

How to Reflect on 20th Century Man Facing Dramatic Situations and Hard Choices?¹

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Summary. This article seeks to answer the question what ideas formed in the field of history theory can help develop a new interpretation of 20th century history, people facing difficult situations, the decisions they made, and, finally, traumatic individual and collective memory. The turbulent 20th century history and the memories about it is controversial; therefore, when contemporary Lithuanian society endeavors to discuss certain events, phenomena, and personalities and tries to come to a consensus on their immortalization – disagreements inevitably arise. In the process of research, it transpired that in contemporary historiography concerning the purpose and meaning of a historian's work, as well as the responsibility to society of researchers of the past, several points are emphasized: (1) in the 21st century, historians have to find a new way of dealing with the complex issues of history; (2) scholars must recognize a responsibility for people who lived in the past and live the present, as well as to strive to show in the present perspective the fates of those who lived in the past; (3) the study of the past should contribute to the development of “intercultural competencies” which contemporary man lacks and which help him to understand *The Other* (past and present man); (4) to achieve these goals, historians need to transform their discipline into a “profession of understanding” that promotes inquisitiveness and openness to the world; (5) researchers of the past, when confronted with attempts to turn them into politicians or judges, have to leave the past open to new questions and interpretations; (6) those who study the past must engage in theoretical (self-)reflection that is necessary to perform the function of a critic that is so vital to society; and (7) historians need to think about the importance of the present dimension confronting complex historical issues. Historians work with collective memory to address the issues of self-awareness in time which face society. Researchers into the past also seek to initiate a dialogue between the people of the past and present. The conduct of the dialogue and its quality depend to a large extent on the level of the empathy that has been developed. Introducing empathy as a method for exploring knowledge about history and the present, this article draws on the ideas of George R. Collingwood, a British historian, archaeologist, and philosopher.

Keywords: 20th century history, evil, empathy, theory of history.

Kaip mąstyti apie XX amžiaus žmogų, atsidūrusį ribinių situacijų ir lemtingų pasirinkimų akivaizdoje?

Santrauka. Straipsnyje siekiama atsakyti į klausimą, kokios istorijos teorijos lauke suformuojamos idėjos gali padėti naujai interpretuojant XX amžiaus istoriją, žmones, atsidūrusius sudėtingose situacijose, jų priimtus sprendimus, pagaliau – trauminę individualią bei kolektyvinę atmintį. Sudėtinga XX amžiaus istorija ir jos atmintis yra kupina

¹ The issues examined in this article about the importance of empathy to the historian's craft have been explored in the book *Istoriko teritorija*: A. Švedas, 2020, p. 290–297.

prieštarų, todėl šiuolaikinei Lietuvos visuomenei mėginant diskutuoti apie tam tikrus įvykius, reiškinius, asmenis bei siekiant susitarti dėl šių dalykų įamžinimo, nuolat kyla atminčių karai. Atlikto tyrimo metu paaiškėjo, jog šiuolaikinėje historiografijoje, kalbančioje apie istoriko darbo tikslą bei prasmę, taip pat praeities tyrinėtojo atsakomybę visuomenei, yra pabrėžiami keli dalykai: 1) istorikai XXI amžiuje privalo rasti naują kalbėjimo būdą apie sudėtingus istorijos klausimus; 2) mokslininkai turi jausti dvigubą atsakomybę – praeities ir dabarties žmonių atžvilgiu – bei privalo stengtis parodyti praeityje gyvenusių žmonių likimus dabarties perspektyvoje; 3) praeities tyrimai turi prisidėti prie šandienos žmogui stigančių „interkultūrinių kompetencijų“, padedančių suprasti *Kitą* (praeities ir dabarties žmogų), ugdymo; 4) siekdami pirmiau paminėtų tikslų istorikai privalo paversti savo discipliną „supratimo profesija“, skatinančia smalsumą ir atvirumą pasauliui; 5) praeities tyrinėtojai, susidūrę su bandymais paversti juos politikais arba teisėjais, privalo palikti praeitį atvira naujiems klausimams ir interpretacijoms; 6) praeities tyrinėtojai turi užsiimti teorine (auto)refleksija, kuri yra būtina siekiant atlikti visuomenės gyvenimui svarbią kritiko funkciją; 7) istorikams reikia mąstyti apie dabarties dimensijos svarbą akistatoje su sudėtingais istorijos klausimais. Istorikai dirba su kolektyvine atmintimi siekdami spręsti visuomenei kylančias savęs supratimo laike problemas. Praeities tyrinėtojai taip pat siekia inicijuoti praeities ir dabarties žmonių dialogą. Pristatant empatijos, kaip metodo, teikiamas galimybės istorijos ir dabarties pažinimui, straiptinyje daugiausia remiamasi britų istoriko, archeologo ir filosofo George'o Robino Collingwood'o idėjomis. Šis mokslininkas vertinamas kaip suformulavęs itin svarbių išvalgų apie empatiją.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: XX amžiaus istorija, blogis, empatija, istorijos teorija.

Why has 20th century history become a problem? Eight introductory theses from an East Central European historian's perspective

Twentieth century history poses many challenges to those who study it. “The twentieth century emerged as a problem in different fields of the social sciences and humanities, even before the end of 2000. The coincidence between the end of the century and of some of its most emblematic political phenomena seemed to reinforce the need for examination and new narratives.” This is how the organizers of an international symposium entitled “Thinking the 20th Century. Perspectives from the 21st Century”, hosted by the FEUC at the University of Coimbra on 1–3 February 2023, described the significance of such a conference, emphasizing the need for new research and new narratives about the recent past.²

This outlook might be viewed as a trend. Seven years earlier, at a conference titled “The History of Twentieth Century Historiography”, held on 18–20 June 2015 at the University of Athens, the symposium's organizers asserted that profound changes had occurred in the second half of the 20th century in the study and representation of history, but that the emergence of these new developments had not helped us resolve all problems. “What is missing most on the twentieth century's preoccupations with history is an exploration of the inner and deeper connection and interrelation between the various experiences of the century and the various approaches to history. <...> How can we relate history and historiography in the twentieth century? In what ways has the twentieth century historical experience determined the study of the past?”³

What is meant by “the twentieth century historical experience”?

