

THE USES AND ABUSES OF HISTORY (Prospectus)

Mondays 3:30-6:30

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Aims and Format

This course is designed for junior and senior history majors in any regional or thematic concentration, but also welcomes others who have done substantial coursework in history. Using case studies from around the world, our class will explore the uses of history (and the roles historians have played) in a wide range of contexts and circumstances: e.g., in promoting nationalism or cultivating patriotism; shaping cultural and ethnic identities and loyalties; making (or justifying) foreign policies or military actions; commemorating historical personalities or events; preserving indigenous cultures, sacred sites, or artifacts; and producing popular histories in print and film. Our seminar is primarily discussion based, with occasional mini-lectures by the instructor or visiting colleagues from the history department.

Because governments and interest groups of all sorts invariably want to have ‘history on their side,’ their supporters tend to produce partisan narratives which use historical evidence selectively. We will ask how effective historians have been—or can be—in countering popular ‘myths’ about the past, in uncovering ‘silences’ in the historical record, and in recognizing that the same historical event or process can leave different memories and hold different meanings for the various parties involved. Does fuller knowledge of the past constrain or empower our capacities to deal with challenges in the present and future?

In examining these and other ‘meta-questions’ through a series of specific case studies, you will almost certainly learn something about contested histories in parts of the world you may not be familiar with, but which should help you situate your own regional specialties in a wider comparative framework. Over the course of the semester, we hope you will find occasion to share insights from other history courses you have taken, and to help us reflect collectively on the value of history as a discipline in understanding the world and our responsibilities in it.

Requirements and Assignments

All students are expected to 1) attend class and participate actively in discussion and via our Discussion Board (25%); 2) maintain an informal on-line journal with responses/reflections/takeaways from the weekly readings (25%); 3) prepare and circulate two short reports/commentaries on books related to one of the weekly topics (20%); and 4) produce a 10-12 pp. final paper—either historiographical or based on primary sources—on a topic of your choice which has some relation to one of the course’s many themes (30%).

Readings The following books will be read in whole or in large part and you should order your own copies from the University Book Store or on-line. (Kindle or e-book versions may be available)

Margaret MacMillian, *Dangerous Games* (2010)

Edward T. Linenthal *History Wars* (1996)

Hal Brands & Jeremi Suri, eds. *The Power of the Past* (2016)

Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (2021)

Other titles we will draw from in the course include:

Friedrich Nietzsche “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life”, from *Untimely Meditations*

Richard E. Neustadt, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*

Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, *The invention of tradition*

Bernard Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*

P. Kenney and M. Friedman *Partisan Histories: The Past in Contemporary Global Politics*

Just as important as the books are the weekly assigned readings, many of them chapters or excerpts from the large corpus of literature on the subject of history’s uses and abuses. These selections will be posted on our course Canvas site (CV) either as links or as downloadable articles, and should be read prior to the class for the week in which they are assigned.

Provisional Outline of Weekly Topics

Wk 1. Intro and Logistics

- 2. Some Uses (and Misuses) of the Past**
- 3. Nationalisms and Histories of the ‘Nation’**
- 4. Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in History**
- 5. Defining, Documenting, Denying Genocide: What role for historians**
- 6. Public history: debates over monuments, memorials, and museums**
- 7. South Africa’s TRC: remembering and documenting painful pasts**
- 8. Promise and Perils of Oral History**
- 9. ‘Lessons’ of the past: history and policy making**
- 10. The 1619 Project: Reframing U.S. History (and school curriculums)**
- 11. Historical documentaries: advocacy and accuracy**
- 12. History and Hollywood: popular historical epics, good and bad**
- 13. History and Biography, biography as history**
- 14. Neglected topics selected by the class**