

# History's sides

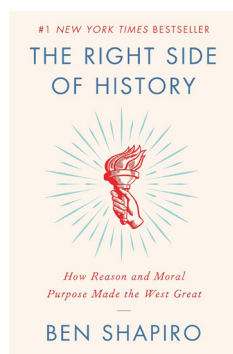
## How people morally inscribe themselves into fractured times

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**Fig. 1.** Poster by British political cartoonist Bernard Partridge, printed in 1916. It announces 'Kosovo Day', the Serbian National Day.



**Fig. 2.** Ben Shapiro's *The right side of history: How reason and moral purpose made the West great*. (New York: Broadside Books, 2019).

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Early memories of fieldwork in Serbia are of friends – buoyed by glasses of *rakija* and cigarettes – launching into tempestuous analyses of national history. In the two defining conflicts of the 20th century, they noted, Serbs had been on the 'right' – the victorious – 'side'. It is true. The Royal Serbian Army delivered the initial victory of the First World War with its defeat of Austro-Hungarian forces at the Battle of Cer in 1914. The retreat of the Serbian army across the Albanian mountains in 1915 and its breaking of the Salonika Front a few years later are central to the Serbian imaginary of that war. In 1941, after shunning a pact with the Axis powers, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was occupied by Germany, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria – and Serbs found themselves aligned with the Allies. They were – again – on the 'right side'.

And yet – the local narrative goes – despite bearing heavy losses in the First World War and facing down fascism in the Second, Serbs were to be grossly betrayed by their former allies. In March 1999, NATO commenced its aerial bombardment of (what remained of) Yugoslavia. For the West, the military intervention was a justified response to the criminal actions of Slobodan Milošević's regime and the ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians. For my Serbian interlocutors, however, the bombing was an outrage, and they recount these events with righteous indignation: how was it possible to have been so firmly on the 'right side' and wind up glossed as perpetrators? The people I spoke with claimed to feel the shift in fortunes acutely. Despite fighting fascism, despite opting for freedom and resisting totalitarianism, they were ultimately seen as the 'fascists' – wrongly placed on the wrong side.

### The anthropological framework

This short article is not the context in which to weigh up the accuracies, fallacies or wilful blindness of my friends' view of the 20th century. Nor is it the space in which to evaluate the Serbian role in the violent collapse of Yugoslavia and its repercussions. I mention this 'story Serbs tell themselves' (Živković 1997) because it illuminates how people think about history in terms of its 'sides'. These passionate conversations simultaneously evoked a culturally specific notion of 'history' and morally evaluated its passage. I take my friends' musings on the 20th century and history's ultimate flows as an invitation to reflect on the interplay between what Michael Lambek (2000: 8-9) identifies as 'historical consciousness' (how people understand and enact the relation between past, present and future) and 'historical conscience' (people's carefully considered moral judgements upon history).

Lambek is thinking through his ethnography in Mayotte, specifically his engagement with the spirit medium Nuriaty Tumbu. Nuriaty hosts and mediates a spirit of national significance, the Sultan Maounna Madi, who ruled Mayotte prior to the French conquest in 1841. Serving as the medium for the sultan, Nuriaty bears the great responsibility of communicating his thoughts to the public. Lambek shows that through mediating the past, she crafts history and its narrative. At the same time, her practice is 'virtuous' because she passes moral judgement upon history, intervening and appraising (ibid.: 11). Nuriaty displays 'both a consciousness of the historical process and a conscientious intervention in that process' (ibid.: 10). Similarly, evoking the 'sides of history' might be understood as the work of historical consciousness and



conscience. In a global sociopolitical context which is fracturing – where the old order is challenged and little is certain – people find fixity by evoking history's sides, by morally inscribing themselves into time.

### The rhetoric of sides

Speaking about history in terms of its 'sides' or ultimate direction is not new, nor unique to southeastern Europe. In 1992, as the Soviet Union crumbled, Francis Fukuyama famously declared the 'end of history', the final victory of neoliberalism. In recent years, marshalling history's 'sides' and their moral freight has increasingly become a means by which people bifurcate the Euro-American cosmos. Luminaries from Taylor Swift to Steve Bannon have, at different times, urgently claimed their projects to be on history's 'right side'. In 2019, Ben Shapiro, the American conservative commentator, published *The right side of history: How reason and moral purpose made the West great*, a staunch defence of Western values in the face of 'woke' attack.

But sideism – if we can call it that – is not an exclusively conservative conceit. Barack Obama's administration, notably, glossed its policy positions in such grand teleological terms. Obama was fond of recalling Martin Luther King: 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.' His administration certainly implied that 'History' was the inevitable forward movement of social progress and that the government's policies rode upon its momentum. In a press conference on 6 December 2015, following the San Bernadino terrorist attack, Obama implored the nation to overcome divisiveness and radicalization: 'My fellow Americans, I am confident we will succeed in this mission because we are on the right side of history.'<sup>1</sup>

Such rhetoric has intensified in recent geopolitical crises. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February

**Fig. 3.** President Donald Trump speaks with Cabinet members and others after signing the One Big Beautiful Bill Act on the South Lawn of the White House, Friday, 4 July 2025.



