

Putin: Historical Commentator

This has been a winter of discontent with both the past and the present, and the two have merged. An improbable person, Russian President Vladimir Putin, has offered a stimulating comment on the issue, especially helpful for present day demonstrators in universities.

The world has been horrified by the barbarities of ISIS, the Islamic State, in destroying historic monuments of the past in Iraq and Syria. It has been surprised by the number of disturbances calling for the removal of monuments to or even memories of past controversial figures both in universities in South Africa, Oxford, and elsewhere, and in areas of the United States. At Oriel College, Oxford, Cecil Rhodes its founder has been condemned as a racist, but he was also an 19th century imperialist who believed in modernity and progress in his own time.

Memories of the past are reflected in the present climate of political anger. Statues of individuals once respected are now seen as symbols of discrimination and oppression. The southern U.S. states in increasing numbers try to eliminate those symbols. The Confederate battle flag was removed from the pole at the South Carolina statehouse grounds on July 10, 2015. The statues of Jefferson Davis in the Kentucky Statehouse in New Orleans, and at the University of Texas, Austin, have been removed. The 60 foot statue of Robert E. Lee in New Orleans may be removed.

The problem with all this is that history cannot be unwritten or erased when people change their minds or a group emerges that is critical of past behavior. As the Cambridge classicist Mary Beard remarked, the drive to erase the statue of Cecil Rhodes from Oriel College, which he funded, is a dangerous attempt to erase the past.

Do we see Thomas Jefferson as a “racist rapist” rather than the writer of the Declaration of Independence? Do we see Arthur “Bomber” Harris, head of RAF Bomber Command, who carried out devastating raids over Germany in World War II and destroyed Dresden on February 13, 1945 where 25,000 were killed, a murderer or a hero? A bronze study of him, placed in 1992 outside the RAF Church of St. Clement Danes in central London, has been damaged from time to time.

Everyone now knows that Putin has become a major and highly controversial player in the Middle East and in international politics generally, and that he is attempting to restore the role of Russia.

Whatever one thinks of Putin as a wily politician and military strategist, he made an interesting contribution to the issue of honoring prominent honored but highly controversial figures. They can be seen as symbols of the prevailing values of their times, but all of them were responsible for atrocities, violence, and deaths. Shall their memory be erased because of the horrors they committed, or should it be kept as reminder of all their activity and useful for historical understanding?

Putin in his press conference on December 19, 2013 touched on an unusual aspect of this discussion of which historical figures should we reject because of their actions and opinions that were commonplace in their own time but that are now unacceptable to contemporary western societies and modern thinking.

Putin choose a strange pair. Stalin who ruled the Soviet Union for 28 years, and Oliver Cromwell ruled as Lord Protector in Britain for few years, 1653-58. But both were ruthless rulers and killers and shrewd in exercise of power.

Why Putin asked are there no statues of Stalin when there are statues of Oliver Cromwell, (actually one) and Cromwell was

just as much a bloody dictator as was Stalin? Cromwell was, Putin argued, a cunning fellow who played a very controversial role in British history. The statue erected in 1899 of him, sword in hand, is still standing outside the Houses of Parliament. No one said Parliament was going to remove it. We must, Putin continued, treat all periods of our history with care. It's better not to stir things up with premature actions.

Indeed, whose statue and memory should go and who should remain? Cromwell, a tall, well-educated intensely religious Puritan, led the Parliamentary Army in civil war against King Charles 1 who was overthrown. More than 50,000 Royalists, supporters of the king, and 34,000 Parliamentarians lost their lives. Cromwell then created a republic, ruled as Lord Protector and was one of the 59 who signed the death warrant of Charles who was executed on January 30, 1649. He was also a commanding figure who ended the monarchy, created a Commonwealth, ended for a time the House of Lords and the established Church.

Queen Elizabeth II, in spite of this regicide of her ancestor, is not likely to call for the removal of Cromwell's statue, but many others have a case. Cromwell acted brutally not only towards those with whom he disagreed on religious reasons, such as the Levellers whom he attacked and executed in Burford Church in Oxfordshire, as well as Catholics. He also was ruthless in his war against the Irish, and massacres in Drogheda in September 1649 and Wexford in October 1649, where more than 300,000 died, about 20 per cent of the Irish population. He was also responsible for the sack of and massacre of Catholics in Dundee, Scotland in 1650.

Josef Stalin, "man of steel," short, with face scarred by smallpox and with clubfoot, was one of history's great killers. Estimates of the numbers he killed range from 20 to 50 million.

Stalin was honored with statues in nine countries, including the U.S. They have been removed after the end of the Soviet Union but some Russian hardliners would like them restored, as well as the statues of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the brutal founder and head of the Soviet secret police, GPU and Cheka. A large monument to the latter, "Iron Felix," located in 1958 near the KGB headquarters in Moscow, was removed by protestors in August 1991. However, in June 2015, the Moscow City Council allowed residents to decide whether the statue should be restored to a square in central Moscow.

Putin, in a speech in 2007, asked the Russian people not to forget the events "that began in 1937." He was alluding to the time when Stalin executed more than 700,000 people and imprisoned more than 1 million. Lenin was apparently more acceptable, though most but not all of his statues have been removed, as has the name of Leningrad. Ironically, it was Stalin who altered the past by erasing the figures of his political rivals especially Trotsky from all photos.

Who is offended by the existence of the statues and should they be destroyed? London is graced or disgraced by the Albert Memorial and Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square. There may be a strong argument for pulling them down on aesthetic grounds, but not political ones in spite of objections to British 19th century imperialism. This objection occurred with Lord Nelson in Dublin as a protest of an English admiral being celebrated in central Dublin. The Nelson's Pillar, built in 1809 to honor his victories, was damaged in March 1966 by a group of IRA dissidents and then destroyed.

We cannot rewrite history or try to do it. The protestors and boycotters are wrong to attempt to do so. The three alternatives are clear. Keep the monuments intact in spite of criticism of the honoree. Remove them if the offence is so great that it is unforgiveable. Keep them but with an accurate explanation of the activities, honorable and critical, about

the individual, "warts and all" as was said about Cromwell, so that all can understand the full life of the person. This last is the wisest solution.

Happy is the country that needs no heroes. Repugnant though Cromwell may have been, he did offer good advice to the protestors and would be destroyers of statues at Oriel College Oxford, Oberlin College, Ohio, and other institutions. In Scotland in 1650 he made an appeal to protestors: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken."