

THE USES AND ABUSES OF HISTORY
BY MARGARET MACMILLAN
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One thing that unites all people regardless of their current place in the world is their history and their past. Another similarity that unites them is the tendency to distort the past for their own ends. Every country and every nation have their own myths which have become the cornerstone in their establishment and progress. The misuse of history is most dominantly done by ideologies and their creators as a tool in justifying their work.

The author of this book is Margaret MacMillan, who is a Canadian historian most notable for her work on the Versailles conference of 1919, which she mentions more than once in this book. MacMillan's understanding and insight into history and national identity are brought out in this book, where she points out mythical roots of some of today's most problematic national and ethnic questions. While history should, in its essence, be all about the search for truth and while the historian should be seen as the seeker of facts, to MacMillan historians are commonly at odds in their pursuit for truth with numerous indi-

viduals and groups that are interested in representing history in such a way that it serves to inspire feelings of national pride. History is used selectively for political agenda.

Even though the book's title is 'The Uses and Misuses of History', the author focuses primarily on the misuse of history. Ms Macmillan starts the book with a short introduction to the 'history craze' that is prevalent in today's societies and the use of history as a comfort. For her, history is a comfort if approached responsibly and healthy, especially if it leads to repentance in societies struggling to deal with past horrors. Ms MacMillan continues by exploring the state of history as a science and its practitioners, professionals as well as amateurs. She points out that professionals have descended into unnecessary theorising and frequently presenting their research in an obscure language, thus excluding the public from their work. In this process, historians have then left an opening for amateur historians who have taken on the mantle writing semi-professional works sometimes with

doubtful results.

The bulk of Ms MacMillan's book is based on her criticism of the misuse of history and its idealisation by people. She attributes this to either willing full misuse or in some cases the negligent approach, which leads to false information and knowledge. She covers topics from the American war on terror and China's approach to its nation building efforts, as well as the national problems in Europe in the 20th century and India's nationalistic tendencies. For all these topics, Ms Macmillan tries to give their roots in history and the problems and controversies that surround them.

Furthermore, she delves inside the problem of history in Canada, her home country, and their approach to their past, especially focusing on the history of the Second World War and two events that were controversial, in the least to say.. The first is the CBC documentary entitled *The Valor and the Horror*, which discusses the effectiveness and morality of strategic bombing. Some 20,000 Canadian airmen had participated in these actions, with half of them ended up being killed.. To the survivors, anything other than the representation of their struggles and efforts being represented as 'black and white, good and evil' is an outrage. The second controversy regards a plaque dedicated to the very same airmen, which is an insult to all those who served in the Second World War. These two controversies led Ms MacMillan to claim that history should not be written in order to make people feel good but to be a reminder that human affairs are complicated. She also criticizes the whitewashed views and an unhealthy

approach to their respective troubled past by China, Japan, Israel, Russia, India, as well as by the United States with regard to its South.

While Ms MacMillan's new book is rather brief, she gives a glimpse of historical narratives being used in the last couple of decades. As previously mentioned, she focuses on the misuse of history and the effect of a toxic approach in understanding and approaching the past, with the final product being a truncated history that has its unwelcomed parts shortened and the favorable parts put on display and centred around by the people misusing history for their gain. This is, in part, magnified, since history is consumed by society which uses it fairly regularly, and if history is not checked upon and is left to people who are not able and well versed in the necessary skills, then history is prone to corruption either by negligence or by deliberate malice. Not all is glommed in the book, and the author shows in the last chapter how history could be used as a guide in clearing up the present. All in all, this book is a fairly good foundation for every aspiring or would-be historian since it shows what happens when the past is not approached with care.