2022 stoked a febrile atmosphere in which belligerents, onlookers and diplomats all appealed to history's sidedness. Myroslav Marynovych, vice-rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv and a former Soviet dissident, felt assured that 'Ukraine is on the right side of history'.<sup>2</sup> At a 2024 speech to the UN, Fergus Eckersley, UK minister counsellor, also observed that 'the supporters of Ukraine are on the right side of history'.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, China – refusing to condemn Vladimir Putin, and lobbying for what it saw as a peaceful solution, argued that its own diplomatic response placed it 'on the right side of history'.

And then, in the autumn of 2023, a crisis unfolded which begat a new wave of passionately binary claims about the moral freight of history's sides. Writing for *The Jerusalem Post* in 2023, Jason Greenblatt argued that the Hamas attacks of 7 October forced nations and individuals to inexorably face the question: 'On which side of history do you stand?' For Greenblatt, it was a choice between 'breathing life and kindness into humanity' or being 'a helpmate to the forces of evil and barbarism'. In turn, critical voices have fiercely condemned Israel's brutal military response as placing it on the 'wrong side of history' – alongside states that support it.<sup>5</sup> In these fraught geopolitical circumstances, diplomatic, military and activist actors frame their interventions not merely in terms of immediate humanitarian catastrophe, but against the relief of history's ultimate *telos*. They intervene with an eye to posterity, wary of how their actions may be judged in the future.

### Historians' critique

Professional historians take a dim view of writing history as an implicit story of progress. The Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield caustically referred to the 'Whig interpretation of history', a psychological tendency to emphasize 'certain principles of progress in the past' (1931: v), erasing complexities by retrospectively dividing the past into 'the men who furthered progress and the men who tried to hinder it' (ibid.: 11). Historians, he argued, should not impose 'a certain form upon the whole historical story' (ibid.: 12): the ways of progress are 'crooked and perverse', history 'twists and turns' with 'wilfulness and waste' (ibid.: 23). Historians, Butterfield wrote, should not impute history's progressive moral arc from the vantage point of the present.

More recently, others have critiqued the tendency of politicians to evoke history's sides. Writing for the *New Statesman* in 2024, Professor Richard Evans took a critical view of leaders of diverse stripes – from Putin to Blair – appealing to the verdict of history. For Evans, evoking the ultimate vindication of history is ridiculous. 'History never reaches a final verdict'; the horrors of the previous century are grim proof that history is hardly an inevitable drive to increased tolerance and humanitarianism. The writer David Graham (2015) also ridiculed sideist thinking as 'a tortured, idealistic, and ultimately untenable vision of what history is and how it works'.

The argument against proclaiming oneself to be 'on the right side of history' is, of course, that one cannot possibly know. Who is to know – a few hundred years from now – what or whom humans of the future may deem to have been on the right or wrong side of history: veganism, budget air travel, Donald Trump, this article? In 2019, *Vox* magazine asked a range of experts: 'What do we do now that will be considered unthinkable in 50 years?' Along with (more predictable) predictions such as 'flaunting wealth' and 'eating meat', ethicist Karen Swallow Prior proposed abortion as a practice that future humans would look back upon with horror and 'lack words to explain to our grandchildren' why such 'wilful destruction in the name of personal choice' was ever allowed. The philosophical point is: how can we tell what is 'on the right side of history'?

### Anthropological re-evaluation

And yet, the quibbles of philosophers and historians aside, evoking the 'sides of history' retains enormous traction in the contemporary Euro-American public sphere. As a self-conscious, politically charged relationship which people cultivate with time, it merits anthropological attention. The intellectual project of the 'anthropology of history' has been premised on provincializing the hegemonic authority of Western historicism, showing that assumptions of causation, linearity and sequentiality are but one mode of knowing the past (Palmié & Stewart 2016). Rather than subjecting other cultural contexts to the regime of historicist thought, they point to the 'varieties of historical experience' (Palmié & Stewart 2019). We might interrogate the evocation of 'history's sides' not as a woeful misunderstanding of how 'history actually works', but as

1. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/06/address-nation-president>.

2. <https://ucufoundation.org/ukraine-stands-on-the-right-side-of-history/>.

3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/if-russia-is-so-concerned-about-ukraines-defensive-action-then-russia-should-stop-invading-uk-statement-at-the-un-security-council>.

4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-right-side-history-over-ukraine-war-foreign-minister-2022-03-20/>.

