INTRODUCTION

UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL LESSONS

Klas-Göran Karlsson and Maria Karlsson

This book is concerned with historical lessons, which are defined as concentrations of historical meaning that involve multiple historical perspectives and questions of historical transition and temporal transcendence. It aims to contribute to a theoretical understanding of the concept of historical lessons, suggest ways to make them scholarly operative, and provide empirical examples of analyses guided by this concept. Its first two tasks relate to modern historical and cultural theory, which has shifted its focus from reproduction to the production of history, and has expanded the traditional arena of history to include what learning processes, i.e. work with historical constructs that serve to give meaning and orientation to posterity. With a few exceptions, the book's empirical focus is on modern Eastern and Central Europe.

In a research endeavor conducted at Lund University in Sweden, a collaborative group of historians, scholars specializing in Slavic and Eastern European studies, and a political scientist, all contributors to this publication, cooperated to elucidate the processes, structures, and functions of historical lessons, both in theoretical and practical contexts, as well as across diverse discourses and societies. Throughout the project, we extended an invitation to a select group of distinguished academics to share their insights on historical lessons. Although the series of lectures was ultimately suspended due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, several of these experts generously offered us written materials that are included in this publication.

Consequently, the first chapter, which is theoretical and analytical in nature, is not meant to serve as a mandatory framework for all the subsequent chapters. Although some chapters are aligned with the broader research project and follow the analytical and conceptual structure outlined in this first chapter, others have a more independent status and are written from an

external perspective. These chapters are written by scholars who have contributed theoretically and empirically to a deeper understanding of historical lessons, although not as members of the aforementioned research group.

Historical lessons are the culmination of cultural or intellectual processes in which history is exposed to communication, evaluation, and other kinds of qualifications of latter-day relevance. These lessons can be studied and analyzed with distance and analytical accuracy from a scholarly perspective, often far from the hotspots of the world or the trivial life situations, but in some situations, drawing lessons from the past transcends from theoretical thought experiments into real-life, pressing concerns. Living in a conflict-ridden and unsafe world, with brutal ongoing wars in both Russia-Ukraine and the Middle East, we need to turn to history, or rather to a complex of historical questions. What are the historical lessons that can help us comprehend events as rooted in history, as similar to or distinct from other conflicts, and as connected to our own lives and society?

Consequently, we must ask whether present conflicts have historical roots, whether they are driven by historically motivated driving forces and rationales, and whether similar wars or conflicts have taken place before. We may also feel the need to think about the general aspects of modern warfare. Do the wars of the postmodern world exist as isolated, singular conflicts, or do they tend to generate new tensions that could cause the conflict to spread to new states and territories? Could these wars, as history has shown, trigger other devastating phenomena such as civil war, genocide, or revolution? Another crucial set of questions revolves around our apparent path dependency in assigning roles within historical narratives. States at war often invoke history to legitimate their actions, portraying their antagonists as perpetual perpetrators and eternal enemies. As conflict looms, we may find ourselves interpreting it through historical or cultural lenses, sometimes relying on simplistic images and narratives that, while providing guidance and orientation in a difficult situation, risk perpetuating or exacerbating the conflict. Can we also make sense of the wars by turning constructively, with benign and beneficial intentions, to history?

These reflections on the role of the historical dimensions in times of anxiety and turbulence clearly relate to the concept of historical lessons. Three approaches to understanding these lessons have already been suggested. The first approach examines the unique conditions and prerequisites for a conflict as they appear from a distanced historical perspective. The second approach focuses on general patterns and systematic observations evident in similar conflicts. The third approach considers our present-day attitudes, relations, and questions concerning these antagonisms. Collectively, these approaches represent activations of our historical consciousness —a mental compass that enables individuals and societies to orientate themselves temporally by

connecting what we perceive as our current situation with interpretations and representations of the past, as well as with expectations (or fears) about the future. Analyzing historical consciousness is challenging with traditional scholarly methods; it likely serves us best as a heuristic device, reminding us that history is not merely a record of the past, but a present and living dimension of human existence. However, the manifestations and activations of historical consciousness, including historical lessons, can be subjected to analytical scrutiny. This pioneering work endeavors to undertake such an analysis.

