

## HISTORY, LYING, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY\*

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Scholars' moral responsibility for truth, for the objective content of the results of their investigations, is a somewhat neglected problem in Western English-speaking critical philosophy of history. Nor has this problem found much theoretical attention in Soviet philosophy of history. At the same time the process of reassessing and rewriting Soviet history in the light of *glasnost* has helped to reveal the magnitude of distortions, lies, and half-truths in Soviet historiography over a number of years. The process of rediscovering what actually happened in the past has made history (at least for the time being) a very fashionable subject in Soviet intellectual life, and has also raised painful moral questions for many older historians who now face tough moral accusations by their colleagues, the general public, and perhaps by their own conscience. An analysis of the moral problems of Soviet historiography also has theoretical value in the Western intellectual context. Stalinist and post-Stalinist historiography represents a good extreme model for understanding many ethical choices that appear also in modified and milder form for historians, political scientists, and journalists who work in democratic societies. Stalin's instruction for historians to identify "a revolution of slaves" as a cause of the fall of slave-owning society<sup>1</sup> is, of course, in its nature quite different from the American Justice Department's attempts to stop the publishing of *The Pentagon Papers*,<sup>2</sup> but they can both serve as concrete cases for developing a general analysis of moral problems that may face students of history. Generally speaking, there are official or unofficial restrictions on the writing of history in every society. No society has been entirely successful in implementing the ideas of freedom of expression and objectivity in the study of history. So the question is usually one of degree, and in this respect, of course, Western democratic societies (in spite of all their shortcomings) have created better conditions for freedom of expression than have the socialist societies in Eastern Europe.

The notion "study of history" means here not only studies of history carried out by traditional historians but also studies of current history carried out by political scientists, political journalists, and politicians

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themselves. In other words, not only writings by G. M. Trevelyan or G. Elton, but also H. Smith's *Russians* would qualify as historical writings. Taking a Marxist context: not only Y. Tarle's biography of Napoleon but also most of the political writings by V. I. Lenin can be taken as historical studies. Such wide interpretations of the term "the study of history" do not influence very much the substance of the argument but help to present the examples more vividly.

Finally, I think that a meaningful ethical theory of history cannot be built apart from the study of actual examples from historiography. That is why in what follows I rely on concrete material.

## I

I shall consider here two types of lying in history and in politics: 1) the "direct lie" method; 2) the "blank pages" method.

A "direct lie" may also be called a "straightforward" lie. It says that "x took place there and then" whereas in reality x did not take place there and then or did not take place at all. It says that x had property *F* whereas in reality x did not have property *F* but had property *G*. Similar structures of "direct lie" statements can be listed almost endlessly.

The "direct lie" is perhaps as old as the writing of history itself. Taking an example from Russian history: it is well known that the author of the old Russian chronicle *Povest vremennykh let* faked and included in his narrative a text of a treaty, allegedly concluded between the Kievian prince Oleg and the Emperor of Byzantium in the year 907.<sup>3</sup> It is easy to find analogous cases of lies in many ancient and medieval historical writings.

"Direct lies" were widespread in Stalinist historiography. Pages and pages of the famous *Short Course* of the history of the Soviet Communist Party<sup>4</sup> can be classified as "direct lies." First of all, we can, of course, refer here to allegations that Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Radek, Tomski, and other victims of the "Great Purge" were agents of foreign intelligence services, that they planned to murder Soviet leaders, that they formed antirevolutionary clandestine organizations,<sup>5</sup> and so on. From the point of view of today's Soviet political and historical conception, the following can be considered as a brilliant example of "direct lie":

In 1937 new facts came to light regarding the fiendish crimes of the Bukharin-Trotsky gang. The trial of Pyatakov, Radek and others, the trial of Tukhachevsky, Yakir and others, and lastly, the trial of Bukharin, Rykov, Krestinsky, Rosengoltz and others, all showed that the Bukharinites and Trotskyites had long ago joined to form a common band of enemies of the people, operating as the "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites." ... The trials brought to light the fact that the Trotsky-Bukharin fiends, in obedience to the wishes of their masters – the espionage services of foreign states – had set out to destroy the Party and the Soviet state, to undermine the defensive power of the country, to assist foreign military intervention, to prepare the way for the defeat of the Red Army, to bring about the dismemberment of the U.S.S.R., to hand over the Soviet Maritime Region to the Japanese, Soviet Byelorussia to Poles, and the Soviet Ukraine to the Germans, to destroy the gains of the workers and collective farmers, and to restore capitalist slavery in the U.S.S.R.<sup>6</sup>