² More information about the symposium is available here: <https://ucpages.uc.pt/en/centre-for-interdisciplinary-studies-ceis20/thinking-the-twentieth-century/>

³ For a presentation of this exceptional conference which brought together scholars from all over the world researching historical theory and methodology, see: <https://www.inth.ugent.be/content/history-and-historiography-20th-century>

One possible answer is that the history of the past century is closely connected with the expression of evil. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin, reflecting back on the time in which he lived, once said that “I remember it only as the most terrible century in Western history.”⁴ In her book about efforts by Karl Jaspers, Walter Benjamin, Gottfried Lessing and others to oppose the evils of the 20th century, political theoretician Hannah Arendt spoke about “dark times”.⁵ The past century, often called the age of extremes and atrocities, demonstrated that history can spiritually traumatize, physically cripple, or even kill nearly everyone living in Europe, thus those who endured two world wars, the rise of various authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, the Holocaust, the Gulag, various forms of spiritual coercion in everyday life, and the economic upheavals that took place between 1914 and 1989 have described them simply as “a feeling of insecurity”.

The expression of evil in the 20th century has been remembered, reflected upon, and witnessed by several generations as a propound existential experience. These encounters with the recent, painful past have posed a challenge to 21st century society and scholars alike.

The traumatic memory of individuals and collective communities, evoking pain, discomfort, shame, and uncertainty about the past and the present, and the narratives that transform that memory into history, employing the metaphor of the Greek historian Antonis Liakos, are similar to the cloned dinosaurs from Stephen Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993) who escaped the park and now roam among us, destroying everything in their path and igniting memory wars: “We live in a world where, in most places, history and memory are present in every moment of our public and private lives. We enjoy a nostalgic sense of past times, or we suffer from a traumatic sense of the past. The past is used for questioning, resisting, or even transforming the present. But the presence of the past may prove deadly; dead memories are thirsty for blood, and there are many killer dinosaurs in the park.”⁶

Why have some of the themes of recent history and memory transformed into Liako’s “killer dinosaurs” in 21st century public life? To answer this question, we will formulate eight of the most obvious insights, without suggesting they are a detailed analysis of the issue. Our focus will be on the area of Europe stretching from central Poland to western Russia, which Timothy Snyder has called the “blood lands”:⁷

1. Reflecting on the dramatic events of the 20th century in the history of Lithuanian and Central and Eastern European society is a challenging task in the intellectual sense, since, in this case, the most important question of “What actually happened?” very often remains without an unequivocal answer. The grey fog that envelops the history of the blood lands is slow to disperse, because some of the subjects of academic research (events, processes, phenomena, biographies of individual actors) do not fit into the binary schemes of “good–bad”, “right–wrong”, or “heroic–villainous”.

⁴ Reference based on: E. Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 1.

⁵ H. Arendt, 1968.

⁶ A. Liakos, M. Bilalis, 2017, p. 209.

⁷ See: T. Snyder, 2010.

2. Notwithstanding the above, the narratives of the last century are, as a rule, of great importance to the societies of Central and Eastern Europe as a foundation for the historical cultures and collective memories they have created today.⁸
3. The complex history and memory of the 20th century is full of controversies and contradictions, and not only the academic communities of this European region, but also their societies have not yet discussed or agreed upon the meanings of the elements or symbols that make up these cultures, nor on their hierarchy in their respective cultures.
4. The importance of history and memory for the identity of a given society transforms them into the focus of activity not only for the academic community, but also for politicians, business people, the media, and various other interest groups. As a rule, therefore, the collective memory and cultural forms of a given society in modern times are created by thousands of hands,⁹ while the efforts of academics in this process are not always significant, let alone capable of determining the final outcome.¹⁰
5. As a society attempts to negotiate the place and significance of the elements or symbols that make up its historical cultural model, the ensuing process is usually chaotic and more akin to the clamor of many people trying to outdo each other than any form of constructive dialogue.
6. This communicative chaos is further complicated by the fact that the individuals and institutions involved in the debate (or its parody) employ different types of truths to express and justify their opinions: scientific truth, practical truth, political truth, therapeutic truth, strategic truth, aesthetic truth, and rhetorical truth.¹¹ As a rule, historians tend to focus on scientific truth to reconstruct the course of events and their significance in the past, forgetting that scientific truth does not exist in a

⁸ Focusing attention on contemporary history, selecting certain phenomena needed to construct a collective identity and maintain its integrity, is not a feature particular to the self-awareness of Central Eastern European societies, but is a universal tendency. For the latest overview of these processes, see: A. Nikžentaitis, 2021.

⁹ The metaphor of the cultural forms of contemporary history as the work of a thousand different hands was employed by Raphael Samuel: R. Samuel, 2012, p. 8.

¹⁰ This situation has been insightfully discussed on several occasions by stating that the pyramids of information dissemination created by modern society and its elites have collapsed in the 21st century. The collapse of this system has created a situation in which the public space has been invaded by different narratives, and the characteristics of that situation are often determined not by positive but by negative (and nonfactual) information.

For a historian's attempt to make sense of the situation, see P. R. Pinto, B. Taithe, 2015, p. 1–20.

¹¹ The above typology of forms of truth has been proposed by the German historical theorist Jörn Rüsen: *Scientific truth* is based on the results of empirical research and the coherence of theoretical reflection. *Practical truth* is about moral or ethical issues and is based on answering the fundamental question: "What is 'good'?" *Political truth* acts as a way of ensuring consensus in power relations by legitimizing these relations. *Therapeutic truth* is a specific form of truth concerning the phenomena of health and illness in an individual or society, with therapeutic healing as its point of reference. Truth is that which heals and treats. *Strategic truth (polemical truth)* focuses our attention on the battleground between individuals or groups, where certain statements are established as a victors' truth. Another way to interpret this type of truth is to conclude that truth is what leads to victory. *Aesthetic truth* is based on the criteria for assessing aesthetic taste. *Rhetorical truth* is asserted in verbal communication, using the persuasiveness of statements. Rhetorical truth is that which helps to persuade others. For more about the different types of truth and their forms of interaction, see J. Rüsen, 2017, p. 34–35.

sterile laboratory, isolated from other forms of truth, but always exists in relation to political, practical, therapeutic, and other truths.

