Furthermore, it is a narrative often associated with the Labour Party, who are credited for running the home front and building a new welfare system. For those who recognise this myth, the war concludes with the general election, where the people of Britain appreciate the triumphs of collectivism and solidarity in voting for Atlee in a landslide victory.

Kit Kowol expands on the scale of competing myths, not only recognising that dissonance between the myth of the people's war and Churchillian patriotism, but also challenging the concept of a "good war", a myth most famously proffered by AJP Taylor.[15] Whilst many identify the war as undoubtedly 'good' from a British perspective, Kowol notes the British absence during the Nazi annexation of Czechoslovakia and the suppression of the Indian independence movement as examples which serve to undermine this generally well-accepted myth. Furthermore, Kowol elaborates as to how these contradictions play into a broader narrative of British politics rather than simply embedding themselves within crises such as Brexit and Covid-19. Our political climate has been dominated historically by the staunch competition between the Conservative and Labour parties. It is this competition which Kowol believes can be attributed to these competing myths, as the narrative of a people's war and of Conservative patriotism fall respectively to each party. This in turn, has created competition "not just over who controlled the state, but who exactly was "the nation"".[16] As Friedman states, "the construction of a history is the construction of a meaningful universe of events and narratives for an individual or collectively defined subject".[17] Put simply, the narrative of history alters according to what is 'meaningful' to a collective group of people. In the case of both the Labour and Conservative parties, the history of the Second World War has framed their identities through telling a selective version of history which is meaningful to them and their followers.

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[12] B. Johnson, 'Boris Johnson: The Day Churchill saved Britain from the Nazi's', *The Telegraph*, 13 October 2014,

[13] K. Kowol, 'Britain's obsession with the second world war and the debates that fuel it', *The Conversation*, 4 June 2020, https://theconversation.com/britains-obsession-with-the-second-world-war-and-the-debates-that-fuel-it-139497, [Accessed 25/08/2020]

[14] Churchill, *So Few*, House of Commons, 20 August 1940, https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/the-few/ [Accessed 13/09/2020]

[15] Ibid; A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, (Hamish Hamilton, 1961)

[16] Kowol, 'Britain's obsession with the second world war and the debates that fuel it'

[17] J. Friedman, 'The Past in the Future: History and the Politics of Identity', *Journal American Anthropologist*, Volume 94. Issue 4, p. 837

I would take Kowol's argument further, and state that competing myths occur not only between parties, but within them too. Occasionally, opposing parties do not conform to the symmetry of opposing myths. As seen in Brexit, sometimes there are multiple narratives that do not sit comfortably together - those who were pro-Brexit argued simultaneously that Britain was a plucky underdog, 'standing alone', while also an imperial trading power. To hold these two thoughts coherently in the same argument is not only hard, but also highlights confusion within rival camps regarding Britain's place in the world.

Another narrative which does not fit within the confines of 'left versus right', is that of '*declinism'* – a thesis most famously articulated by Corelli Barnett. [18] Declinism refers to a gradual loss of great power following the victory of 1945, and perhaps explains British preoccupation with this moment, as it was Britain's 'last hurrah' on the world stage. Barnett's thesis purports decline resulted from a focus on welfarism, at the expense of both industrial and economic decline - as well as a retreat from empire. However, the place of the Second World War within this 'declinist' narrative is complicated. David Edgerton disputes Corelli's argument that Britain prioritised welfare over industrial modernisation and military power, thus beginning Britain's 'decline'. For Edgerton, he recognises that *declinism* is relative, and not as absolute as Barnett suggests. [19] The war catalysed a number of internal changes; a new welfare system, new national institutions (National Coal Board and British Rail for example), and a new national form of capitalism – one focused on domestic production and consumption rather than international, or reliant on empire.[20]

