

'It would be wrong to conflate history and memory.' Discuss.

Historical facts and memory are undoubtedly essential for reconstructing the history of the world in our minds accurately. Memory is often the reason for certain sources to exist, as accounts of events always come from what someone remembers of the incident at the time. However, conflating history and memory is dangerous as it eventually becomes impossible to divide the two as they become entwined in the remaking of past events. Whether it's entirely wrong to conflate the two is debatable as often you can't piece together the past without intertwining them. The definition of conflate can vary, so to avoid confusion, in this essay I am going to use this definition of conflate: "brought together from various sources, composed of various elements"¹.

It could be wrong to conflate history and memory for many reasons, the main one being that the two don't coincide: they aren't the same. Memory is someone's subjective view on an event that they witnessed in the past. Often details can be forgotten or they didn't see clearly what was happening. Two people at the same event can remember very different circumstances occurring. History is meant to be comprised of correct facts about the past: the reality of what actually happened. If one combined the two, fact could get mixed up with fiction (or at least partial truth), thus making the so-called 'history' wrong or incomplete. History is not meant to be subjective as it's supposed to give an unbiased view on how the past played out. It's meant to key us into the ways of the past; how people lived, what the landscape was like and how cultures evolved (to name a few). Furthermore, memories can end up being entirely false. False memory is a serious problem that the police have to deal with when trying to get witnesses to identify the criminal in a case. Additionally, a study by Loftus and Palmer in 1974 discovered that leading questions altered the witnesses' responses completely.

In the review essay of Henry Rousso's *The Haunting Past: History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France*, written by Richard Evans, he establishes that because of recent public activity in prosecuting the last members of the Nazi regime and claims for stolen Jewish property there has been a recovery of memory surrounding the events of the Second World War since the 1980's. Many historians are being called into trials to act as expert witnesses. The original judicial investigations after the war unearthed considerable new historical documentation surrounding the topics now in court, which have influenced historians' opinions. This may have led to the historians' evidence being subconsciously subjective and the historian Henry Rousso argued that the phenomenon of historians being called as expert witnesses confuses history and memory. Furthermore, the facts that the historians accumulated from their research may serve to change a witness's memory on the stand without them realising it. Often when a person is unsure about a memory they will agree with what someone else says happened. This means that if a witness was giving a statement and were influenced by the historian's testimony, then their statement might not be their actual correct memory. This links to the study done by Loftus and Palmer on leading questions.

Additionally, Mark Roseman's article about Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony tackles this difficult subject demonstrating how the emotional impact of an event can alter memory. In his study of the testimony of Marianne Ellenbogen it seemed that very traumatic events lengthened her perception of time periods surrounding the events. Conversely he also noted that some memories

¹ The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary Volume 1

were edited out, ensuring that those who helped her remained unblemished in her mind. This demonstrates that memory is an unreliable source, therefore combining it with facts could lead to confusion and the creation of imprecise historical events.

Furthermore, the winners tend to write history meaning that they have more of a say in what sources survive. These accounts will be subjective towards their opponents, meaning that already unreliable sources are made even more so as most of the sources we have are the ones accepted by the leaders of society at the time. Sometimes, sources have been destroyed or changed by the next generation of rulers as they didn't agree with their previous counterparts. Additionally, different periods of history have a dissimilar range of sources for the same type of event. Slavery in the Roman times, for example, has virtually no accounts written by slaves themselves as history was mostly written by the richest people in society. There is much more evidence, however, for 18th Century slavery - chains, documents (such as diagrams of how to fit slaves into ships) and first hand accounts. This illustrates how different times document the same things differently and how different societies are selective in their memories due to societal context.

Memory itself does have its own history. Memories were kept alive mostly by oral transmission among the peasantry. In Katharine Hodgkins' article she states that according to Judith Pollmann the people in early modern Europe (1500-1800) often made themselves forget or neutralise the past, formalising this aim in 'Acts of Oblivion'. These Acts were carried out after wars or rebellions and required the people to forget about the trauma. This is 'because early modern culture struggled to articulate such pain' suggests Pollmann, meaning that the painful memories left behind from the war were too hard for society to accept.

The study of ancient civilisations is an example of history where the two (history and memory) can be very firmly divided. Writers such as Virgil and Livy wrote down their account of events based on what other people had told them as they weren't alive at the time that they were writing about. To be more accurate, they were writing what other people had remembered happening often told through several generations. Architectural or archaeological evidence makes it easy to distinguish between memories and actual facts when it comes to the physical remnants of history - for instance, Amphitheatres. If a historian examined one on its own the most that they could probably conclude was that large numbers of people gathered in them to watch something. Without the written evidence from writers such as Livy, modern day historians would have had no idea what actually happened in them. Even with both of these types of sources, however, it would still be impossible to know about all the types of shows and spectacles that they went to see. Another example of where the two can be firmly distinguished is the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. When it erupted and Pompeii, Herculaneum and Stabiae were lost, there was the physical evidence left behind and written sources such as Pliny. The sources written about the event were confused and hard to decipher but because one can look at the archeological evidence, it's possible to find out what actually happened for certain using modern science. This isn't so easily achieved, however, when talking about a battle or diplomatic meeting as the only sources that are obtainable about those come from someone's memories of the event. A painting or mosaic is also someone's memory (plus how they've interpreted it) and a written account comes from memories too, thus making it nearly impossible to tell if what it says is what actually happened, especially when sources often contradict one another in some way. Overall, when the

historical records and memory are clearly distinct you can combine the two without the risk of confusion and imprecision.

