

Viewpoints

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the historical issues
behind today's news

FAKE NEWS

The post-truth past

The advent of 'alternative facts' and the 'post-truth' world may seem innately modern, but it has ample precedents in history – and historians are uniquely equipped to tackle the problem

BY ADAM IP SMITH

Among Donald Trump's accomplishments is inadvertently stimulating popular interest in epistemology. 'Post-truth' is the Oxford Dictionaries' 2016 'word of the year' – a judgment based largely on the number of times it's been invoked by journalists discussing the politics of the US election and the UK's 'Brexit' referendum. In a post-truth world, politics is conducted in a frenzy of self-reinforcing bubbles.

Because people have a psychological preference for information that reinforces their pre-existing biases, the media gives us the stories we'll like, rather than ones that are true.

2016 was also the year in which the term 'fake news' entered the political lexicon. Initially used to describe the literal manufacturing of lies masquerading as factual reporting by Macedonian teenagers trying to make a quick buck or Russian agents out to cause trouble, President Trump has now seized on the term to attack any media

story, or even polling data, that he doesn't like. Even cynical Washington insiders have been taken aback by the Trump administration's apparent indifference to truth. Trump's bizarre insistence that his inauguration crowd was larger than Barack Obama's – in spite of photographic evidence to the contrary – is reminiscent of Chico Marx's famous injunction in his core 1933 text

Duck Soup: "Well, who you gonna believe – me, or your own eyes?"

This is a slightly different variant of dystopia from that famously described in George Orwell's *1984*, which leapt up the bestseller lists after presidential advisor Kellyanne Conway defended the



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White House press secretary by describing the incorrect information he provided as “alternative facts”. Orwell’s imaginary government wanted people to believe that war was peace and freedom was slavery, whereas today the problem is that no one knows what to believe any more. It is as if the proliferation of data on the internet, combined with distrust of institutions and ‘experts’, has led to epistemological anarchy: a state in which it’s simply too exhausting to keep on fact-checking everything, so instead you just shrug your shoulders. You keep hearing people arguing about it, so who knows if man-made climate change is real or not?

Sir Richard J Evans, formerly Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, has claimed that the origins of the ‘post-truth’ culture lie in the pernicious influence of postmodernists who dismissed the pursuit of truth as a delusion. But there is a longer history at work here and, of course, there is nothing postmodern about the phenomenon of the powerful trying to control knowledge: that desire is surely as old as government itself. “We live in an age that maketh truth pass for treason,” said English politician Algernon Sidney, on his way to being executed in 1683 for alleged treason against Charles II – a line that helped his version of truth posthumously triumph, not least in 18th- and 19th-century America, where he was hailed as a Whig patriot who’d been martyred for the rights of the people. Sidney’s valedictory

bon mot might have struck a chord with the acting attorney general fired by President Trump for her “betrayal” after she told US justice department lawyers not to defend his ban on migrants from seven majority-Muslim countries.

The epistemological problem of ‘how we know what we know’ has bedevilled philosophers for centuries. It was all very well for Enlightenment thinkers to tell us that our reason should lead us to truth, but what if one person’s reason leads them to a truth that another thinks is a lie? What if, as the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant suggested, we never actually ‘know’ a thing in itself but only as filtered through our categories of understanding?

There is probably some truth – a deliciously ironic truth – to the idea that the cultural ascendancy of post-modernism, which was intended to emancipate us from oppressive narratives about the world, has provided, knowingly or otherwise, some of the modes of argument for the populist right. Conservative talkshow hosts in the US sought to emancipate their listeners from what they saw as hegemonic liberal narratives through a radical scepticism about authority. It is a short step from here to the view that one ‘knows’ something is right because one ‘feels’ it to be true – and that appeals by experts to evidence that is not immediately in front of your own eyes are just part of the liberal domination that has to be overcome. Trump’s politics has its origins in that kind of thinking.

Good historical writing can be an antidote to ‘post-truth’ culture – not because historians have magically resolved the epistemological challenges of generations but because they have a pragmatic, practical answer. On the one hand, historians are professionally dedicated to questioning received narratives, never taking them at face value; on the other, they are equally determined to use an exhaustive search for evidence to construct the most plausible meaning they can. Reading and doing history is empowering because it does not just give you the tools to doubt what you’re told, but also the tools to build a case to back up anything that is doubted.