7. As attempts by the Lithuanian public and the historian community to reflect on the extremely complex events and memory issues of the 20th century continue, they are influenced by intense and controversial historiographical revolutions (challenging traditional narratives, denying the equivalency between history and memory, changing historians' value orientations and theoretical and methodological preferences) and a "boom" in memory (which created a space for the expression of "frozen memories", opened up the possibility of focusing on catastrophic events and traumatic experiences, and also enabled the manifestation of memory in new – mediatized – forms, etc.).¹² In this multidirectional process, complex issues of the past, as asserted by Gordon S. Wood, became even more complicated.¹³
8. The war launched on 24 February 2022 by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has compelled the nations of East Central Europe to ask whether 20th century history (and its defining "ultimate catastrophe" – the Second World War¹⁴) has actually ended, or whether the horrific things that occurred in that century (the rise of totalitarian states, mass oppression, wars, genocides, etc.) are more like diseases that elude a cure, and whose symptoms are now reappearing and threatening to dominate 21st century. The fear of the return of this history, like a tornado destroying everything in its path, further complicates the work of reflecting on traumatic experiences, coming to terms with painful memories, and pursuing dialogue and harmony between communities embracing different memories.

The trends outlined above lead to a confrontation with the question: "What do we remember today, and how and why do we remember it?" – a question that often leaves us with no clear answer. And the latter situation leads to a worrying conclusion: It is likely that we will be unable to agree on the interpretation of some of the important topics of history and memory in the near future, and we will also not be able to find compromises that will be satisfactory for all memory communities in terms of the evaluation of specific events, phenomena, processes, and their perpetuation in historical culture.

What can the humanitarian community do in such a situation?

It's clear that the time has come to engage in reflection about what assumptions of thinking could help us explore new perspectives on the extreme history of the 20th century, on the people who find themselves in extreme situations, on the decisions they made, and, finally, on our memory that reflects on these traumatic experiences.

¹² The contemporary use of the expression "memory boom" has been discussed in various respects on several occasions. For a valuable historiographical position, see J. Winter, 2007.

¹³ G. S. Wood, 2009, p. 5.

¹⁴ See the idea formulated by Henry Rousso in his book *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary*, asserting that, when defining its contemporary self, society as a rule chooses its most recently experienced catastrophe: "...by dating the present time from the latest catastrophe, we define the contemporary in structural terms (certain catastrophes have always punctuated historical time) as much as we delineate a particular conjuncture: Our own regime of historicity is defined in great part by the difficulty of getting over the memory of the recent major catastrophes, hence of re-establishing a certain historical continuity of longer duration." (see H. Rousso, 2006, p. 12).

To answer this question, we will address the resolution of two problems:

1. What should (not) be done? The question of the responsibility of researchers in the face of complex historical questions and conflicts of memory.
2. What new approaches might help in pondering and talking about the decisions and experiences of *The Other* in history?

The aforementioned issues, which will form the basis of the inquiry explored in this article, also shaped the structure of this text. To answer the first question, an historiographical analysis was firstly based on selected texts written in the late 20th century and in the 21st century, which by their content and form claim to belong to the genre of historiographical manifestos (that speak about changes in the historian's craft and the responsibility of scholars). The second question, meanwhile, will focus on a few texts that represent the avant-garde of contemporary historiography and which address the relationship between history and empathy.

The questions raised and addressed in this article have already received academic attention.

An important point of reference for this text has been the thesis proposed by Aleida Assmann about the fundamental shift that has taken place in the regime of modern time, in which the category of history as trauma has discounted the notion of the irreversibility of time and allowed for the emergence of new perspectives on the relationship between past and present. According to Assmann, in the legal, moral, and therapeutic dimensions, the arrow of time no longer flies in one direction only (from the past to the present), and human suffering experienced in the past does not automatically lose value, and instead becomes history, encouraging the raising and discussion of questions of existential importance to all of us.¹⁵ Assmann's idea has been further developed by George Cotkin and Donald Bloxham,¹⁶ who emphasize that history connects us to (moral) responsibility and moral judgments, as well as by Antoon De Baets, who speaks of the need to create a code of ethics and "responsible history".¹⁷ In the latter context, it is also important to recall Herman Paul's study of epistemic values and Ewa Domańska's text on epistemic justice.¹⁸

Also significant are efforts by Vladimir Tismaneanu, Timothy Snyder, and Daniel Little to see the experiences of people in the 20th century as lessons for us.¹⁹

This article is an attempt to engage in the conversation begun by the aforementioned historians on how to think about 20th century history and the human experience within it.

¹⁵ A. Assmann, 2013.

¹⁶ G. Cotkin, 2008; D. Bloxham, 2020.

¹⁷ A. Baets, 2008.

¹⁸ H. Paul, 2022; Domańska, 2021.

¹⁹ V. Tismaneanu, 2012; T. Snyder, 2017; D. Little, 2022.

What should (not) be done? The responsibility of researchers in the face of complex historical questions and conflicts of memory

Before we embark on a search for an answer to this question, a brief detour is useful. In the development of the science of history, spanning the period from antiquity to the 21st century, there have been several major changes in the concept of the purpose and meaning of an historian's craft. Historiographers and theorists of history seeking to explore several millennia as a rule capture the dominance and change of several different paradigms in historical science.²⁰

It is clear that the representatives of pre-nineteenth-century paradigms of historical science who seek to instruct society ("a historian is a teacher of life") and who see the significance of their work as that of a historian-detective ("historians must first and foremost answer the question of what actually happened") are of little use in today's controversies in 20th century history or in the consideration of the question of the duties and responsibilities of those who study the past in the face of memory conflicts.