More importantly perhaps, is that Brexiteers and Remainers have a confused understanding of the 'declinist' narrative anyway, creating further dissonance between narratives. Concepts of decline and rebirth within the Brexit debate have often been presented in unclear and contradictory ways, and by commentators who seem perplexed about how to understand the Second World War and its relevance today. Many commentators have claimed Brexit was driven by an imperial nostalgia, that in some Brexiteer quarters, there was the idea that closer ties with the Commonwealth would replace European connections – colloquially termed 'Empire 2.0'. However, Saunders critiques the notion of imperial nostalgia. He claims there was perhaps a louder voice within the pro-Brexit vision which emphasises Britain 'alone' throughout the war, emphasising the narrative of a determined, defiant, and plucky nation. Yet, in this narrative, the empire is forgotten – and thus Saunders believes it was instead, 'imperial amnesia' which was galvanising Brexiteers. In expressing the belief that Britain can 'be great again', even without an empire, they are hailing a British exceptionalism maintained by historical amnesia. In reality, Britain was a global and economic power simply *because* it had an empire. Now that it does not, a buccaneering spirit alone could not elevate Britain to be a dominant power once again. Those who are blinded by such imperial amnesia are failing to consider the place of empire in Britain's history, and are too quick to hail British exceptionalism.

It is not just how the war is remembered, but which particular events we choose to emphasise in this process. We often talk about the war as a single episode, but actually the war was a dynamic process, from which we choose individual episodes that we invest with meaning. Often, it is the preamble of the war, and the failures of the 1930s, which we recall. For example, the rather crude Brexit campaign which exclaimed "Halt ze German advance, Vote Leave", played upon Britain's previous trepidation, to halt the German advance through their policy of appeasement. Such staunch advocacy of immediate action plays into a narrative which we choose to remember – ultimately, appeasement is bad, and we should never give in to bullies. The prevalence of this lesson is evident in the words of Darren Grimes, a then 22-year-old Brexit activist: "we're a proud island nation that survived a world

[18] C. Barnett, *The lost victory: British dreams, British realities, 1945-1950,* (London: Macmillan, 1995)
[19] D. Edgerton, 'The decline of declinism (economic condition of UK)', *Business History Review*. Volume 71. Issue 2, pp. 201-6
[20] Kowol, *Britain's obsession with the second world war and the debates that fuel it*

war…I don't think we're about to be bullied by a French egomaniac".[21] Here he refers to Macron, but the message remains clear – the failures of the 1930s to prevent the war through the policy of appeasement, has created a mythologised memory whereby any form of negotiation or conciliation is swiftly averted and labelled weak due to the failure of this policy historically. It is of course, not difficult to note a number of issues with this, but as Megill postulates, where identity is problematized, memory is valorised.[22] The identity of Britain as a strong and dominant nation was vulnerable when Chamberlain's policy of appeasement failed on numerous occasions, and therefore, the strong tendency to condemn such action in contemporary circumstances validates the image that Britain is and will continue to be a central world-power – accurate or otherwise.

The moments which others choose to remember, are those of the 1940s: most notably Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and VE Day. A common factor in the recall of all these events is the myth of 'standing alone', aided by Churchill's infamous speeches including "we shall fight on the beaches", "our finest hour", and "blood, toil, tears and sweat".[23] This myth is one so pertinent in our politics today, as, according to Lucy Noakes, it "codifies for us something about what it means to be British".[24] It invokes concepts of bravery, pluck, and courage, which while seemingly positive, are factually incorrect in their origin. As recently as the summer of 2017, Nigel Farage urged people to "go out and watch Dunkirk" a newly released film on the legendary events.[25] While trying to appropriate the memory of Dunkirk to fuel his Brexit Leave campaign, he met backlash from Remainers who criticised Farage, but also film writer Christopher Nolan, for side-lining those who stood by Britain's side throughout the events of Dunkirk and its aftermath.[26] As David Edgerton notes, the notion of 'standing alone' is a mythologised ideal: "people want to remember the war, and especially the early years of the war, as a time when the nation stood alone without an empire or without allies. Nobody at the time would have believed this."[27] For Edgerton, this is the most dangerous myth of all, as Britain won the war through ruthless state planning and control, not simply courage and pluck. Not only did Britain have the largest colonial empire boosting their manpower, they also had significant resources readily available. With a formidable industrial base, Hurricanes and Spitfires could be made quickly, radar was soon developed, and ultimately, Britain proved a phenomenally sophisticated military state. Furthermore, in the Battle of Britain, the most successful British squadron was the Polish 303 Squadron, without whom, according to the head of Fighter Command, Sir Hugh Dowding, "I hesitate to say that the outcome of the battle would have been the same".[28] It is as Lowe states, "no nation is ever truly an island, even when its geography suggests