Historians cannot fight the battle for truth alone, of course. Without a free press and serious journalists dedicated to holding power to account, and without institutions, such as universities, that try to maintain the spirit of scientific enquiry, the space for historical analysis withers. But history does teach us that, though omniscient objectivity may be a noble dream, the rigorous and transparent use of evidence is something we can choose to do – or not. 🌐



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POLITICS

Byzantine family ties

Donald Trump has been accused of acting in the interests of friends and family – but, in that, he has an 11th-century role model

BY PETER FRANKOPAN

Picture the scene: a crippled economy going from bad to worse; a discredited foreign policy that saw wealth frittered away on failed military interventions; and rising concerns about the role of the elite in overseeing rising inequality. As with Donald Trump nearly 900 years later, not many would have picked Alexios Komnenos as the coming man in the Eastern Roman empire – often called Byzantium – at the end of the 11th century.

Unlike Trump, Alexios was a young man – precocious, even – but one whose track record as a military strategist inspired many to overlook his political inexperience. Although some certainly did not think so, to many it seemed

obvious that it was time for a change in Constantinople. Things had been going badly for a while, and none of those in positions of authority had the brains or the brawn to arrest the decline. Those with an eye on the top job in Constantinople, the position of emperor, were all either too old, too compromised or too short of ideas. What was needed was a breath of fresh air.

Authors writing in florid, beautiful Greek in Constantinople would never have deigned to use an expression such as “draining the swamp”, nor pithy slogans such as “Make Byzantium Great Again”, but that was effectively the word on the street in 1081. One chronicler reported that Alexios’s supporters sang songs about his plans “going fizz”.

“Alexios, hurrah – he’s your boy!” the chant continued.

Unlike Trump, who had to win an election, Alexios arranged a coup that saw him depose the sitting emperor and take the throne. But both Trump and Alexios did the same thing once they had taken power: they appointed a cadre of loyal followers whose interests were closely aligned with those of the new leader. And no one’s fortunes were more closely linked

than those of the first family.

In Trump’s case, that meant giving his sons Eric and Donald Jr, and his son-in-law Jared Kushner, key roles in his ‘transition team’, then making them senior advisors in either a formal or an informal capacity. For Alexios, it meant surrounding himself with brothers and brothers-in-law who were rewarded with plum roles in his administration. In both cases, however, a woman was the power behind the throne. For President Trump that meant his daughter Ivanka, who was credited in the first week of his administration with forcing an about-turn on a proposal to water down rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; for Alexios, it meant his mother, the formidable Anna Dalassene, who was handed full executive power when the new emperor was occupied dealing with a full-blown military crisis. The empire would not survive, he used to say, without his mother’s “brains and good judgement”. Anna was a calm and stabilising influence – something many commentators say about Ivanka Trump.

The problem with keeping a close grip on the reigns of power is that those closest to the leader get the greatest rewards. Alexios’s family and friends received public funds “by the cartload” and became so rich that their houses were “the size of towns”. That seems likely to happen in the US, too, where the president immediately loosened bank regulations. After less than two weeks in power he talked of “So many people, friends of mine, that have nice businesses, and they can’t borrow money”. Making life easier for friends and family – and making them richer – was instinctively the right thing to do.

Predictably, that did not go down well in the Byzantine empire under Alexios Komnenos, nor is it likely to do so in the United States in 2017. Just weeks after Komnenos took the throne there were mutterings about his decision-making and his performance, especially after things went badly wrong with the empire’s foreign relations. There were whispers in the highways and byways about whether it might be



Trump and Alexios both did the same thing after taking power: appointed followers with interests closely aligned to theirs

better to replace him with a more malleable and less polarising figure.

If it is any consolation to Trump, Alexios was made of stern stuff, seeing off challenge after challenge to his rule. The emperor was like a sailor being buffeted during a storm, wrote his daughter Anna Komnene, withstanding wave after wave of assault. As it happened, he also ushered in something of a golden age – a point that might make the doom-mongers, who see Trump as a danger to the United States and to the world itself, pause for thought. It is striking, however, that the sun only rose over Alexios's realm after he got rid of his family and his retainers, who turned out to be nothing but trouble: determined to protect their own interests at the expense of the state. Appointing on merit, developing an effective foreign policy and overseeing economic development that helped the many rather than the few is what finally turned things around. Donald Trump might be interested to learn from history, rather than to merely think about how to make it. 🌐

ALAMY/IAN SCOTT OR TOBIAS KE????



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TRAVEL

Into the shadows

'Dark tourism' may not be for everyone, yet it can provide visceral insights into history

BY ROGER MOORHOUSE



The genre of travel dubbed 'dark tourism' has boomed in recent years. Visitor numbers at Auschwitz, for instance, have more than quadrupled since 2000. Chernobyl, long off-limits, now welcomes 10,000 visitors each year.

This July I'll be leading a tour group exploring Poland's grim fate during the Second World War, visiting numerous museums and historical sites including concentration and Nazi death camps. Other popular 'dark' destinations include Ground Zero in New York, Robben Island in South Africa and Cambodia's Killing Fields.