And how do the representatives of the most recent historical schools, movements or paradigms speak about their craft? One of the most important features of these schools, movements or paradigms is the incredible diversity of ideas, value orientations, theories, and methods, as well as principles of narrative construction, and it is therefore obvious that arriving at one consolidated answer to the question of interest to the 21st century community of historians is not possible. With this in mind, we will attempt to hear the voices that shape programmatic assertions in the polylogue of contemporary historiography.

The narrative changes our understanding of reality. The interpretation and understanding of history is only possible as part of a narrative.²¹ It allows us not only to convey certain information about the past, but also to take other important actions. Thus, the narrative can change our understanding of reality, revealing new meanings and awakening the historical imagination and a feeling of empathy. As Fritz Breithaupt has asserted, "Empathy is born when we think in narratives; when we experience emotions through narratives by identifying with fiction (or real-life – ed.) heroes."²²

When thinking about the above, historians in the 21st century are increasingly talking about an even distribution of attention between *what is said* and *how it is said*. A symptomatic example of this might be the subject "History in the World", discussed in an issue of the journal *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice*. The conceptual framework for that thematic issue was provided by the editor Kalle Pihlainen's article "Historians and 'the Current Situation'".

In Pihlainen's view, when we consider the nature of the historical discipline and a historian's duties and responsibility to 21st century society, we must discuss three aspects: (1) the construction of meaning within the historical discourse and the ideological and

²⁰ There are many texts on the history of historiography. For an overview of the most important developments in the study of history, George G. Iggers' monograph is by far the most indispensable: G. G. Iggers, 2005.

²¹ For a classical historiographical position, which deals with the connection between the telling, interpretation, and understanding of history, see: L. Mink, 1987.

²² F. Breithaupt, 2009, p. 114.

political consequences of “doing history”; (2) the expression of history and historicity in the contemporary world and the question of how much and how historians can attempt to react and influence this process; and (3) ensuring the creation and support of the integrity of historical knowledge.

As it addressed these tasks, the community of historians came a long way in the 20th century. According to Pihlainen, it became clear over time that it is extremely difficult to author a scholarly work that is theoretically sound, socially sensitive, and historically correct. He concluded that the most difficult and interesting challenges for contemporary historians are not directly related to epistemology or to the resolution of other issues that are exclusive to the discipline.²³

Thus, it can be reasonably argued that one of the most important challenges for historians in the 21st century is to find a way of speaking that responds to the new situation. According to Rik Peters, writing in that same issue of *Rethinking History*, the ability to find an authentic, correct, and impactful way of speaking allows for the emergence of a “prospective history” that creates new perspectives on reality – important not only for the interpretation of the past, but also for the creation of connections between the past and the present, and also with the future.²⁴

A historian’s responsibility regarding a people’s past, present and future. Historians, as a rule, feel a dual responsibility: to the society of today, to which they addresses their texts, and to the people of the past, which they study. Working with the traces of the past, historians make contact with a potential world which (thanks to the craft of those who study the past) a reader is able to inherit. Telling a story about the past is related to the ability to hear witnesses. As Paul Zumthor puts it, historians are always ready to “listen to the discourse of an invisible other who speaks to us from some deathbed (or some couch) of which the exact location is unknown to us; we attempt to distinguish in the fantasies of this stranger the echo of a voice which, somewhere, probes, knocks against the world’s silence, begins again, is stifled...”²⁵

The ability to hear witnesses is not just a matter of naming certain facts and highlighting important events. It is just as important to show the fate of people who lived in the past in a present perspective and thus preserve them for the future. Thus, as David Leichter asserts, “we must struggle against the tendency to consider the past only from the angle of what is done, unchangeable past. We have to reopen the past. . . .”²⁶

Reopening the past, in turn, has enormous value for the present. But it is not enough to let the voices of the past speak. Historians must find a way to theoretically reflect on the materiality and reality of the voices of the past, not so much in terms of epistemological “truth”, but in terms of an ethical response to the catastrophes of the 20th century.²⁷

²³ K. Pihlainen, 2016.

²⁴ R. Peters, 2016, p. 253.

²⁵ P. Zumthor, 1986, p. 37.

²⁶ D. Leichter, 2011, p. 222–223.

²⁷ Gabrielle M. Spiegel contemplates this in his text “The Future of the Past. History, Memory and the Ethical Imperatives of Writing History”: G. M. Spiegel, 2014.

What responsibility should historians have towards the people of the future? A historian's craft is not only talking about the past "for its own sake", but also concerning themselves about the forms of the future, when talking to people living in the present.

A historian's duty in shaping the "intercultural competencies" of today's society

Today, the science of history has an opportunity to tap into a vast array of sources that testify to the diversity of human experiences, as well as to the diversity of political and social life. These sources speak to us about the thoughts, emotions, actions, and sufferings of people from different eras. In the latter, the sound of voices from the past contains answers to many questions of interest to today's scientific community and society. By initiating dialogue, posing questions, listening to the answers and interpreting them, those who study the past must, as Christian Meier argues, also constantly reflect on the possible (as well as unobtainable) results of their work – what obligations this knowledge allows us to fulfil and what possibilities it may offer.

As previously mentioned, historians have a responsibility to the dead, but at the same time, they also bear the burden of a great responsibility to present and future generations. "We need to be much clearer than we have been in the past about the image we have created of each other <...> we also need to use history to understand each other better", says Meier, pointing out that modern man clearly lacks the "intercultural competencies" that would help us understand *The Other*, who is distant from us in time and space. Turning to the Holocaust as one of the defining events of the 20th century, Meier writes: "We must deal with the victims as well as the survivors; with those who complied and those who resisted. History must try to describe from a distant as well as a close-up perspective – and there are also parts about which it must remain silent."²⁸

Guidelines for making history a "profession of understanding"

Enrique Florescano, expanding upon Christian Meier's insights into the challenges for the science of history, argues that studying the past inevitably implies openness to other people, which in turn makes it possible to talk about the possibility of making history a "profession of understanding."

As the new historical schools and paradigms took hold in the 20th century, much debate ensued about the theoretical assumptions and methodological principles of a historian's work. In an attempt to summarize what historians agree upon when they seek to make their discipline a "profession of understanding", Florescano outlined the following guidelines: distancing oneself from engaging in antiques collecting, where facts of the past are assembled and valued simply because they are covered by a layer of dust from the past; ignoring those who seek to force history into a confining jacket of determinism; and avoiding explanations of historical phenomena based on singular causes; rejecting

²⁸ Ch. Meier, 1995, p. 34, 39.

the division of history into areas, spheres, disciplines, and specializations that fragment our understanding of social reality and its evolution. Florescano called for closely associating the economic, social, cultural, and political levels of history, and for a reconstruction of the biographies of those who lived in the past, regardless of the category (“great” or “little people”) to which they have been assigned by various *-isms*. This is essential to avoid separating individuals and groups into small and isolated groups, since the creation of such islands in the ocean of history prevents the science of history from becoming a positive form of knowledge helping us to understand human thought and behavior.²⁹

Faced with the “duty to remember”, we must leave the past open

Representatives of various historiographical schools have continuously attempted to answer the first question raised in this article, and their insights reveal shared guidelines for the practitioners of the craft of the muse Clio. In this case, we will draw on the ideas of the French historian Henry Rousso, who studied the Vichy regime as a phenomenon of history and memory. In Rousso’s view, Western society at the end of the 20th century was confronted with aggressive pressures that developed into a “duty to remember”,³⁰ usually expressed in the creation of various sites of remembrance (monuments, plaques, etc.) while leaving no room for individuals and society to escape this duty. Rousso was convinced that historians must renounce the role of “agitator of collective memory” being imposed on them in this situation, and that they must constantly reflect on the fundamental differences between memory and history, as well as on the search for truth.³¹

The instrumentalization of history, forcing it to serve the needs of memory, tends to encourage the reduction of images of the past into simplistic schemes and categories (“traitors”, “victims”, etc.). In this case, it is a historian’s duty to make sure that the past remains open to new questions and interpretations in an attempt to understand people and their actions in liminal situations. Researchers should therefore not play the role of prosecutors, lawyers, or judges in regard to the past, but rather should, according to Rousso, try to understand what the people imprisoned in Auschwitz experienced. Those who research the past must also try to understand what led to the behavior of concentration camp commandants, guards, medics, etc. If, having refused to judge, historians are unable to understand, then their work is meaningless.

The need for self-reflection and (self)criticism

In his text “Are We Asking Too Much of History”, American author on historical theory Allan Megill attempted to outline the most important functions of history in the 21st century, and identified four of them: creating and maintaining different types of identi-

²⁹ See E. Florescano, 1995.

³⁰ The concept of a “duty to remember” is used in: H. Rousso, 1998.

³¹ A discussion of Henry Rousso’s central assertions, expressed during an interview with journalist Philippe Petit (and which later became the basis for the book *The Haunting Past: History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France*), can be found in: R. J. Evans, 2002.

ties; disseminating certain ideas; providing entertainment; and being a useful discipline (the author used the following terms to describe these functions: *identifying*, *evangelizing*, *entertaining*, and *being useful*), while stressing that history in today's world is immediate.³²

What do historians do as they perform these four tasks? According to Megill, the servants of the muse Clio often choose to demand too little of themselves and history. In his view, "too little" is associated with historians' aversion to focus on the fundamental divide between reflection on the past and the present, while at the same time pointing out that the history that is chronologically and emotionally closest to us is also the most dangerous; the inability to engage in self-reflection (when discussing the most important questions: "How is history created?") and, finally, a lack of courage to criticize their own discipline.

Megill summarized his ideas thus: "Rather than seeking to bolster present identity by linkage to the past, historians in their critical function ought to highlight what divides past from present. Here it ought to be a matter not of showing continuity between past and present but rather of showing how the past provides a reservoir of alternative possibilities, of paths not taken, of difference."³³

The importance of the dimension of the present in confronting the expression of extremes and liminal experiences in history

When we speak of liminal situations and experiences in history and their impact, we should state that, from the point of view of historical theory, what is more important is not what decisions were made by a given historical actor or what consequences that decision produced, but what we are going to do with that historical experience today.

The latter thesis, as a fundamental assumption of historical thinking, has been regularly expressed by historical theorists in one form or another in the latter half of the 20th century.

The issues discussed in this article are echoed in an idea developed by the Spanish philosopher Manuel Cruz in his book *On the Difficulty of Living Together: Memory, Politics and History*: ". . . The important thing is not what they have done with us, but what we do with that they have done with us."³⁴ Thus, in this case, the most important thing is the responsibility we bear, as people who did not live in the past, in the face of history. In other words, history is the past made contemporarily relevant, so when we think about people in liminal situations and faced with fateful choices, we are talking about ourselves.

³² A. Megill, 2002.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁴ M. Cruz, 2016, p. viii.

What new approaches might help us think and talk about the experiences and actions of *The Other* in history? Empathy

The processes taking place in Western historiography signal that the field of historical theory “is suffering from a pandemic of fragmentation”. At the same time, however, we can also take note of certain trends emerging within the diversity of ideas and theories at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. Of late, there is considerable discussion and publication about memory, trauma, “historical experience”, hermeneutics, “presence”, narratives, “epistemic values”, and the “practical past”.³⁵

The aforementioned strands of historical theory are linked by an attempt to explore the relationship of researchers (individuals, society) to the phenomena that exist in the plane of history or memory.

In the second part of this text, we will focus on one of the possible approaches of such a relationship: empathy.

In the view of Polish museologist, philosopher, and historian of ideas Krzysztof Pomian, it is imperative to realize that there is not one, but at least three levels that must be employed when speaking about the complex questions of history and memory that preoccupy us, those associated with the manifestation of evil and suffering and the scars left by that evil on the human soul and on the memory of society. These are the cognitive, hermeneutic, and existential levels. On the cognitive level, according to Pomian, historians attempt to ascertain what actually happened; on the hermeneutic (understanding) level, they seek to reflect on liminal situations and what people far removed from us in time experienced; and on the existential level, they address the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In Pomian’s view, historians are most successful working on the cognitive level, while the hermeneutic and existential levels are the realm of artists, psychologists, and philosophers.³⁶ To be sure, the work done on the cognitive level by those who study the past will never be fully completed if they do not resolve to consider, on the hermeneutic level, the manifestations of evil in history. And speaking about the historical experiences of *The Other* and our relationship with those experiences in the present is inseparable from empathy.

The term “empathy” (*Einführung* in German) began to be applied as an important concept to describe an aesthetic experience. One of the leaders of the “empathy school”, the philosopher Theodor Lipps, spoke about empathy as the projection of human emotions onto external subjects and the disappearance of the distinction between humans (“I”) and the subjects they observe. This term now refers to the opportunities opened up by the interaction of psychological, cognitive, emotional, and social skills to experience what other people think and feel, to build emotional connections with people, and to care for the well-being of others.

³⁵ R. Peters, 2016, p. 235.

³⁶ Pomian’s concept has already been presented in another text by the author: A. Švedas, 2018.

There have been many attempts to provide a definition of empathy³⁷ and, at the same time, to create typologies of forms of empathy. One such definition has been presented by Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers, who have outlined five levels of empathy: The first is the physiological level (the ability of humans and various animals, when together, to feel the same emotion); the second is imaginative empathy – the capacity to imagine what a given person felt, feels, or would feel under certain circumstances, to step into his or her emotional state of mind; the third level is related to the “dual focus” which an empathic person demonstrates when he or she imagines what it means to be in the role of the sufferer, while at the same time being aware that he or she is not actually in the other’s position; the fourth level is reached when a person shifts his or her focus away from feeling, reflection, or imagination to mindfulness, recognition, and support; and on the fifth level of empathy, empathic feelings and actions transcend social barriers to reach out to *The Other* and help overcome the cognitive and emotional dissonance between different people and societies.³⁸

Given the numerous functions that can be attributed to empathy, it should come as no surprise that empathy has recently come to be seen as a factor that has had a profound impact on the evolution of homo sapiens and on the development of the civilizations that humanity has built to date, and that may also have a profound impact on the future of global society in the 21st century.³⁹ Thus, the concept of empathy is used to define a very broad range of phenomena and their relationship to each other, while linking disciplines that have had little to say to each other so far: neuroscience, zoology, ethology, phenomenology, cognitive and social psychology, psychoanalysis, etc.⁴⁰

Despite the trends discussed above, those who study the past have until now spoken little about empathy. This should not surprise us, since, as a rule, the word “empathy” has put historians in a difficult situation: “Empathy makes them uneasy. It is a squishy and capacious concept. It lacks rigor. Its precise meaning is unclear. Empathy connotes softness, feeling, something gendered feminine perhaps. It implies forgiveness or sympathy or even love for the people of the past.”⁴¹ Clío’s servants only recently came to understand the importance of emotions for the study and experience of history.⁴² Until now, empathy was mostly discussed by the historians’ guild as tool to be used in the educational process.⁴³

In this respect, British historian Geoffrey Elton’s statement that there are only two principles of historical research that encourage us to ask the following questions might be seen as a chrestomatic example of historians’ thinking: What historical evidence does the researcher have of the past, and what does this evidence mean? Thus, at first sight, it

³⁷ E.g.: Social psychologist C. Daniel Batson presents eight definitions of empathy in: C. D. Batson, 2009.

³⁸ A. Assmann, I. Detmers, 2016, p. 5–6.

³⁹ See, for example.: M. Tomasello, 2009; J. Rifkin, 2009.

⁴⁰ See A. Coplan, 2011, p. 3–18.

⁴¹ T. A. Kohut, 2020, p. 1.

⁴² On the other hand, it can be assumed that some historians use empathy in their work, but simply don’t reflect on this act. See P. Loewenberg, 2007, p. 19.

⁴³ The main ideas expressed by the educators are discussed in: L. D. Jr. Ozro, A. E. Yeager, 2001.

seems that historians are prepared to question and analyze sources in order to decipher their various meanings, but that they are not prepared to give themselves the chance to understand why the people of the past behaved in a certain way in these sources and tell us about their actions and experiences in a particular manner.⁴⁴

It is true that philosophers of history have thought and spoken considerably about the importance of empathy, as if to counterbalance the skepticism of historians and the lack of self-reflection among the servants of Clio. For example, the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, by stating that in an effort to understand, a historian performs acts of recreation and re-experience in his mind, at the same time conceptually grounded the importance of the use of compassionate and empathic approaches in historical research. Meanwhile, the philosopher of science Carl Gustav Hempel wrote that empathic understanding could suggest certain psychological hypotheses that may help an historian explain specific events in the past. The latter philosopher, however, distinguished empathic understanding from scientific understanding,⁴⁵ a point with which William H. Walsh, Patrick Gardiner, and William Herber Dray were not willing to agree.

Meanwhile, in his book *Laws and Explanation in History*, Canadian philosopher of history William Herbert Dray spoke of empathic understanding as a “rational explanation”. In his assertion, researchers of the past understand certain things when they are able to view historical situations by establishing a connection between themselves and other individuals, removed from them in the past. In Dray’s view, it’s not enough to ask the question “What would I have done in Benjamin Disraeli’s position?” An historian must try to perceive a historical situation, its specific problems, and their potential solutions as they would have unfolded before the specific British Prime Minister in question.

The intensive evolution of historiography in the latter half of the 20th century opened new opportunities for researchers of the past to think about empathy as a method or approach for learning about history. In this regard, several important moments in the development of historiography are worth mentioning: the tendency to turn away from the analysis of the evolution of overarching structures towards micro-historical narratives; the turn away from “hard analytical” methods and towards “soft” hermeneutical methods; a shift of emphasis away from the argumentative historiographical style, often referred to as “non-narrative”, and the move towards an expressive narrative.⁴⁶

As previously mentioned, these changes have led to the current interest in the possibilities of empathy as a medium of understanding.

