

This is the INTERLUDE between
chapters 1 and 2 of:

The *Crux* of WORLD HISTORY

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Volume 1.

The Book of Genesis

The Birth of the Jewish People

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INTERLUDE

Why do historians write like this?

You may be reeling a bit from the rather extreme examples of historical distortion that you were made to witness in chapter one. That was just the appetizer; you will be seeing much more of that. And it will cause more astonishment. So before we continue, I'd like to make just a brief parenthesis to address the question that has begun to bother you: *Why do some historians cited in chapter one write the way they do?* Here is one hypothesis:

“History, it has been said, is the propaganda of the victors.”

That's the first sentence in *Nero: Reality and Legend* (1969) by B.H. Warmington. As written, it is false. The word 'history' simply means 'what actually happened,' and this cannot be propaganda—neither the victors' nor anybody else's. For example, what *actually happened* in Rome under Nero is not propaganda, except of course for the emperor Nero's own specific acts of propaganda and those of his political competitors. The rest was just 'stuff that happened,' and all of it part of 'history.'

But historian B.H. Warmington did not really mean to communicate an absurdity, it's just that his chosen phrase unfortunately says 'history' where it should really say 'historiography,' as only the latter term will properly refer to what Warmington does, for example, when he writes a book making certain claims about what supposedly happened in Neronian Rome. So what this historian really means to say is the following: *historiographical* accounts of the past—according to a common view (“it has been said”)—are works of propaganda meant to justify members of the ruling classes.

Now, given that Warmington is himself a historiographer (or a 'historian'—same thing), his opening shot is either charmingly innocent or shamelessly cynical. Either way, however, we should take him seriously. If, as he suggests, the people who believe his profession to be systematically dishonest exist in such great numbers that the accusation has become a truism, we should stop and ask: Can this be right?

Well it cannot be right that too many people believe this. If the majority really thought that historiography was propaganda meant to keep the ruling classes in power, working-class parents would be protesting outside the schools that their children are being taught a bunch of lies meant to keep them down. So, although “it has been said” that historiography is “the propaganda of the victors,” this cannot have been repeated much outside a small circle. As small as the ruling classes? Perhaps.

The question that now remains is the one that matters most: Are the select few who share with each other the observation that historiography is aristocratic propaganda hitting or not the nail on the head? Are they expressing a truth?

We have seen already some evidence consistent with that hypothesis in chapter one, because the standard portrayal of the ancient world is to defend the ancient Romans against the ancient Jews, even though it was the ancient Jews who were fighting to liberate ordinary people from the repressive Roman aristocracy, which was cruel beyond imagination.

A question remains about how widespread and how consistent biases like these might be, because so far we have only covered one topic, and only one time and place. So let us examine first the *expectation*. Let us ask, in other words, whether it is reasonable to expect, *a priori*, that historiography will be written so as to produce pro-aristocratic propaganda.

I begin with the observation that it is not the working classes that produce the bulk of historians—this profession the relatively wealthy find much easier to pursue. Perhaps more importantly, the institutions that accredit and employ historians, and which thereby provide incentives for particular historical interpretations, are most certainly *not* controlled by the working classes. So the suspicion (unless it is an admission) expressed in historian B.H. Warmington’s opening shot has a certain plausibility, which means it should be considered seriously.

Now, but should it turn out that historians indeed distort the past to justify the ruling classes, then what ordinary people have heard of ‘what actually happened’ is false; it isn’t the truth or anything close to it but rather a carefully constructed story meant to ensure that a small class of people continues to benefit disproportionately from everybody else’s work. That would be chilling. But perhaps the perception expressed in Warmington’s first sentence is incorrect and historians do not

mostly write propaganda to justify the ruling classes. There is, after all, a competing view, and it has likewise produced a truism:

“History is just one damned thing after another.”

This one needs no correction because the word ‘history’ *is* here referring to ‘what actually happened,’ not to what historians write. The claim it makes is that the sequence of human events is not lawful—it is “just one damned thing after another.” I have seen separate attributions of this claim to H.A.L. Fischer, Winston Churchill, Henry Ford, Voltaire, Harry Truman, and Anonymous (!), so it is bandied about quite freely. My point, which may not be immediately obvious, is this: if the above multi-attributed truism is true, then Warmington’s is false, and vice-versa.