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[21] Grey, Chris, 'The dangers of Brexit Britain's obsession with the Second World War', *iNews*, 28 September 2018, https://inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/brexit-britain-second-world-war-fixation-203066 [Accessed 12/09/2020]

[22] A. Megill, 'History, Memory, Identity', *History of the Human Sciences*, 1998, Vol.11, Issue 3, p. 37-8

[23] W. Churchill, *We Shall Fight on the Beaches*, House of Commons, 4 June 1940; W. Churchill, *Their finest hour*, House of Commons, 18 June 1940; W. Churchill, *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat*, House of Commons, 13 May 1940

[24] L. Noakes, quoted in S. Montlake, 'Battle of Britain's history: How the myth of WWII shaped Brexit', *Christian Science Monitor*

[25] N. Farage, 'I urge every youngster to go out and watch #Dunkirk', Twitter, 25 July 2017, https://twitter.com/nigel_farage/status/889971797386514434?lang=en [Accessed 25/08/2020]; ***Dunkirk*, 2017, Christopher Nolan**

[26] H. Mance, ' Dunkirk' does not teach us anything about Brexit', *Financial Times*, 28 July 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/adf46768-736d-11e7-aca6-c6bd07df1a3c [Accessed 25/08/2020]; A. Wiseman, 'Christopher Nolan: why 'Dunkirk' is anything but a 'Brexit movie', *Screen Daily*, 30 November 2017, https://www.screendaily.com/news/christopher-nolan-why-dunkirk-is-anything-but-a-brexit-movie/5124612.article [Accessed 25/08/2020]

[27] D, Edgerton, quoted in quoted in S. Montlake, 'Battle of Britain's history: How the myth of WWII shaped Brexit', *Christian Science Monitor*

[28] https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/the-polish-air-force-in-world-war-2/303-squadron.aspx

otherwise".[29] And yet, the romanticised myth which glorifies Britain as a lone actor against Nazi Germany continues to inform many Briton's narrative of the Second World War, despite the narrative being confused, contradictory, and ahistorical. It is used to validate decisions with potentially gigantic and even catastrophic results by drawing upon a false narrative of historical pluck, courage, and independence in the name of national character.

While, as a nation, we somewhat blindly exalt narratives and analogies of the Second World War, when we stop to analyse what we are upholding, there are multiple, competing, and questionable myths operating. This language needs to be unpacked to appreciate the different connotations for different people, and if we do not, it has to ability to distort politics.[30]

Memory and the Suez Crisis

Although it is certainly striking that The Second World War is being invoked in contemporary politics, it is not the first time in history that people have compared the present day to the war. Perhaps the most notable example is the 1956 Suez Crisis under the leadership of Prime Minister Eden. Anthony Eden became Prime Minister, just short of twenty years after the Second World War, but he was also a prominent voice in the cabinet at the time when Chamberlain was granting concessions to both Hitler and Mussolini in the attempt to avoid war – eventually ending in his resignation. As we know, and Eden feared, the policy of appeasement only whetted the appetite of the two dictators, resulting in Hitler invading Poland despite negotiations made in the name of appeasement. Prior to the invasion of Poland, Eden had resigned due to opposition to the policy of appeasement.