It is true that establishing an empathetic connection with a deceased person from the past is a difficult (many would say impossible) task. A sceptic might perhaps raise other doubts here: If empathy cannot move us to the other side of the street to help someone in

⁴⁴ Exceptions to this are the reflections of historians Giambattista Vico and Gustav Droysen.

⁴⁵ C. G. Hempel, 1942.

⁴⁶ These changes are discussed conceptually in: J. Rüsen, 1993, p. 209. In this context, the strand of non-conventional historiography explored by Ewa Domańska is important: See E. Domańska, 2006. Kohut also stresses the importance of the changes that have taken place in historiography, while pointing out that the emergence of a trend in postmodern historiography and the rise of attention to the history of culture did not automatically translate into a preference for empathy. See Kohut, 2020, p. 18–21.

need, how can it help us in our journeys into a past full of situations and people whose conditions and behaviors demand enormous, exhaustive and exhausting, and perhaps even traumatizing effort?

So, how do historians employ an empathetic approach in the 21st century?

In his pursuit of an answer to this question, historian and psychoanalyst Thomas A. Kohut authored his monograph *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past*, and the historical theorist Tyson Retz published his monograph *Empathy and History*. Kohut discussed the reflection on empathy as a phenomenon in the texts of various representatives of the humanities and social sciences, focusing in particular on the theoretical justification of the external and empathetic approach in historians' research. In his book, Kohut consistently argued that researchers of the past must continuously engage in reflection while declaring which of the aforementioned ways they are using in their approach to thinking and talking about the subject of research, at the same time as they are changing the object of research itself.

Meanwhile, in his discussion of history and empathy, Tyson Retz mostly drew on ideas proposed by British archaeologist, historian, and philosopher Robin George Collingwood and the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, which, according to Retz, offer the possibility of exploring what it means to be ready to learn from history, to be prepared to engage with the questions posed by it, and with the meanings history has created.⁴⁷

According to Retz, the key to exploring the relationship between history and empathy lies in the decision to view the past as a space-time that can provide important insights, if we give the past a chance to do so. To grasp these insights, and perhaps to learn from history, we must adhere to one condition: to reveal how the questions and meanings of the past create synergies with the questions and meanings of our present. By attempting to understand the context in which people thought and acted (which should help us to understand the motives behind their behavior), we gain insight into how we differ from them and what we can learn from them.

Empathetic understanding requires not only identification but also distance. Thanks to historians, the past can reveal itself as an essential otherness in relation to the present and becomes important because it can provide knowledge that the present cannot. In formulating this insight, Retz drew on the ideas of R. G. Collingwood. On a trip to the small town of Die in France in 1928, Collingwood formulated three propositions that defined the essence of his philosophy: (1) all history is the history of thinking; (2) historical knowledge is the process of reenactment in a scholar's thinking; (3) historical knowledge is the (re)creation of the past by placing it in the context of the ideas of the present, and by revealing the differences between the past and present.

⁴⁷ This article focuses on the ideas of R. G. Collingwood, realizing that H. G. Gadamer's conception of a dialogical understanding of history leads us away from empathy (Gadamer questioned the possibility of empathy as a cognitive tool in the humanities and history) and towards the interpretation of ideas and meanings. For an experience of what is common between today's historians pondering the importance of empathy in the study of the past, and the great hermeneutic thinkers of the 20th century, it is useful to consult P. Gardner, 2010.

In his writings, Collingwood consistently asserted that the past as studied by a historian is, in certain respects, alive in the present day, while the past is perceived by the encounter of the people of the past and present. In truth, subject and object are not separate from each other, but are linked in a mutual act of knowledge and understanding. According to R. G. Collingwood, this link means that history is not “events” but “processes” – in other words, history is about things undergoing a transformation from one state to another.

And what place does empathy assume in Collingwood’s philosophy? He never used the term in his writings, focusing instead on the term (re)creation, using it to express actions very similar to empathy. According to Collingwood, historians reflect on the past in order to know it. They interpret sources, and in the process of that interpretation reveal the thoughts embodied in people’s actions, thereby reliving the past. By doing so, we incorporate (and thereby extend) other people’s experiences in the past into our experience.⁴⁸ Clearly, the act of empathy understood in this way also requires historical imagination, to which Collingwood devoted considerable attention.⁴⁹

Based on Collingwood’s concept, the past allows us to know ourselves and to be aware, since every question answered in the past offers a new opportunity to reflect on what circumstances did or did not influence the extremes of history. Self-knowledge is knowing what was (im)possible in a given set of circumstances. By reflecting on the (im)possible choices made by people who are distant from us in time, we come to know ourselves. As Karsten R. Stueber argued in his interpretation of Collingwood’s ideas, we can only understand the motives behind another individual’s actions if they can become the basis for our own actions.⁵⁰

Scholars who have developed this idea tend to think that historical empathy is first and foremost a direction and path.⁵¹ By taking this path, *The Other* (removed from us in time and space) is humanized and becomes a person whom we can understand and with whom we can empathize. Empathy, as Dominick LaCapra noted, humanizes historical understanding⁵² and prevents people and their experiences in the past from being

⁴⁸ In assessing Collingwood’s ideas, it is necessary to understand that the intellectual and historiographical context in which they emerged was completely different from that of the 21st century. It is worth recalling here the insights of Jörn Rüsen and Ewa Domańska, already presented in fragments, on the changes in historiography in recent decades.

⁴⁹ This scholar described the historical imagination as a unique, self-defining and self-founding form of thinking. The most important text in which Collingwood provides a definition of the historical imagination is “The Historical Imagination”, an inaugural lecture delivered in October 1935 at Oxford University, Magdalen College: R. G. Collingwood, 1935. This text was reprinted in Collingwood’s 1946 collection *The Idea of History*: R. G. Collingwood, 1946. Meanwhile, one of the manuscripts from this lecture (with some substantially different parts from the version presented to the public) was published in another book by R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History and Other Writings in Philosophy of History*: R. G. Collingwood, 1999. Collingwood’s approach to empathy, as presented above, is not unique, by the way. The relationship between empathy and imagination was also discussed by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, Alison Landsberg in the field of memory studies, and historian of ideas Dominick LaCapra.