Traditionally, historical lessons have been rooted in the educational sphere, in the results of teaching and learning processes that relate to formalized phenomena such as curricula, course descriptions, and textbooks. In addition, many history textbooks claim to present collections of historical lessons, yet it is often unclear what these lessons are and how they have been formulated. However, historical lessons extend beyond education; they are also relevant in media, politics, diplomacy, economics, military affairs, and other aspects of public life. In these varied spheres, is it similarly unclear what the purported historical lessons actually entail. Currently, it is popular among politicians to invoke historical lessons to justify a course of political actions or political ambitions, but these lessons are seldom well founded. This type of public learning, which in which is the focus of this book, cannot be described in the formal terms used in educational research, and the guiding principles behind public historical lessons are rarely articulated explicitly. However, the fact that they are less organized and formalized does not mean that the historical lessons that we meet in the press, in political speeches, in cultural artifacts, or in the general public discourse are mere fantasies or arbitrarily selected histories. Instead, they follow a cultural logic tied to what will here referred to here as history culture, indicating that the histories chosen as lessons are often—but not always—connected to established traditions and widely recognized cultural preferences.

Historical lessons have rarely engaged scholars in the humanities, and perhaps least of all professional historians. The reasons for this, both past and present, are intriguing and will be explored later in this work. Here, however, we can acknowledge the observation made by the German historian Jörn Rüsen: sense making, of which lesson making is an aspect, has fallen into disfavor among historians, particularly when "sense"—etymologically linked to "direction"—is understood as a temporal continuum that connects the past, present, and future. In modern historical scholarship, "sense" has become a technical term focused on understanding history in its own right, thereby diminishing its relevance for the present and the future, as Rüsen argues.[1]

Many historians adhere to what they would consider methodological reasons for why history cannot orientate or guide for the future. Some argue that

the main problem resides in unforeseen "x factors" and elements of chance and coincidence inevitably emerge. For others, predictions about the future based on historical analysis merely reflect the predictor's current preferences or fears. For yet another group, to use history as a source of lessons implies the existence of a grand historical plan—an assumption often unwarranted, as such a plan frequently does not exist.

For the authors of this book, such a professional attitude is regrettable. We believe that historians possess the knowledge and skills necessary to formulate the kinds of historical lessons emphasized in this book and should actively engage in doing so. There is a pressing need for constructive scholarly interpretation and critique to demonstrate how the historical dimension can effectively guide and orientate us. This is a challenging intellectual task, as any historical lesson involves an encounter between two or more temporal horizons and worlds—an encounter that ideally results in the intellectual synthesis that characterizes historical consciousness.

The Structure of the Book

This volume is structured into three interrelated yet analytically distinct parts. The first section features two authors who provide philosophical, theoretical, and analytical frameworks for the concept of historical lessons. In the opening chapter, Klas-Göran Karlsson explores scholarly approaches to understanding the concept, emphasizing the transitional and multitemporal nature of historical lessons. He demonstrates that the complexities surrounding historical lessons are connected to longstanding intellectual debates, originating in antiquity but persisting today among professional historians and laypersons with differing views on the function of history. A key concept in Karlsson's chapter is the notion of history culture, where history is selectively used and evaluated for its sense-making and orientating functions. Consequently, our engagement with history is neither arbitrary nor impartial; the types of histories we consult for lessons often carry distinctive "borderline" characteristics, as he argues. Both this chapter and the book as a whole advocate for thinking scholarly about historical lessons.

Björn Badersten's metatheoretical and conceptually oriented chapter addresses the issue of political learning from history, drawing on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, or "practical wisdom." Through its holistic, experience-based, relational, and situational understanding of history, *phronesis*, he argues, bridges genetic and genealogical approaches to historical learning. It aligns intriguingly with the integrative idea of "learning history in history." Framed within the analytical language of this volume, *phronesis* suggests that we learn both "about" and "from" history, though mediated and

abstracted by analytic-critical thought and grounded in specific spatiotemporal circumstances. It also underscores that historical lessons are inherently normative, highlighting the need for judgment and ethical reflection in the complex transhistorical interaction between the universal and the particular.

Johan Stenfeldt's chapter seeks is to dissect the concept of a historical lesson by exploring its absence, using the negative concept of "historylessness" as a starting point. This term often surfaces in public discourse when disagreements arise within the same history culture —where some individuals believe history demands certain actions that others neglect or reject. But in what specific situations does this occur? Drawing inspiration from Reinhart Koselleck and conceptual history, Stenfeldt traces the appearance of this term ("historielöshet" in Swedish) in the Swedish press over a long period, from 1890 to 2015. The chapter chisels out implicit definitions of the term and identifies its various usages. Remarkably, the frequency of the term multiplies tenfold in the final three years of this period, a development that is worth reflecting on. What historical lessons were believed to be neglected during these years, and by whom, according to newspaper editors?