The “blank pages” method differs from the “direct lie” first of all because the former attempts not to make direct false statements, but rather selects facts to create the overall distorted picture. In other words, in spite of reporting a real set of facts (say,  $F_1, F_2, F_3, \dots F_n$ ) a selection (say,  $F_1, F_4, F_6, \dots F_n$ ) is reported. An important feature is, of course, that some objectively basic, first-rate facts (whatever the words “objectively basic” mean in this context) are omitted. The “blank pages” may be connected with the existence of all kinds of censorship.

Stalinist historiography is also full of “blank pages”-type reports. Consider, for example, a passage of Stalin’s biography where the economic successes of Soviet agriculture by the year 1940 are described and assessed without mentioning the real decline in meat production or other negative data.<sup>7</sup> Many other important historical facts that now surface (like the stories about massacres of thousands of people in 1937 and in the following years near Minsk in Byelorussia<sup>8</sup>) were simply absent from history books of that period.

The “white pages” method was very popular also in post-Stalinist Soviet historiography (especially during the Brezhnev years) when the direct lie approach was generally not applied any more.

## II

Almost a textbook case for studying the “direct lie” and “blank pages” methods in historiography are the various accounts of the events in the Baltic states in 1939–1940 in Soviet historiography. It is obvious that the interpretation of the incorporation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into the USSR is closely related to current Soviet political interests; therefore the whole topic is politically quite sensitive. It is not surprising then that *glasnost* has had a significant effect on the writing of history about this period of Baltic history.

I will briefly describe here some moments of Estonian history; the story is similar in the other two Baltic states. A brief summary of the events of that period from the point of view of current Estonian historical thought follows:<sup>9</sup>

The secret protocol of the Nazi-Soviet treaty of August 23, 1939 divided Eastern Europe into spheres of interests, leaving Estonia in the Soviet sphere. Following the outbreak of the Second World War, the Soviet government compelled Estonia to sign a mutual assistance treaty on September 28, 1939, according to which about 25,000 Red Army troops were stationed in Estonia (the size of the Estonian army was about 15,000). In one of the articles of the treaty the Soviet government renounced any intention of compromising Estonian sovereignty, stating that the enforcement of the treaty should in no way impair the sovereign rights, economic structure, or political system of the contracting parties.

On June 16, 1940 the Soviet government presented an ultimatum to Estonia, demanding the replacement of the Cabinet of Ministers and the

admission of additional Red Army troops. Given the military might of the USSR, the Estonian government considered resistance to be futile, and next morning additional Soviet forces crossed the border, occupying the country and bringing the total number of foreign troops to approximately 125,000. On June 19, a Soviet Politburo member, A. Zhdanov, one of the highest Soviet leaders, arrived in the Estonian capital and started to coordinate the transfer of power on the spot. A new puppet government was installed on June 21, which hastily (and with grave violations of the existing Constitution) arranged parliamentary "elections" for July 14–15. The "elections" guaranteed an easy victory for the communist-controlled Union of the Estonian Working People (UEWP) because only candidates representing the UEWP were allowed to stand, and the "elections" were held on the principle of "one candidate per place", so that the voters really had no alternatives from which to choose. There was only one exceptional electoral district with two competing candidates, but even there the alternative (not supported by the UEWP) was arrested on election day. The Red Army presence was quite open in the polling stations and there are good reasons to believe that the results of the voting were not counted correctly.

Although the UEWP in its pre-election program had said not a single word about plans to join the USSR or even to establish a Soviet-type society in Estonia (that is, the voters' opinion was never asked about such a crucial decision), a corresponding petition was passed by the new Estonian parliament on July 22, and on August 6, 1940 the Supreme Soviet of the USSR admitted Estonia as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, so completing the process of annexation.