It was in 1956, when Eden was the Prime Minister of Britain, that the Suez Crisis ensued. Nasser, an Egyptian leader, and dictator catalysed the events by nationalising the Suez Canal – a valuable waterway, and international asset which controlled two-thirds of the oil used by Europe. Ultimately this meant that an Egyptian dictator would be running, and generating profit from, the canal – which was both illegal and would potentially quash the flow of imports and exports to its user countries. Initially, there were some attempts to begin negotiations with Egypt, economic sanctions were placed, and a User's Group was set up, yet these were limited. Instead, Eden, alongside Israel and France, planned a secret attack on Egypt. Infamously however, troops had to be removed days later due to a lack of international support – notably American. This was a devastating blow to the reputation of Britain as a world power, and furthermore to the reputation of Anthony Eden.

While these events appear largely unrelated, with different international actors, different circumstances, and twenty years apart, these events were linked through the actions of Eden and the memory of the Second World War. As Prime Minister, Eden acted in the extreme due to the looming memory of appeasement and an intention to avoid any - and all associations with such a policy. As Tilly states, "once a process has occurred and acquired a name, both the name and one or more representation of the process becomes available as signals, models, threats and, or aspirations for later actors" in collective memory.[31] Thus, in the case of appeasement, it earned a collective reputation as a failed policy, acting as a threat and a warning for later actors. Eden's response to this was expressed

[29] K. Lowe, 'WW2: When Britain stood (not quite) alone', *BBC History Extra*, 24 June 2019, https://www.historyextra.com/period/second-world-war/britain-stood-alone-ww2-myths-brexit-debate/ [Accessed 25/08/2020]

[30] J. Elledge, 'Britain has built a national myth on winning the Second World War, but it's distorting our politics', *New Statesman*, 18 August 2017, https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/brexit/2017/08/britain-has-built-national-myth-winning-second-world-war-it-s-distorting-our [Accessed 10/09/2020]

[31] C. Tilly, 'Why and How History Matters', in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Robert E. Goodin, (Oxford, 2009), p.5

perfectly in his memoir, *Full Circle* where he claimed that his actions in 1956 were those which should have been adopted 18 years previously.[32] Although Nasser, Hitler and Mussolini may be comparable in their dictatorial leadership, this is where their likeness ends. Yet Eden could not recognise the stark distinctions - and twenty-year gap, for all the analogous comparisons he made, such as "Muslim Mussolini" and "Middle Eastern Munich". The term '*hyperamnesia'*, coined by Garton Ash, is central to the assessment of Eden's actions in 1956.[33] Hyperamnesia refers to a state of being whereby history is not left as the past but continues to distort and dictate present politics. Anthony Eden was so consumed with evading any association with appeasement and to rebuke its legacy, that he failed to realise his actions (in the opposite way) would too end in failure and the embarrassment of the British nation. To act in one situation how people should have acted twenty years prior is imprudent, and highlights issues and changes in international context, economic reality and quite clearly, changed personalities.

Worryingly, some individuals today share a similar mentality to Eden: avoiding connection with the failed policy of appeasement, despite an even lengthier period of time separating events. Perhaps the internationally humiliating and personally devastating consequences for Eden – now consistently voted 'Britain's Worst PM' - should act as a caution.[34] How, and to what extent, should history and memory influence contemporary decisions? This calls into sharp focus why we are utilising myths of the Second World War to justify modern political decisions today.