On the other hand it wouldn't be wrong to conflate history and memory as they often go conjointly. Memories are often used as sources for historical facts and one could argue that all history is based on memory. For example, diaries are a commonly used source for many important events, like Samuel Pepys' diary which provides key insight on the Great Fire of London. His Diary is a first hand testimony of the Great Fire of London, The Great Plague and other major events at the time. He was also close to the King which meant that he had real insight into what was actually happening politically. Narratives such as his are very helpful and provide crucial information about what actually happened despite being a conflation of historical facts and memory. The Diary of Anne Frank is another example of this. Her diary gave historians and readers around the globe an unparalleled insight into what a Jewish girl's life was like hiding during World War Two. Her diary is used as evidence for what happened during that time but, like all diaries, is solely based on her memories of the events that she witnessed. This, therefore, is an example of how history has been conflated with memories. Her memory of events was combined with historians' knowledge of incidents at the time to add to the picture being built in order to make sense of what happened. This is what sources are used for: to fill in the missing pieces.

If one combines memory and history then one doesn't always know if the bigger picture will be correct. However, if you don't combine them than perhaps there will be major parts of history that we will never be able to study in depth. This said, if there are multiple parallel accounts about the same event with very similar details than it should statistically be at least partially correct. For example, there are many individual accounts surrounding Kristallnacht that all have a similar theme to them, thus providing a compelling narrative for what actually happened. The accounts may not all be correct but the broad idea of them all combined should provide a reasoned historical overview of the event. For example, see Jane Ulman's article (2014) which has lots of different accounts all detailing very similar events. Another example of where memories are most important is whilst studying spontaneous and unusual events that don't leave a physical aftermath like the Peterloo Massacre.

In order to complete the bigger picture and piece together our knowledge of the past, however, the two might have to be considered together. It might be possible to sift through the fact and the fiction once the basic knowledge of events has been systematized from indisputable facts. Once a groundwork is laid out the more subjective sources can be evaluated, giving room for sorting through the sources. This technique, for example, is used when looking at Battles. There are always many different accounts of what happens, ranging from the written word to paintings. Not a single one of these sources can be accurate as they all originate from a memory. Even if the writer is sitting down watching the battle and writing what they see, they are bound to miss something as they can't be looking everywhere at once. This is where history and memory become impossible to not conflate as the entire selection of sources for the event are derived from memory. The only knowledge that one can have about the actual events rely on these sources. Artifacts such as weapons can only tell of what weaponry was used, not the tactics or outcome. In more modern periods of history it is possible to have a film or voice recording of an event. These are obviously going to be entirely accurate

technically, however the context that they might be put in could be wrong as there will always have been events off camera that will have been important.

History and memory inevitably appear side by side whenever one tries to look at the past so whether it's necessarily wrong to conflate the two is debatable. It may not be ideal to have the two combined when trying to sift through the facts but surely it's not actually a bad thing. The possible confusion that could be created might be risky but at least there is the possibility that some part of the past could be understood better. However, if this view that is created is completely wrong and incorrect then surely it would have been better to have never combined the two. Therefore the possibility of interpreting the past completely incorrectly makes unconsciously conflating the two wrong in itself as history is complicated enough without the added aspect of misleading oneself just because one decided to try and rush the process. However if you consciously conflate and are careful about how you combine and reference sources and examine context then historical studies could be more illuminating and valuable.

Bibliography:

The Diary of Anne Frank, Anne Frank (1947)

Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction : An Example of the Interaction Between Language and Memory. E.F Loftus and J.C Palmer (1974) *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour* 13, 585-589

The Aeneid, Virgil

History of Rome, Livy

The Letters of Pliny the Younger (Penguin Classics), Pliny (translated by Betty Radice) (2003)

The Diary of Samuel Pepys, Samuel Pepys

Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony, Mark Roseman (1999) *The Journal of Holocaust Education* 8:1, 1-20

Witnesses to Kristallnacht, Jane Ulman (2014) *The Jewish Journal* 6th November Edition

The Long History of Memory, Katharine Hodgkin (2018) *History Today Magazine* (online)

History, Memory, and the Law: The Historian as Expert Witness Author(s): Richard J. Evans (2002) *History and Theory*, Vol. 41, No. 3 , pp. 326-345