The recent growth has been spurred by globalisation, and perhaps a growing popular awareness of wider histories. But though it sounds edgy and postmodern, dark tourism has a long pedigree. In the years after the American Civil War, travel firm Thomas Cook offered its customers tours of newly cleared battlefields; they did the same after the First World War, taking groups to the Flanders cemeteries.

What is it, then, that drives our interest in holidaying on the darker side of human history? Partly, it is just that: history's horror stories have long exerted a strange magnetism. Partly, too, it is that the opportunities for such unconventional travelling are so much greater and more affordable now than even a decade ago. But it is also undoubtedly the lure of the 'sense of place' – the frisson of seeing with one's own eyes the spots where tyrants walked, where death lurked, where history was made.

Of course, there are limits. Sensitivity must always be paramount. A tour to a 'dark' location must never be carried out in an exploitative, disrespectful or tasteless manner. Moreover, given the still-controversial nature of some subjects, it is not enough for a guide or operator simply to provide the location; there is also an obligation to educate and provide accurate context. One cannot visit the former site of the Auschwitz concentration camp, for instance, and come away denying that the Holocaust took place.

Some find the idea of holidaying on history's dark side incomprehensible, even distasteful. That's fine. But we must not forget that, done properly, this form of travel can be challenging, enlightening and hugely rewarding, providing a vital new aspect to our understanding of the subject at hand – whether we are on the bridge on the river Kwai or at a former Soviet gulag.

To my mind, the throwaway phrase 'dark tourism' scarcely does the concept justice. Visiting history's most infamous locations reminds us of the subject's emotional element – its visceral appeal. And that is a reminder that can be of benefit to us all. 🌐



Roger Moorhouse is the author of *The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact with Stalin, 1939–1941* (The Bodley Head, 2014)



CIVIL WARS

Latin lessons on civil war

Internal conflicts now outnumber international wars – but are nothing new, as the Romans were aware

BY DAVID ARMITAGE

Civil war is now humanity's most characteristic form of organised, large-scale violence. In the decades since the Second World War, fighting within states has almost entirely replaced that between states: from Afghanistan to Yemen, all of the world's 40 or so ongoing conflicts are now civil wars, except for the struggle for Kashmir between India and Pakistan. For the moment, at least, intrastate war has almost entirely replaced interstate war across the world.

How are we to make sense of this mayhem? "Comparatively," political scientists would answer: "Take a broad sample of civil wars since 1989, or maybe 1945, and analyse their motivations, life cycles and aftermaths." Most historians, on the other hand, would advocate: "Individually – look at each conflict in context, and recover its specificity." To both groups I would reply: "Serially, but over 2,000 years, examining wars fought over the centuries from ancient Rome to the present."

In my new book, I argue that the long view of civil wars, from that instigated

The entire western hemisphere is now free from civil war for the first time in two centuries

by Roman general Sulla to the current conflict in Syria, encourages humility, complexity and hope. Humility, because we can see that much of what we think we now know about civil wars has been discovered centuries, even millennia, earlier. Complexity, because our struggles over the meaning and significance of civil war arise from multiple histories that are still jostling and colliding in the present; and hope, because the long view shows that civil war is not a congenital curse for humanity but something we might gradually cure.

First, humility. Social scientists now tell us that civil wars last longer, recur more often and leave deeper wounds than other kinds of conflict. The Romans discovered all of this during their own civil wars in the first century BC, and in their reflections on those conflicts over the course of five centuries, by thinkers ranging from Cicero to St Augustine. They were not the first to suffer internal conflict, but they were the first to experience it as 'civil' – among fellow citizens or, in Latin, *cives* – and as 'war': formal armed conflict with, as they said, drums and trumpets, standards and generals, for control of the city itself. Their conception of civil war, their narratives about it and their moral analyses resonated

through the centuries, shaping later views in the west and beyond, almost down to our own time.

Next, complexity. Starting in the 19th century, civil war came under the umbrella of law; in the late 20th century, the Geneva Conventions were extended to cover "non-international armed conflict" (the international humanitarian law term for civil war). This set up collisions over the definition and meaning of civil war, notably in Iraq during the Second Gulf War and more recently in Syria.

Those controversies pitted experiences among local populations on the ground against expert understandings within the international community of what was, or was not, civil war. Such disputes arise from civil war's multiple histories, which need to be carefully excavated to be properly understood.

Finally, hope. The incidence of civil conflict seems to be declining. Major civil wars characterised by decades of death and destruction have been terminated in the past few years, first in Sri Lanka and more recently in Colombia. The entire western hemisphere is now free from civil war for almost the first time in two centuries. Perhaps humanity is on the verge of dis-inventing what the Romans first invented 2,000 years ago. Until we do, we will need history – and a very long view of it – to assess future prospects for escaping our most disturbing discontents. 🌐



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