Jayne Svenungsson's chapter examines how European narratives of crisis have been intertwined with religion across different time periods, factions, and purposes. It begins by discussing tendencies from the prewar and interwar era, where religion was invoked both in conservative, nationalist narrative of crisis and progressive antinationalist ones. The chapter then revisits postwar debates, during which religion—or the biblical legacy—was commonly depicted as the root of the ideological distortions that had fueled Europe's recent crises. At the same time, religion was also embraced as a constructive force in postwar Europe, particularly by the founding fathers of the European Union. Finally, the chapter maps how contemporary European political and cultural discourses form historical lessons related to religion. As in previous eras, religion today is rhetorically adopted for various, often conflicting, purposes. The chapter concludes by briefly considering the critical role of theology in contemporary Europe.

Christer Jönsson's contribution on learning from history in diplomacy explores the idea that historical lessons can vary across different dimensions. The chapter distinguishes between two main approaches to learning: lessons derived from long-term experiences during lengthy processes and those emerging from discrete, dramatic events. Additionally, lessons may be either positive or negative, either facilitating constructive solutions to recurring problems or dilemmas or impeding them. Jönsson applies these distinctions to the recorded history of diplomacy, which dates back to the fourteenth century BCE. As case studies, process-based lessons are discussed: the positive development of rules and practices that mitigate the harmful effects of relative status and prestige, and the negative "unlearning" of old lessons of

the functional necessity of diplomatic immunity and inviolability. Similarly, two significant events serve as illustrations: the Munich Agreement of 1938, which delegitimized "appeasement" and concessions to totalitarian regimes; and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which demonstrated the complex use of coercive diplomacy through a combination of threats and negotiations.

Karl Schlögel's chapter presents the idea that landscapes are like palimpsests—overlapping historical layers that can be deciphered and read as historic textures. This is particularly relevant in regions where many historical layers—ethnic, national, religious, and cultural —overlap. Traditional historical narratives tend to follow a chronological order, often overlooking the spatial dimension of the historical process. However, East Central Europe in the twentieth century was a battleground of dramatic upheavals: wars, imperial collapses, revolutions, and shifting borders. These events left their marks on the physical, cultural, ethnic, and political landscape, creating a complex terrain of competing lessons, memories and memorials. Schlögel argues that reading these landscapes can offer new ways of representing and narrating the deeply intricate history of this region.

Nanci Adler's chapter examines the lessons drawn and ignored within Russian history culture, particularly regarding the Stalinist era. While post-Soviet Russia has undertaken symbolic acts of rehabilitating victims of false accusations, it has largely refrained from implementing substantive transitional justice mechanisms. Notably, it was not until 2015 that a Moscow city-sponsored Gulag museum was opened, and in 2017, Putin unveiled the "Wall of Sorrow," a monument honoring victims of political repression—many of whom did not live to see its construction. Both official and public narratives avoid discussing the broader system of repression that extended beyond the Gulag and was the modus operandi of Soviet rule. Much like during the Khrushchev and Gorbachev eras, the Russian government allows for a limited memorialization of victims, but remains reluctant to critically examine the role of the perpetrators. This chapter explores the underlying causes and ramifications of Russia's ambivalence toward its Stalinist past and suggests how to move beyond the current deadlock.

Maria Karlsson's chapter shifts focus to the Holocaust, particularly the 1990s as a pivotal period in shaping contemporary perspectives on historical lessons. The chapter continues from where Alon Confino's influential book *Foundational Pasts* (2012) ends. In his epilogue, Confino introduces a Nazi propaganda poster from 1937, which links the ideals of the French Revolution —especially its history of Jewish emancipation—with the *Judenfrage* of the German 1930s. The artwork, like much Nazi propaganda, is dark, menacing, and riddled with antisemitic stereotypes. While the poster may seem conventional for its time and place, its message about historical lessons is revealing. For Confino, the poster underscores the need for further explo-

ration of Nazi Germany's memory landscape, but it is also a telling example of how so-called dark lessons—lessons drawn from historical atrocities—are employed to shape contemporary narratives. The Holocaust was not the genesis of such cautionary tales, as evidenced by the prewar poster, but it certainly amplified the focus on warnings, syndromes, and "dark lessons" that dominate historical discourse today.