Although I have highlighted the durability of comparisons to the Second World War, there are also some notable differences between the collective memory of war at the time of the Suez Crisis, and those of our contemporary politics. Just twenty years after the war, the failures of the British nation to act faster in the face of dictators, loomed larger in the living collective memory. Whereas, with a negligible population of those who lived through the events of the Second World War, such failures and negative memories are easily masked behind a narrative of British pride and courage now. During the Suez Crisis, Eden's intentions were of course not another national humiliation, but an attempt to **reassert** British pride and strength on an international stage. Through fast military action there was an attempt to prove Britain as a dominant and independent actor, despite the reality of reliance on American support. The avoidance of a previously failed policy was one of the greatest 'lessons' from the Second World War at the time of the Suez Crisis. On the other hand, in the present day, the collective memory from the Second World War is largely that of Britain standing alone, fantastic military achievement, and the bravery, pluck and courage of the British nation. Now, instead of trying to restore a narrative of British strength, we are aiming to **resort** to a time of great historical strength, albeit somewhat imagined and hyperbolised. The memory of the war in Britain, is not just that of 'never again' as in some countries such as Germany but is a source of strength for the British nation still.

History and memory in society

Despite the problems and dangers identified throughout this essay, it is neither desirable, nor remotely practicable to excise 'history' from contemporary politics. The past and present are symbiotic in history and memory; the past shapes us, but history is written, partly, in order to try to understand, and make sense of our present. Often one will hear the colloquial phrase that we 'learn from the past', or

[32] Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: Full Circle*, p. 431
[33] G. Ash, *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*, (London 2016)
[34] "Churchill, 'Greatest' PM of 20th Century", *BBC Politics*, 4 January 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/575219.stm [Accessed 10/09/2020]; 'Thatcher and Attlee top PM list', *BBC News*, 29 August 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5294024.stm [Accessed 10/09/2020]; 'Rating British Prime Ministers', *Ipsos MORI*, 29 November, 2004, https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/rating-british-prime-ministers [Accessed 10/09/2020]

as George Santayana said, if we do not learn from history, we are "condemned to repeat it".[35] While simplified, the notion of using an understanding, or even living memory of the past, in contemporary politics is inescapable. Furthermore, a shared national history is imperative for national identity. As the Popular Memory Group of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies argued in 1982, "we structure our memories to make sense of our past and present lives".[36] Ownership of a past is the very make-up of a national identity, with an acknowledgement of a long line of ancestors, historical greatness, ultimately legitimises contemporary decisions, and status both historically, and globally. This is expressed perfectly by Schlesinger in 1992: "history is to the nation rather as memory is to the individual. As an individual deprived of memory becomes distorted and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future. As the means for defining national identity, history becomes a means for shaping history."[37] One of the points Schlesinger grapples with is that historical truth is not an active agent in our understanding of the past, instead we have 'conception', and a mythologised form. Nonetheless, this is not necessarily problematic, and is just as essential in providing direction for a nation. However, there are some noteworthy, and potentially dangerous consequences from the interconnectivity of history and politics, past and present. The power of history is so great, it can often be abused resulting in a distortion of reality, an overstatement of continuum and the political justification of a pre-concocted route.

Although history will forever be connected with, and inform contemporary politics, can we ever truly learn from history in a constantly dynamic and changing world? Hegel declared in 1837: "people and governments never have learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced from it. Each period is involved in such peculiar circumstances, exhibits a condition of things so strictly idiosyncratic that its conduct must be regulated by considerations connected with itself and itself alone."[38] While Hegel's sentiment that each event occurs in specific circumstances is undeniable, his conclusion that "a general principle gives no help', is ignorant to the information history can provide, and the inexorable interconnectivity of the past and present. Furthermore, while there may be some limitations in the role of history, it has not prevented politicians from invoking the past, or to validate the rectitude of a specific point of view. Though history may not repeat itself in exact forms, history can be used to instruct on a theoretical plane. Sir Lewis Namier addresses a similar point to Hegel – experiences never occur twice yet notes how the transcendent properties of history can be used to apprise – "No two events or chains of events are identical any more than any two individuals or their lives. Yet the lives of all men can be summed up, as in Anatole France's story in eight words: "They were born, they suffered, and they died.'"[39] While the specific actors, locations or other variables may not be identical, the elimination of such variants reveal certain fundamental regularities. In this sense, history can perhaps be understood as a linear, rather than a cyclical process, in which there is an overarching guiding principle of progress.[40] We can make generalisations which provide a certain predictability, while also being aware that exceptions are frequent, as "history never repeats itself".[41]

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[35] G. Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense, V. 1 of The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress*, (1905), p. 284

[36] The Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method' in R. Johnson, G. McLennan, B. Schwarz & D. Sutton (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics*, (1982, London: Hutchinson), pp. 205– 52.