Taking the above account as a basis and comparing it with a number of earlier Soviet and Estonian accounts, it is possible to clarify the notions of "direct lie" and "blank pages" further.

The classic case of "direct lie" is a story of the secret protocols to the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty of August 23, 1940. The existence of that protocol has been denied by some Soviet historians and politicians,<sup>10</sup> although the text of it had been published in the West in the 1940s and its existence was generally accepted by the world academic community of historians.<sup>11</sup> Recently the chairman of the special Soviet parliamentary commission and a CPSU Politburo member, A. Yakovlev, practically recognized the fact of the existence of that secret protocol,<sup>12</sup> although it was also reported in the press that at least one high-ranking member of the Yakovlev commission continues to deny that such a secret protocol ever existed.<sup>13</sup>

It was emphasized above that the July 1940 parliamentary elections were fraught with serious violations of existing laws and generally accepted democratic traditions. There are good reasons to believe that the situation was similar in the other Baltic states in the summer of 1940. In light of that, it is possible to identify some more general evaluative statements also as cases of the "direct lie," for example, the statement that the 1940 parliamentary elections were the "first democratic parliamentary elections in these countries," that is, in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.<sup>14</sup>

Soviet historiography about the incorporation of Estonia also offers a number of good examples to clarify the concept of "blank pages." First of all, the existence of the secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty was *usually* not explicitly denied; rather it was simply not mentioned. To look at the chapter on the 1940 events in the two-volume book about Estonian history is quite instructive in this respect.<sup>15</sup> It contains, for example, a number of facts about the activities of a small (about a hundred members before June 1940) Estonian Communist Party, but at the same time, some events listed in the above summary are quite vividly absent from this chapter. To give just some examples: the existence of the secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty is not reported; the September 28, 1939 treaty between the USSR and Estonia is mentioned, but the guarantees that the economic and political systems of the participating states will not be influenced by the treaty are omitted; the extraordinary fact that one of the most high-ranking officials of the USSR and Stalin's close colleague, A. Zhdanov, unexpectedly arrived on the 19th of June 1940 in a supposedly independent foreign country and started to form a new government is not reported. Nor is information given about another curious fact: that the leaders of the winning party said only *after* the elections that their aim was to establish a Soviet-type society and to make Estonia a part of the USSR.

### III

By identifying these two types of telling non-truth in history and politics, I do not want to say that there are no other relevant types. But to give more extensive coverage of the other possible ways of distorting the actual course of history is beyond the scope of this article.

Trying to focus first on the ethical side of the problem, I will leave aside the much debated problems about the nature of truth and objectivity in history, that is, questions like "What is truth in history?" or "Is it at all possible to write an objective history?"<sup>16</sup> I rely here on intuitive understanding of what is true and what is not true in history. And for understanding the essence of the moral choices of historians it is better, I think, to use the space of this article for explication of what is not true in historical knowledge on the basis of the review of concrete examples of lying and distorting rather than to try to present the notions of truth, objectivity, and lying in strict theoretical form. At the same time I think that the moral approach to history gives some support to the idea that more or less *true* (or at least more or less *untrue*) history can be in many cases objectively distinguished. Otherwise we cannot justify the struggle for truth which is a moral duty of all scholars. In other words, I think that it is morally wrong to suggest that it is never possible to show objectively that some historical accounts are closer to truth than others.

Another ethical point I would like to stress is the following: the distortions on the level of semi-theoretical, generalized historical

statements are ethically more easily justifiable than the distortions on the level of concrete, factual, empirical statements. At least that is the impression that one can get from studying Soviet historiography and interviewing Soviet historians. Most Soviet historians seem to have less trouble in finding moral justifications for offering distorted semi-theoretical generalizations (such as "There was a genuine revolution in Estonia in 1940, supported by the masses") than for concrete empirical lies (such as "There was no secret protocol attached to the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939"). Soviet historians avoided making false statements on concrete issues (preferring a "blank pages" method), but were more willing to formulate distorted general statements (demanded by the official ideology) about revolution, developed socialism, flourishing of national relations, and so on. Perhaps there are reasons for such a tendency: the historians' implicit contempt for theory and therefore the conclusion that distortions are not so blame-worthy on the level of generalizations; the objective vagueness of historical generalizations and the real difficulties of separating "true" from "false" on that level; and so on.