Barbara Törnquist-Plewa's chapter highlights the challenges of conveying traumatic memories of victims through film, specifically aiming to use these narratives as "never again" historical lessons for a broad audience. The chapter poses critical questions, such as the following: what can we learn from depictions of dark and conflicting pasts in popular culture? Who learns these lessons and under what circumstances? The discussion is grounded in an analysis of the reception of the Polish film *Hatred* (2016), directed by Wojciech Smarzowski. The film, which portrays the massacres of Polish civilians by the Ukrainian nationalist guerilla during the chaos of the Second World War, sparked significant controversy. Törnquist-Plewa examines the gap between the director's intention—warning against the dangers of nationalism and representing the trauma of the victims—and the film's actual reception by the public. This case highlights the complex web of factors that shape how historical lessons in films are received, particularly emphasizing the role of history culture and the political and social context in which these lessons are mediated.

Per Anders Rudling's chapter shifts focus to the brutal 1932–133 Soviet famine, which arguably constitutes Stalin's greatest crime against his own people. The lessons derived from this event have varied widely, and since the early 1980s it has occupied a central position in the memory culture of the Ukrainian diaspora. While access to archives has expanded our understanding of the famine, little of the recent scholarship is engaged with the diaspora's memory culture, which has found increasingly sacral expressions and takes the form of a monologue, its numbers of victims grossly inflated, and in isolation of academic research. The fall of 2019 saw an infected conflict on the campus of the University of Alberta, following comments by a sessional instructor, a member of a small communist party, who dismissed the diaspora's narration of the famine as a lie. The influential Ukrainian lobby demanded the instructor's immediate censoring and dismissal, seeking the university administration's endorsement of their rivalling instrumentalization of history—one no less selective in regard to political violence in twentieth-century Ukraine. A number of faculty members, in turn, defended the instructor's right to freedom of speech on principal grounds. Letters flew back and forth, and petitions were signed on both sides. This clash between two extremes—proponents of two mutually exclusive and equally selective ideological narrations of political violence in twentieth-century Ukraine—raises

not only issues of use of history and *Aufarbeitung*, but also of trigger warnings, cancel culture, and academic freedom.

Using the taxonomy of historical lessons suggested by Klas-Göran Karlsson in the introductory chapter, Eleonora Narvselius' chapter traces the evolution of one of the most emotionally charged and politically controversial symbols of modern Ukraine, Stepan Bandera. His symbolic representation has undergone multiple transformations, shifting from a personification of the wartime nationalist movement to an attribute of symbolic (geo)politics in the Poland-Ukraine-Russia triangle. His image has moved from being a propaganda tool to a pop-cultural meme, and from a regional hero to a national symbol embodying the struggles of modern Ukraine. Narvselius focuses particularly on how Bandera's symbolism has been reinterpreted and reframed between two pivotal events in Ukraine's post-Soviet history: the Euromaidan protests in 2014 and the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022. This transformation reflects important shifts in public meaning-making in Ukraine, a country still grappling with its political identity while negotiating its place in the "triangle of memory" (Poland-Ukraine-Russia) and its relationship with the triangle of the detrimental "-isms" (Nazism-Soviet totalitarianism-violent nationalism).

Klas-Göran Karlsson is Professor of History at Lund University. He is the leader of the research project "Lessons of Communist and Nazi History: A Genealogical Approach," of which this volume is one result. Between 2001 and 2008, he conducted another large project, "The Holocaust and European Historical Cultures." He has written extensively on Russian and Soviet history, on genocide history, and on uses of history in Europe. His publications include *Perspectives on the Entangled History of Communism and Nazism* (co-editor, Lexington Books, 2015) and *Lessons of History: The Holocaust and Soviet Terror as Borderline Events* (Academic Studies Press, 2024). He is the editor of *Natur & Kultur's Global History* (in Swedish, 2022).

Maria Karlsson holds a Ph.D. in history from Lund University. Her thesis, "Cultures of Denial. Comparing Holocaust and Armenian Genocide Denial" (2015), compares Western, postwar denial of two of the twentieth century's most well-known cases of genocide. Within the topic of this book, she has also researched and written on revisionism, the lessons of the Holocaust, and the difficulties of narrating controversial genocide history online.

Note

1. Rüsen, "Sense of History," 42–43.

References

Rüsen, Jörn, "Sense of History: What Does It Mean? With an Outlook onto Reason and Senselessness," in Jörn Rüsen (ed.), *Meaning and Representation in History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 40–64.