

Czech writer Milan Kundera opens his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* with the description of a photograph. The year is 1948. A group of political leaders stands on a balcony overlooking a crowd on a cold, snowy day. The key figure wears a fur hat that has just been placed on his head by a comrade who stands nearby—a comrade who can no longer be seen in the photograph. He was airbrushed out of the picture because he had been tried and executed for treason four years after the photograph was taken. And yet his hat remained.

This issue of *The Hedgehog Review* explores several aspects of the past suggested by Kundera's meditation on the photograph. First is the malleability of the past: in the workings of social life, the past does not always exist as a hard, objective, or factual reality—something “out there” to be grasped and appropriated. In our individual lives and our collective remembrances, the past can be reconfigured, altered, and even invented. The context for Kundera's photograph shows us that the past is not ideologically neutral. Among other things, it serves to justify political, social, and religious agendas against those whose beliefs and interests do not conform to established or “official” understandings. The past can be a weapon.

Second, while we try to reconfigure the past to justify, shape, or explain the present, the past also resists our efforts to contain it in a neat and tidy narrative or image. The past shapes us; we are the recipients, rather than the agents, of the past acting in the present. The past forms our identity in dynamic ways—not only in how we understand ourselves, but also in how we are understood by others. For example, the effort to erase the past, as Kundera points out, is not usually successful. Traces of what we do not want to remember remain in the records, the histories, and our memories. The past lingers and shapes the present in ways we do not always understand, and certainly in ways that we cannot completely control, despite our best efforts.

Third, our past is our heritage, our inheritance, our tradition, and we may experience it as a treasure, an albatross, or both. As creatures who persist in time, we carry ourselves through time, shaped by our experiences and by the experiences, ideas, practices, and memories of those who came before us. We owe gratitude for our inheritance, for the world that we have been bequeathed, for our existence. But our inheritance can also constitute a burden. We have inherited debts to those who were the victims of past injustices—debts that we may need to keep paying through memorials, rituals, and testimonies, as well as through more concrete forms of payment. We have an obligation to remember and learn from times of injustice, periods of oppression, and acts of malice in the effort to prevent their repetition.

Remembering is an ethical and social responsibility—and just what is the appropriate or best way to remember is hotly debated, whether the specific topic is the design of a 9/11 memorial, a public apology for slavery, or the writing of a history book. In fact, memory itself has become the subject of a rapidly expanding area of research, exploring questions like: Is there such a thing as collective memory? Can we use psychological terms usually ascribed to individuals to refer to whole communities, societies, or countries?

Fourth, while this issue looks at the burdens terrible pasts place on us, it is also concerned with the ways in which the past serves as a kind of comfort or consolation. Can we learn from the past things that will help us as we grapple with present terrors, atrocities, and crises? Are there things we have lost that we might retrieve from the past for present goods? What are we to make of the widespread nostalgia—a longing turn to the past for comfort—that runs through contemporary culture? The past can be both a troubling reminder of the extreme violence to which humans can resort and a consolation that things have been otherwise at other times and, therefore, may well be so in the future.

While the past may seem an elusive and abstract theme, few topics are so concretely connected to who we are or to the shape of the world in which we live. The past is not, of course, one thing; there are many pasts, and they are continually being rewritten. Likewise the uses of these pasts are multiple—and just who or what is doing the using is not always clear. But one thing is clear: we would do well to be reflective about our relationship with these many pasts—the ways we use them and the ways they shape us and our worlds—because they are not going away. The past is never simply in the past.

—T.H.R.