To see why, first, assume that *Warmington’s* truism is correct and therefore that historians *do* mostly write propaganda to justify the privileges of the ruling classes in their own societies. What follows? That they must be making a real contribution to keeping these elites in power—because, if all this propaganda were having zero effect, then why bother? It would be much easier just to tell the truth, wouldn’t it. So if historians write propaganda meant to keep the ruling classes in power, that’s because it works. But then the actual sequence of events is already governed by one rather important, lawful regularity: *the way you talk about the past helps determine class processes in the future*, in which case history cannot just be “one damned thing after another.”

Now let’s begin at the other end, starting with the assumption that human history is not “one damned thing after

another.” This is the assumption that history is a lawful sequence. What does this require? Naturally, that human *behavior* be lawful—that is, that certain grammatical constraints exist over a person’s choices. For example, the discovery that certain collections of behaviors involving what are called ‘speech acts’ (at the first level of analysis) are constrained by a grammar we call ‘linguistic’ is the reason that a science can emerge whose job is to discover the properties of these behavioral laws: *linguistics*. But if your neighborhood university lacks a department of host-guest interactions (of *hostics?*), that hardly means that the meta- and para-linguistic behaviors of hosts and guests are without lawful local constraints such as those we see in language. They *do* have such constraints, and so do many other collections of (meta-) behaviors that together constitute ‘grammars’ of various sorts. In other words, every domain of human interaction has its locally varying ‘traffic rules,’ as sociologist Erving Goffman famously called them.

The idea that human *political* grammars are constrained by what people believe about the past strikes me as a reasonable one. If true, then anybody who can shape the official historiographic representation of the past which the masses consume will have a sizeable impact on political realities. What follows? Well it doesn’t exactly follow that the ruling classes—which *do* have the opportunity to shape the official story of what supposedly happened—will waste their advantage and then succeed in spite of it. What is more likely is that historiography is usually a tool that the ruling classes employ to steer history in order to remain in power.

Historiography steers history.

Of course, this claim is a *hypothesis*. Like any social-scientific hypothesis it is not very interesting unless it can be tested. I think this one can be, because it predicts that the historiography of the Western world has been written so as to make it difficult for ordinary people to fight for justice, and easy for the oppressors of ordinary people to apologize for their own crimes. If an empirical demonstration of these predictions is possible, then the hypothesis will be supported.

A good test case is to take a look at the representation of the Jews in Western historiographical works, because what nobody denies is that practically every century since the birth of Jesus Europeans have massacred Jews in large numbers. And though pockets of relative tolerance appeared here and there for limited periods of time, the lot of most Jews who were not murdered or forcibly converted was traditionally something close to outright slavery. The Jews, in other words, have not been the victors. Therefore, the hypothesis that historiography is the propaganda of the victors predicts that our commonly accepted version of the sequence of events in the West will turn out to have been written, upon close analysis, so as to disadvantage the Jews.

The book in your hands will produce a demonstration that historians indeed go out of their way to attack the Jews, and to excuse those who, century after century, have oppressed them. Out of this exercise will emerge a corrected representation of the historical path cut by the Jewish people. But one cannot correct the representation of the losers without doing the same to the representation of the victors, so writing the real story of the Jewish people will require presenting an entirely new account of Western civilization.

This book will do that too.

I hasten to concede that an alternative picture of the past to the one you have been taking for granted will not be convincing unless I can decisively *refute*, by way of demonstrations that you can inspect and scrutinize yourself, that most historians have been deceiving you. And so, in the process of telling my tale, I will also be fencing with the authors of what one may call the ‘official story,’ and you’ll get to see the blood and guts up close. This will either make for interesting sport, or it will produce the morbid fascination and horror also induced by train wrecks, or both.

And yet I think these are far from being the sweetest of my book’s attractions. Although it is correct to identify the Jews as the losers in Western history, in one very important respect they have always been winning, because the long string of crimes their neighbors have visited on them have not dented their spirit; and their sheer survival has allowed these same neighbors to become, over time, through contact with Jews, more enlightened and ethical. This is an inspiring story. To tell it is to acknowledge that the Jews have been saving us, precisely as God, according to their tradition, has commanded them. In this sense at least, my tale brings justice—at long last. And here lies the strongest selling point, in my view, for a new look at the history of the Jewish people.