#### IV

Using the concept "lie," I assume that an author, an historian, is consciously distorting the truth, consciously telling partly or completely wrong stories. If historians sincerely want to discover the truth but still reach wrong conclusions, then they make *errors*, mistakes. From the moral point of view, it may be said that historians are generally not morally responsible for errors, but they are responsible for deliberate distortions, lies. Of course, as always, there are serious exceptions to that rule. Consider, for example, cases where historians are constantly making errors because they are too untalented or, to put it more bluntly, simply too stupid to qualify for academic jobs on the generally accepted level. Surely, they may then, in a sense, be excused for making some particular error but they are at the same time guilty of committing the more serious moral "crime"—doing research without really being able to do it on an acceptable academic level. So we may say that in an important sense historians are still morally responsible for lying even if they believe in their false historical account because their professional qualifications are lower than is required by objective academic standards. For example, I think that the writing of the distorted stories about the Baltic events in 1940 (omitting facts like Zhdanov's arrival in Estonia, or stating that the July 1940 elections were democratic) cannot be excused through saying that an author believed sincerely that his or her account is objective, because there was ample evidence to make a qualified historian doubt the adequacy of the "official" narrative about the events.

The difference between knowing truth and telling truth (or making it publicly known) should also be mentioned. Most of the moral problems considered here have to do with situations when historians know the truth,

or at least are committed to some point of view, thinking that it is true. The moral question consequently arises with making that truth or point of view publicly known.

Are there any *substantial moral differences* between using “direct lie” and “blank pages” methods? Although it is clearly a choice between two evils, it seems to be that from the point of view of most historians’ intuitive ethical understanding, the “blank pages” method is morally more acceptable. After all, the selection of facts for a narrative is inevitable and it is impossible to draw a neat line between the cases when we have, so to say, “normal” variations between narratives about the same historical process by different historians, and when these variations cross over to morally repugnant lies. It is always possible to identify extremes and there are many examples of extreme cases in Stalinist historiography. But the area between the extremes is not very clearly identifiable.

Let us consider three sentences:

- 1) Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939.
- 2) The war broke out between Poland and Nazi Germany on September 1, 1939.
- 3) Poland invaded Nazi Germany on September 1, 1939.

The first sentence is obviously true. The second (taken as it is, that is, without additional context) leaves some important information about the start of the war (who started it) aside, and can be in this respect interpreted as a peculiar “blank pages” case. The third sentence is obviously a “direct lie.”

I think that from the point of view of the average historian’s sense of professional ethics, sentence 3 will be considered as more morally blameworthy than sentence 2. Or to put it in a generalized form: other things being equal, “direct lying” is morally more blameworthy than the “blank pages” method. But this is, of course, a matter of intuitive judgment and cannot be proved unless some sociological survey is carried out among historians.

## V

I indicated above that to draw a neat line between the normally acceptable selection of facts and the morally wrong one is extremely difficult. One possibility is to approach the matter on a comparative basis. It seems to be morally wrong to omit facts from an historical account if these facts belong by objective academic standards at least to the same level of importance and generality as other facts (that are reported in the given account), and if the omission of the facts in question makes it easier to interpret the given account in favor of the interests of a certain state, party, social group, and so on. For example, if the important fact of who started the war is omitted from the historical account, but detailed

descriptions of some particular battles are given (as is the case with many Soviet accounts of the 1939–1940 Soviet–Finnish war), then we clearly have a morally blameworthy selection of facts.

Of course, things would be different if an historian says openly what kind of factual material is omitted from the account, and on what grounds it is omitted. For example, something may be omitted because it is connected with the privacy of living persons, or it is a commercial secret.

It is also possible to use some kind of sociological argument in connection with the problem of the permissible level of the selection of facts, that is, that level can be to a certain extent clarified against the background of the concrete practices of historians working in the most democratic societies of the given historical period. But, of course, such a criterion is also still quite ambiguous, subjective, and open to various criticisms.

