



History as We Would Like It

Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online. The present PDF is part of this series.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

History as We Would Like It

Contribution to 'The Judgements of History: A Symposium', *Worldview* 15 no. 7 (July 1972), 15–19 at 16



James Barrett ('Scotty') Reston (1909–95)

I SHOULD BE GLAD to believe with Mr James Reston¹ that God is not mocked and that the crimes of statesmen and of peoples obtain their just due at the hands of history. But I find it difficult to divorce myself from the thought that, at any rate in the long run, it is the conquerors and the big battalions that determine the verdicts (despite some shining examples) of historians. Over a century and a half ago, Immanuel Kant wrote, 'If those revolts which gave Switzerland, the Netherlands and Great Britain their constitutions, and which are now praised as so felicitous, had failed, historians would see in the execution of their originators the deserved punishment of major criminals' (from an essay entitled 'That May Be All Right in Theory, But It Does Not Work in Practice', 1793).²

¹ James Reston, 'Not by Power Alone', *Worldview* 15 no. 7 (July 1972), 15–16.

² [Now (2023) 230 years ago.] 'Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis', *Berlinische Monatschrift* 22

HISTORY AS WE WOULD LIKE IT

Alexander, Scipio, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne won their wars; our history books would have been very different if they had not – not merely because events, the course of human history itself, would have been different, but because the judgements of the world upon them are part and parcel of this course and would have been very unlike the conventional wisdom that would have resulted from their failures. Could anyone doubt what ‘the verdict of history’ of every journalist and schoolmaster and the vast majority of educated men would have been if Napoleon had successfully invaded Russia and England and established his laws in his entire empire for any length of time? If Hitler, or even the Kaiser, had won their wars?

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, of a Belgian who, after his country had been invaded in 1914, and resistance crudely repressed by the German armies, asked a German officer whether he was not afraid of the judgement of history. ‘No,’ the officer is alleged to have replied, ‘for we shall write the histories.’ Victors are seldom judged: the defeated, the minorities, the persecuted sometimes leave memorials of themselves in the light of which later generations modify conquerors’ accounts of their successes. But this does not happen often: the Romans won, but the writings of the Jews are there to testify against them; Europeans exploited and humiliated the Chinese, but now there are Chinese writings to shame their descendants, whose own histories used to record little or nothing of this. There is more hope at present that this will not automatically prevail, because the enormities of our own century have been such as to provoke indignation within the ranks of the conquerors themselves. This is still new, but it does offer hope for greater justice in terms of those deeply held human values that have not altered all that much in the course of the centuries. Yet the price that we, in this century, have had to pay for this more universal awakening of the moral conscience has been appalling.

It is, I think, this sense of outrage which Mr Reston has in mind; and although I am somewhat sceptical of its efficacy, I share his

(July–December 1793), September, 258–9: *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1900–), viii 301: ‘wenn jene Empörungen, wodurch die Schweiz, die Vereinigten Niederlande, oder auch Großbritannien ihre jetzige für so glücklich gepriesene Verfassung errungen haben, mißlungen wären, die Leser der Geschichte derselben in der Hinrichtung ihrer jetzt so erhobenen Urheber nichts als verdiente Strafe großer Staatsverbrecher sehen würden.’

HISTORY AS WE WOULD LIKE IT

attitude: I should like this doctrine to be true, even though history does not afford too much evidence for it.

© Isaiah Berlin 1972

Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 21 January 2023