⁵⁰ This view by Karsten R. Stueber was discussed in the article “Reasons, generalizations, empathy, and narratives: the epistemic structure of action explanation”: K. R. Stueber, 2008.

⁵¹ L. D. Jr. Ozro, 2001, p. 3.

⁵² D. LaCapra, 2004, p. 503.

turned into a cold “subject” of academic study in which the historian is merely an aloof observer.

The efforts of a given researcher of the past to understand *The Other* are, as a rule, related to the five segments of the aforementioned path. In the first section, one projects one’s own thoughts and feelings onto the historical situation; in the second, as a rule, the key is the understanding of the paradox of the fact that modern man’s thinking and behavior are different from those of those who lived in the past; in the third and fourth segments, historical inquiry seeks to understand the unique situation in which a particular person finds themselves; and the fifth delves into the circumstances that have led to the (mis)understanding of one another’s intentions and actions by people at a particular point of intersection of time and space, which in turn has shaped the unfolding of the history.⁵³ Of course, on the latter path, a crucial step for the historian is the creation and refinement of the narrative.

Thus, empathy avoids a deterministic assessment of the past and its people (i.e., looking to history not only for what is relevant to us, but also trying to understand what was relevant to the people of the past), and it directs our attention away from what has happened to what could have happened, thereby opening up a space of possibility and continuity, and enabling a better understanding of victories as well as setbacks, failures, defeats, disappointments, and tragedies.⁵⁴

In this instance, recalling Karsten R. Stueber’s thesis, we can expand upon the previously mentioned metaphor of developing historical empathy as a path to be followed. After completing the five sections of the path, we come to the sixth, where we are given the opportunity to better know ourselves by reflecting on the question: “What would I have felt, thought, or done in *The Other’s* place?”

Thus, by trying to understand *The Other* we come to know ourselves. This act of knowledge both brings us closer and separates us. When we use empathy in the science of history, we first become aware of how different we are from *The Others* who lived in the past, and only then, by looking at the chasm between the present and past, do we try to understand and sympathize, or to understand and evaluate, his or her actions from a moral perspective.⁵⁵

Empathy is not identifying oneself with or justifying someone who lived in the past. And understanding does not automatically create conditions for forgiveness. What should protect the historian from equating these things is an understanding of the distance between the present and the past, as well as an intensive process of reflection and self-examination.

It is important to realize that building bridges of understanding between ourselves and people who did good and horrible things in the past is first and foremost a matter

⁵³ Ch. Portal, 1987, p. 89–99.

⁵⁴ Thomas A. Kohut, *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past*, p. 4, p. 59.

⁵⁵ Philosopher Jacqueline Dale explored the limits of empathy by asking whether he should really care what Hitler thought and felt during his last days in Berlin: “Must I as a historian of these events myself actually believe and desire what Hitler believed and desired?” (See J. Dale, 2009, p. 71)

for us, living in the here and now and dealing with two fundamental problems. The first of these problems gave the title to this article: How do we think about 20th century man faced with liminal situations and fateful choices? The second problem is closely related to the first: How will we ourselves behave when faced with liminal situations and fateful choices?

Conclusions

History enriches the human experience and adds a new dimension to the individual and societal view of the world. Narratives about the past not only create and maintain the integrity of personal and societal identity, they also add depth to that identity while revealing its complexity.

We are not free from the past – understanding the links between *then* and *now* creates a sense of historical presence. On the other hand, history is not always a reservoir of unambiguous information that can be used to construct identity, and memory is often a source of pain, frustration, disorientation, and conflict.

The past century, often described as a one of extremes and atrocities, has shown that history can traumatize, physically cripple, or even kill virtually every European citizen. In the 21st century, too, man lives in a world of uncertainty. This is profoundly influenced by the traumatic memory of pain, discomfort, and social discord.

This situation raises the question of what assumptions of thinking can help us to take a fresh look at the extreme history of the 20th century, the people who found themselves in marginal situations, the decisions they made, and, lastly, the individual and collective memory that reflects on traumatic experiences.

In an attempt to define the role of the researcher in the face of complex historical issues and conflicts of memory, one can refer to the ideas postulated in contemporary Western historiography about the meaning and value of a historian's work in the life of contemporary society: (1) Historians in the 21st century have to divide their attention between *what is said* and *how it is said*, and to find a way of talking about complex historical episodes and their interpretative possibilities that fits the new situation; (2) a historian must feel a dual responsibility towards the past and the people of the present, and must try to show the fate of the people who lived in the past in a present perspective, thus preserving it for the future; (3) the study of the past must contribute to the development of “intercultural competencies” that are essential for the modern person, which help him or her to understand *The Other* (removed from us in time and space); (4) to achieve the above objectives, historians must make their discipline a “profession of understanding”, encouraging curiosity and openness to the world; (5) in the face of the imperative “duty to remember”, researchers must leave the past open to new questions and interpretations; (6) those who study the past must engage in theoretical (self)reflection, which is essential for the critical function that is essential for the life of society; (7) historians need to reflect on the importance of the dimension of the present in the face of the expression of the extremes and the marginal experiences of history.

Historians work with collective memory so as to address the societal problems of self-understanding in time. Researchers of the past act as translators, enabling a dialogue between the past and the present. The process and quality of this dialogue depends to a large extent on the possibilities offered by empathy as a medium of understanding.

One of the most important authors on whom contemporary theorists of history draw in their attempts to describe the role of empathy in the process of reflection on the past is the British archaeologist, historian, and philosopher George Robin Collingwood. According to Collingwood, historians reflect on the past in order to know it. They interpret sources, and in the process of interpretation the thoughts embodied in people's actions are revealed. This is how the past is experienced. By experiencing it, we incorporate (and thus extend) other people's experiences of the past into our own.

According to this Collingwood's concept, the past allows us to know ourselves and to be conscious, because every question answered in the past offers a new opportunity to consider what circumstances have or have not influenced our experience of the extremes of history. Self-knowledge is the knowledge of what was (im)possible under the given circumstances.

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