## VI

Can conscious lying be morally justified through references to various *sanctions*, punishments that would have been implemented against the historians, had they told the truth? Sanctions were a real factor for historians of the Stalinist era and their variety was very wide, from officially organized criticisms and condemnations in academic journals to death sentences by courts or special security organs. To understand the atmosphere of officially orchestrated criticisms, it is very instructive to study the materials of discussions in philosophy, biology, physiology, linguistics, and political economy in the years 1947–1951.<sup>17</sup> Generally speaking, it seems right to say that historians' personal safety, career prospects, increase in public popularity, and so on, must not serve as moral excuses for lying. But it should also be stressed that the possibility (and even the desirability) of compromise is defended by some prominent Western thinkers. For example, John Kekes says: "If a society is evil, resisting its vicious legal and moral requirements is good. My point is not to condemn such behavior, but to call attention to its incompatibility with happiness. If a man wants to have a happy life, his life-plan should not be at radical odds with his society."<sup>18</sup> At the same time we know that many intellectuals of various historical periods, like Socrates and Thomas More, preferred death to telling or doing what they considered to be wrong.

I think that it is meaningful to analyze two cases of sanctions-facing here that may be called *martyr-situation* and *hostage-situation*. In the first case an historian tells non-truth, knowing that if he refuses to do so he will be severely punished. In the second case he knows that not only he but also his children, wife, other relatives, friends, and so on, will be punished. I think that the hostage-situation can be a partial excuse for an historian to lie, although a more or less adequate moral judgment can be passed only by taking into account the whole agent's (historian's) situation; first of all, of course, how important in the social and political sense is the problem about which the scholar is lying or telling truth.



There is one further way of creating "blank pages" without being directly responsible for it morally. I have here in mind an *escapist* strategy. Escapism in this context means that in a situation where it is impossible to tell the truth about certain problems, scholars attempt to study other topics where their cognitive activities are not so heavily restricted by taboos. For example, if it is impossible to get to know or to tell the truth about Stalin's prison camps, then an historian may specialize in Ancient Egyptian culture or in the development of Phoenician towns. This strategy usually helps historians to avoid moral pains and hesitations although the morality of it may be questioned on the deeper level. For example, what was more moral for historians in the Stalinist Soviet Union: to try to study the history of the October Revolution and to understand the causes of the emergence of the USSR (knowing that this is a very important question but also knowing that they will be inevitably committed to distortions, lies, and half-truths in their studies), or to concentrate on the nature of the reforms of the pharaoh Amenophis IV (knowing that this problem may not be so important but at least it is possible to speak truth about it)? I do not think that there is a good and easy answer to that question.

Finally one brief comment about the monopoly on true evidence. I think that the historian's lying about historical facts is generally more morally blameworthy if this historian is the only (or one of the few) person who has access to the direct evidence. The same general principle applies, of course, to politicians' and other public figures' memoir-writing and storytelling. In other words, if a particular historian (or politician) was one of the few persons in the Soviet Union who knew the exact facts about the secret protocol to the abovementioned Nazi-Soviet Pact (the late Andrei Gromyko was perhaps such a person), then his moral guilt is generally increased by saying (as Gromyko in fact did) that such a protocol did not exist. One conclusion from this is that the forgery or the shredding of the original historical documents is especially blameworthy. The recent story of Col. Oliver North shows that such unfortunate practices are not necessarily connected only with the totalitarian societies.

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- <sup>2</sup> *The Pentagon Papers* ed. Neil Sheehan, et al. (Toronto, 1971), IX-X.
- <sup>3</sup> A. P. Pronshtein, *Metodika istoricheskogo issledovaniya* [Methods of Historical Study] (Rostov, 1971), 236.
- <sup>4</sup> *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [bolsheviks]* (Moscow, 1948).
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- <sup>6</sup> *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [bolsheviks]*, 427-428.

- 7 Iossif Vissarionovich Stalin: *Kratkaya biografiya* (Moscow, 1947), 179; About the real decline of Soviet agriculture during the collectivization period see: V. Selyunin, "Istoki" [The Sources], *Novyi Mir* 5 (1988), 177.
- 8 Z. Poznyak and Y. Shmytalev, "Kuropaty-doroga smerti" [Kuropaty—the Way to Death], *Sovetskaya Estoniya* (August 8, 1988), 4.
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