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In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies

David Rieff

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The conventional wisdom about historical memory is summed up in George Santayana's celebrated phrase, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Today, the consensus that it is moral to remember, immoral to forget, is nearly absolute. And yet is this right?

David Rieff, an independent writer who has reported on bloody conflicts in Africa, the Balkans, and Central Asia, insists that things are not so simple. He poses hard questions about whether remembrance ever truly has, or indeed ever could, "inoculate" the present against repeating the crimes of the past. He argues that rubbing raw historical wounds—whether self-inflicted or imposed by outside forces—neither remedies injustice nor confers reconciliation. If he is right, then historical memory is not a moral imperative but rather a moral option—sometimes called for, sometimes not. Collective remembrance can be toxic. Sometimes, Rieff concludes, it may be more moral to forget.

Ranging widely across some of the defining conflicts of modern times—the Irish Troubles and the Easter Uprising of 1916, the white settlement of Australia, the American Civil War, the Balkan wars, the Holocaust, and 9/11—Rieff presents a pellucid examination of the uses and abuses of historical memory. His contentious, brilliant, and elegant essay is an indispensable work of moral philosophy.

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