[37] A. Schlesinger Jr. Folly's Antidote, *New York Times*, 1 January 2007 https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/01/opinion/01schlesinger.html [Accessed 10/09/2020]

[38] Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, (London 2004)

[39] Namier, '*History'* (1952) in Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present*, (London 1970), pp. 376-7

[40] J. M. Wiersma, 'Politics of the Past, the Use and Abuse of History' in *Politics of the Past, the Use and Abuse of History* (eds.) J.M Wiersma and H. Swoboda, (2009, The Socialist Group in the European Parliament)

[41] R. J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, (2000, London, Granta Books), p. 59

History use is greatest at times of crisis Cohen believes, and the examples I have used thus far in this essay demonstrates this.[42] The primary examples I have explored include the Suez Crisis (1956), and more recently, Brexit (2016) and the Coronavirus (2020), all of which can be considered crises of some variation – whether medical, military or international. One of the reasons for this increased use at time of crisis, is, as Charles Tilly notes, that "history shapes the availability of means for making collective claims".[43] To possess a shared historical understanding of the nation, and a shared historical identity, can motivate people to take action for the future. [44] Furthermore, history allows one to present a model of the world that incorporates a favourable outcome for the crisis at hand and can point towards a more hopeful future at a time of unknown circumstance.[45] Political actors, and commentators, will probably always reach for historical analogy in pursuit of political authority, to legitimise a leader or a cause, or to advocate for, or condemn a course of action. In the case of Boris Johnson, he has consistently compared himself to Churchill, and referred to his cabinet as a "wartime government", inundating his speeches with numerous other references to the war.[46] And yet, these stories never fit exactly, and consequently are regularly modified in order to conform to the current narrative necessary to galvanise the population towards a route of action. As a result, there are a number of dangers brought about by the use of history at times of crisis. As seen in the case of the Suez Crisis, Eden's use of history, whether impervious or not, led to both political and personal humiliation as well as the failure of international intervention. This is because the power of historical truth has a difficult time competing with the power of the right story at the right time – even though, or perhaps precisely because, the latter has been hopelessly adulterated with myth and legend.[47]

Every nation has a national history, a national identity, often founded upon a narrative of heroism, success, and pride. The creation of such however, omits many details, while enhancing others, due to "a mixture of tradition, living memory and self-justification" in the formation of popular memory.[48] Thus, despite societies emphasising commemoration and remembrance, what we choose to forget is just as significant as what we choose to remember. Sometimes, choosing to forget is a step towards peace, and accepting progress and time. The sores of history can plague a nation and may therefore be better forgotten. Perhaps the remembrance of history has led to rancour and resentment more often than reconciliation.[49] This undermines Santayana's sentiment that a society *must* remember in order to avoid repetition.[50] In some societies, it is not necessarily remembrance that is the problem, but how they choose to remember.[51] Some memories are so engrained in the foundations of that nation that they continue to dictate contemporary actions. Such a relationship with history has been termed by Garton Ash as '*hyperamnesia'*.[52] Whether the memories are too precious to give up, have remained unchallenged for living memory, or inhibit progress, the term *hyperamnesia* refers to over-use of history and the inability to see the present for the past. While I am not suggesting we do not remember such events, it is important we question why and how we are remembering and utilising history within our societies. Nor am I advocating forgetting, as this too has pitfalls. Instead, both should occur naturally alongside one another in balance, combining both positive and negative aspects of past

