

HistoryMatters

Longue durée • Warsaw Uprising • Banking in 1914 • Isle of Man



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are cut. International institutions, humanitarian bodies and NGOs must follow the same logic and adapt their programmes to annual, or at most triennial, constraints. No one, it seems, from bureaucrats to board members, or voters and recipients of international aid, can escape the threat of short-termism.

Until very recently, any broader public seeking solutions to short-termism in the history departments of most universities might have been disappointed. Historians once told arching stories of scale but, nearly 40 years ago, many stopped doing so. For two generations, between about 1975 and 2005, most historical studies focused on biological timescales of between five and 50 years, approximating the length of a mature human life. The compression of time in historical study is illustrated bluntly by the average number of years covered in doctoral dissertations conducted in the United States, a country which adopted the German model of doctoral education early and then produced history doctorates on a world-beating scale. In 1900 the average number of years covered in doctoral history dissertations in the US was about 75 years; by 1975, it was nearer to 30. Command of archives; total control of a ballooning historiography; and an imperative to reconstruct and analyse in ever-finer detail had all become the hallmarks of historical professionalism. Short-termism was an ▶

Masters of Change

Failure by academic historians to take the long view threatens the future of public history and policy, but a shift is afoot.

Jo Guldi and David Armitage

A SPECTRE is haunting our time: the spectre of short-termism.

We live in a moment of accelerating crisis that is characterised by a lack of long-term thinking, as rising sea levels threaten low-lying coastal regions, the world's cities stockpile waste and human actions poison the oceans, earth and groundwater for future generations. We face rising economic inequality within nations even as inequalities between countries abate while international hierarchies revert to conditions not seen since

the late 18th century, when China last dominated the global economy. Almost every aspect of human life is planned and judged, packaged and paid for, on timescales of a few months or years. There are few opportunities to shake loose from these short-term moorings. It can hardly seem worthwhile to raise questions of the long term at all.

In the age of the permanent campaign, politicians plan only as far as their next bid for election. They invoke children and grandchildren in public speeches, but electoral cycles of two to six years determine which issues prevail. The result is less money for crumbling infrastructure and schools and more for any initiatives that promise jobs or returns right now. The same narrow horizons govern the way most corporate boards organise their futures. Quarterly cycles mean that executives have to show profit on a regular basis. Long-term investment in human resources disappears from the balance sheet and so they

Villagers offer prayers as rising sea levels submerge graves, Tenggang cemetery, Indonesia, June 2014.

academic pursuit as well as a public problem in the last quarter of the 20th century.

It was during this period that professional historians ceded the task of synthesising historical knowledge to unaccredited writers and simultaneously lost whatever influence they might once have had with colleagues in the social sciences, most spectacularly with economists, over policy. The gulf between academic and non-academic history widened. After 2,000 years the ancient goal for history to be the guide to public life – what Cicero had called *magistra vitae* – had collapsed. With the ‘telescoping of historical time ... the discipline of history, in a peculiar way, ceased to be historical’. History departments found themselves increasingly exposed to unsettling new challenges: the recurrent crises of the humanities marked by waning enrolments; invasive demands from administrators and their political paymasters to demonstrate ‘impact’; and internal crises of confidence about their relevance amid adjacent disciplines with swelling class sizes, greater visibility and more obvious influence in shaping public opinion.

But there are now signs that the longer view is returning to the discipline. Professional historians are again writing monographs spanning periods of 200 to 2,000 years or more and the doctoral scope is widening. There is an expanding historical universe, from the ‘deep history’ of the human past, stretching over 40,000 years, to ‘big history’ going back to the Big Bang, 13.8 billion years ago.

In the last decade, interest in big data and themes such as long-term climate-change, governance and inequality are causing a return to questions about how the past changes over centuries and millennia and what this might indicate about human survival in the future. This has brought a new sense of responsibility and urgency to historians. The discipline holds particular promise for looking both backwards and forwards in time. After all, historians are masters of change over time. During the last 500 years historians have, among other things, spoken truths to those in power. They have been reformers and leaders of the

state and they have revealed the worst abuses of corrupt institutions to public examination. ‘The longer you can look back the further you can look forward,’ said one 20th-century master of political power who was also a historian: Winston Churchill.

The public future of the past remains in the hands of historians ‘if we are willing to look out of our study windows and to think of history, not as the property of a small guild of professional colleagues, but as the rightful heritage of millions’. These words, of the American historian J. Franklin Jameson, were first delivered in December 1912 but they remain relevant today. To put contemporary challeng-

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es in perspective and to combat the short-termism of our time we urgently need the wide-angle, long-range views only historians can provide.

Historians of the world, unite!
There is a world to win – before it’s too late.

Jo Guldi and David Armitage are the authors of *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, 2014)

Alternative Histories by Rob Murray

Warsaw’s Child of Freedom

Hanna Czarnocka (Koscia), an octogenarian now living in London, recalls her part in one of the most courageous resistance actions of the Second World War

Clare Mulley

ALTHOUGH the water was ice cold, when 16-year-old Hanna Czarnocka reached the River Oder en route to a POW camp in the autumn of 1944, she relished the chance to wash some of the dirt and blood from her clothes. As her plaits soaked up the water, the gravel and mortar dust caught in them turned to mush, only to harden as her hair dried. ‘It was like a piece of wood’, Hanna, now 86, remembers, recalling how her friends broke the comb they tried to drag through her hair. A few days later they arrived at the Oberlangen camp in north-west Germany. As surviving combatants from the Warsaw Uprising, they were some of the first female POWs of the war.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. On August 1st, 1944 thousands of Polish men, women and children launched a coordinated attack on the Nazi forces occupying the capital. Their aim was to assist and welcome the advancing Red Army as free citizens of Warsaw. The determination, discipline and sheer heroism of the Polish people meant that the Warsaw Uprising lasted an incredible 63 days. However it ended in capitulation, the destruction of much of the capital and the deaths of an estimated 200,000 Poles. Today Radosław Sikorski, Poland’s foreign minister, emphasises that the Home Army commanders were counting on the rapid advance of the Soviets into the city when they took the decision to rise against the Nazis. ‘I am convinced,’ he says, ‘that if they had known what consequences their decision would bring, they would never have taken it.’ For strategic and political reasons the Russians stayed put.