

Why Bother with History?

Ask the former generation and find out what their ancestors learned. (Job 8.8)

Why? Because history has to do with memory and personal identity resides in memory. So, if you don't know your history, you don't know who you are.

One staple feature of situation comedy has been the character who sustains some trauma—a blow to the head— and suffers amnesia. His first question is always, “Who am I?” Loss of memory equals loss of identity. Our understanding of ourselves as individuals is tied to the knowledge of our personal history. We know who we are by knowing where we've been.

What is true for individuals is also true for nations, cultures, religions and the Christian Church. Without a knowledge of our history we lack identity—we don't fully know who we are. We lack content and we lack context. We become vulnerable. So, those who write history control a great deal. It's not too much to say that, humanly speaking, whoever controls our understanding of the past controls our future.



The Little Man Who Wasn't There

These official photographs show Josef Stalin, leader of the former Soviet Union (1929-1953) inspecting the White Sea Canal with some of his officials. On his right are Voroshilov and Molotov (yes, the cocktail is named after him). On his left is Nikolai Yezhov. This little man (5'0") was head of the NKVD (Stalin's secret police) during the deadliest period of *The Great Purge* (1936-1938). Up to 1.2 million Russians were arrested, tortured and executed under his reign of terror. This included many artists, authors, scientists and non-political persons. After presiding over these enormities, Yezhov himself fell out of favor and was executed for anti-Soviet crimes.

If Stalin decided someone had become a liability, that someone simply disappeared and in many cases, was removed from official photographs—*literally airbrushed out of history*. It was said, “Everywhere else it's impossible to predict the future but in the Soviet Union it's impossible to predict the past.”

Crass attempts to control minds by re-writing history still occur. But those who engage in serious historical study are less likely to be fooled, are in a stronger position to understand the present and therefore wisely engage the future. In a word, they know who they are.

So, study history!