[42] P. A. Cohen, *History, and popular memory: the power of story in moments of crisis*
[43] Tilly, 'Why and How History Matters', p. 9
[44] M. Schulz, 'Preface: Never Again' in *Politics of the Past, the Use and Abuse of History* (eds.) J.M Wiersma and H. Swoboda, (2009, The Socialist Group in the European Parliament)
[45] Ibid
[46] B. Johnson, Daily Briefing, 7 March 2020
[47] P. A. Cohen, *History, and popular memory: the power of story in moments of crisis*, p. XIV
[48] P. Hassner, 'Beyond history and politics, the need for conceptual and ethnical dialogue', in *Politics of the Past, the Use and Abuse of History* (eds.) J.M Wiersma and H. Swoboda, (2009, The Socialist Group in the European Parliament), p. 73
[49] D. Rieff, 'The cult of memory: when history does more harm than good', *The Guardian*, 2 March 2016
[50] Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense*
[51] Rieff, *The cult of memory: when history does more harm than good*
[52] Ash, *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*

experience. If not, we are acting with misinformation and a false concept of historical and present identity.

Conclusion:

If, as a society, we are constantly facing new problems, and the past does not repeat itself, a tangible conclusion might be that we should therefore not use the past in contemporary debates. Yet, this is unrealistic. Despite the dangers and problems that arise from an over-use of a mythologised past, it is impossible to excise the use of history within politics. Instead the question needs to be how can we do better? How can we use history critically and thoughtfully within our contemporary political conversations? This perhaps begins with a greater role of the historian within public debates – such as Brexit. Some have already begun to address this, with the suggestion of a resident historian within the Foreign Office, and other government departments. However, this might present new problems, as politicians would potentially only receive one 'version' of history – which has very different consequences. Instead, the historian needs to intervene into political conversations, independent from the government. The role of the historian is not one of moral accountancy, but in how we mis/remember. To achieve this, we do not need to read more tomes by historians on the Second World War. Alternatively, these lessons and more accurate understandings of the past need applying to modern problems and challenging how we respond to these with 'history'. Four years on from the 2016 referendum, we are still talking about Brexit and what it means for Britain globally. We are questioning Britain's place in the world now, as well as historically. Due to the over-emphasis of continuity by both Brexiteers and Remainers, the historian has a crucial role in noting examples of alignment between the British nation now, and in 1945, but also, where there are fundamental differences. British state and society are completely different, Britain is no longer a global power, and if we do accept a narrative of 'declinism', the capabilities of the British nation domestically and internationally have been reduced. With a greater involvement of historians, such differences can be addressed publicly and hopefully reduce the destructive qualities history can have within contemporary politics.

Without historians, campaigners and politicians will continue to project an image which is factually incorrect through misremembering and a bastardised version of the past. Until the Brexit campaign, Britain's use of the Second World War in political culture arguably, had not had overwhelmingly negative effects to British politics since the Suez Crisis. However, through Brexit, British "hubris is about to run headlong into nemesis", and the assumption that Britain can survive 'standing alone' is likely to run into a harsh reality.[53] Following the withdrawal from the EU, Britain will inevitably realise they cannot live up to the ideal of a truly independent nation. India will not strike up a trade deal for sentimental reasons, nor will Ireland remain Britain's neutral and junior partner following us out of the EU. Instead, the realisation of Britain's lack of status and power will smack us in the face and our inability to 'stand alone' will challenge the 75 years of misremembered history. Britain has yet to grapple with the 'Gordian knot' of its place in the world, and instead remains in the safety net of self-delusion.[54] If the past must inform our present-day political conversations, we need to ensure it is a good and accurate history - not comforting or self-serving myths. The critical interrogation of these myths is therefore imperative, and a useful function for historians to perform.

[53] Elledge, *Britain has built a national myth on winning the Second World War, but it's distorting our politics*
[54] M. Finn, 'Post-war fantasies and Brexit: the delusional view of Britain's place in the world'

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