5. <https://journalistik.online/en/edition-2-2024/the-war-in-gaza-german-media-and-the-wrong-side-of-history/>.

6. Totalizing moral bifurcations of 'history' are just one way of being historically consciousness and conscientious. 'History' can be known differently, through praying (Henig 2017), performing (Lambek 2002) and dreaming (Stewart 2012), for instance.

Butterfield, H. 1931. *The Whig interpretation of history*. London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd.

Evans, R.J. 2024. The wrong side of history. *New Statesman*, 2 March.

Fukuyama, F. 1992. *The end of history and the last man*. New York: Free Press.



**Fig. 4.** Yugoslav Ministry of Defence, after NATO's bombing in 1999.



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- Živković, M. 1997. Stories Serbs tell themselves: Discourses on identity and destiny in Serbia since the mid-1980s. *Problems of Post-Communism* 44(4): 22–29.

a culturally bound way in which people of various political persuasions are historically conscious and conscientious in a tense geopolitical moment where 'multiple critical events are clumping together' (Henig & Knight 2023: 6).

On the one hand, claiming to be on the 'right side', or denouncing others as being on the 'wrong side', implicitly reaffirms a culturally specific understanding of what 'history' is. Reinhart Koselleck (2004) famously observed that, by the end of the 18th century, 'history' was no longer the recording of plural, local, individual histories but had become the 'collective singular' – a grand and totalizing conceptual framework. It was 'a subject furnished with divine epithets of omnipotence, universal justice, and sanctity' (ibid.: 33). Sideism is – of course – a natural corollary of this specific 'regime of historicity' (Hartog 2003).<sup>6</sup> In the claims of politicians, activists and commentators, history is a forward-moving, linear timeline, not a circle or an eternal return. As the philosopher Karl Löwith observed, at root this is a post Judaeo-Christian view of history, 'determined by an eschatological motivation' – one that appears in historical imaginings 'from Isaiah to Marx' (1949: 18).

On the other hand, evoking sides is a 'judicious' intervention (Lambek 2000: 11). Löwith argued that history 'is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts' (1949: 5). And claiming to be 'on the right side of history' makes sense of the mess and confusion, because not only does it provide grand ideological structure ('History'), it gives it moral weight, too. Presentism appeals to the wholeness of history presuppose that there is an ultimate gauge or 'purpose' against which all human activity will ultimately be assessed.

The agitated past decade has led to wrestling with – and arguing about – the proper relationships between past, present and future. Which histories are seen as legitimate? Whose histories guarantee which futures? Are we witnessing the terrible repetition of past horrors, or the enactment of projects which are good, new and liberating? To what extent – and for whom – does historical suffering permit present action?

The fallout of Russian invasion, Ukrainian resistance, American diplomacy and Middle Eastern turmoil provides contexts into which people who are not directly implicated in these events morally inscribe themselves. The election and inauguration of the 47th US President has led to a

renewed wave of people reaching for history's sides. They become virtuous agents in processes beyond their control, empowered to pronounce on ultimate rights and wrongs, finding fixity in a world where everything is fraught and contested. With the present moment being described as one in which 'layers of relations between humans, nature, capitalism and materiality build stochastically toward a crescendo of systemic polycrisis' (Henig & Knight 2023: 6), evoking the 'sides of history' allows people who might be marginal to feel meaningfully at the very heart of things. If nothing else, this practice allows them to give grand, schematic form to the chaos of the present, rooting themselves conscientiously within a historical narrative.

## Conclusion

On the occasions when Serbian friends expressed performative bewilderment about the course of the 20th century, they sometimes recalled a poster, printed and circulated in Britain in 1916. The propaganda poster – published by the 'Kosovo Day Committee', an organization which promoted the Serbian cause during the First World War – depicts Serbian soldiers engaged in battle with Austro-Hungarian forces. Under the heading 'Heroic Serbia', the text details Serbs' longing for 'freedom' before inviting the British public to celebrate Serbia's national day 'as a pledge of the Allies' victory and Anglo-Serbian friendship'.

How times change – my interlocutors suggested, wryly – from being on the right side to being perceived as on the wrong. But the shift in fortunes at the level of military alignment and media representation did not alter the fact that they still felt firmly that they had been – and continued to be – on the right side. Some Orthodox friends referred obliquely to Divine Justice. Ultimately, in the grand, eschatological scheme of things, Serbs would be proven right – the truth would out.

The Serbian example illuminates a broader phenomenon visible across contemporary crises: from Ukraine, to Gaza, to American politics. When material, political and economic factors are wholly beyond people's control, invoking history's sides becomes a powerful means of orientation. In fractured and uncertain times, the rhetoric of being 'on the right side of history' offers historical consciousness and conscience, helping people to face chaos and inscribe themselves self-reflexively into time's passage. ●