Chapter Six

A ‘History of the Present’: Reflections on the Representation of History in Peace and Conflict Research

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“You have to come early to buy a newspaper. Come late and you’re buying history.”

Introduction

In a thought-provoking introduction to his book History of the Present (2000), which tellingly bears the sub-title: ‘Essays, sketches and dispatches from Europe in the 1990s’, the historian, Timothy Garton ASH comments how, in his experience: ‘Most academic historians are still reluctant to venture much closer to the present than the canonical thirty years after which official papers are released in most democracies’, and he comments on how they are still inclined to leave the history of our own time to colleagues who have made it their own in subjects such as International Relations, Political Science, Security Studies, European Studies or Refugee Studies (Garton Ash 2000: xxv); to which list, one may readily add Peace and Conflict Studies. Whilst agreeing whole-heartedly with Garton Ash’s observation, I would add that in my own experience, it is usually those historians who have embraced interdisciplinary areas and approaches who are more likely to engage in

1 Comment by the lady selling newspapers in the Student Shop, University of Derby, when I arrived too late to buy a copy of The Guardian on Monday, 18 September 2006.
researching a history of the present than their more traditional, archive-bound, mono-disciplinary colleagues.

This chapter is based upon my personal reflections, as a historian of contemporary Europe, on the representation of our own time and the importance of history to Peace and Conflict Research. As such, I have divided the chapter into two sections. In the first section I will define what I understand to be a history of the present and contemporary history as discrete but related branches of the same discipline. I will then explain the relationship of history of the present to journalism; after which I make an observation on the relevance of both a history of the present and contemporary history to peace and conflict research in general. In the second section, I will demonstrate some of the problems and pitfalls that may be encountered in the representation of the history of the present and contemporary history, and I will assess the responsibility of the historian of the present – by considering the relative merits and demerits of attempting to apply the so-called ‘lessons of history’ to our understanding of the past and the present.

Lacking in hindsight but abundant in insight! Defining the history of the present

Situated within the broader framework of contemporary history, the expression a ‘history of the present’ is relatively new in British academic circles, although, as we shall see, the actual practice is not. The expression was first given wider coverage by British historian Timothy Garton Ash, in his book of the same name (2000), although he attributes the first use of the term to the diplomat and historian, George Kennan, who had first used it in a book review describing Garton Ash’s work on Central Europe in the 1980s, in which Kennan was placing emphasis on the practice of combining history with journalism. The French, by contrast have been using expressions such as L’histoire du temps present, l’histoire vécue and l’histoire en directe since at

2 The book in question was Garton Ash’s The Uses of Adversity (1990), which was republished by Penguin in 1999.
least the 1970s; and in 1980, the well-known and prestigious Paris-based Institut d'Histoire du Temps Present (IHTP) was formed out of the former Comité d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale, under the direction of French historian, Henri Michel, as part of the CNRS.³

One of the first things that one needs to appreciate is that writing or representing a history of the present requires the same level of discipline and analytical training that is normally associated with the work of a conventional historian, in a bid to take a neutral position in evaluating one’s own time. It is this level of analysis which differentiates history of the present from journalism and reportage. Where a history of the present differs from more conventional history, is that the historian of the present is working on the cusp of the historical process, dealing with events as they unfold. History of the present is ‘real-time history’, in which the historian of the present works without the benefit of any of the hindsight that is normally the advantage of all other forms of historical representation.

At this point, it is worth considering a more conventional interpretation of what we may now refer to as a history of the present, which at one time was interpreted as the first stage in the process of writing twentieth century history, or the ‘first draft of history’. Writing at the end of the 1960s, one British historian, Donald Cameron Watt, divided what he then termed twentieth century history into four stages (WATT 1970: 62-75):

a) The stage of journalists, politicians, soldiers and pundits, alongside those ‘revolutionary-minded academics who often operate outside the bounds of their own discipline’. For Watt, this period of writing is full of ‘polemic and prejudice’ and had gained a ‘dubious reputation’.

b) Fifteen years after the event - the first wave of university teachers, who provide the first narrative through their lecture courses.

c) Thirty years after the event, when the public records and national archives are opened.

³ The CNRS is the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique. The journal Revue d’histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale would be renamed Les Cahiers de L’HTP.
d) Fifty years after the event. When the issues are no longer polemical and a topic can be fitted into the whole history of a period. In a contemporary context, in 2006/7, the attention currently being given to the Suez Conflict, the Hungarian Revolt, or the granting of independence to India and Pakistan, fifty years after the events, provides good examples of this.

Clearly, Watt is disparaging in his assessment of the first fifteen years of historical representation, whose practitioners are likened to a bunch of pirates, asset-strippers and other undesirables. Unfortunately, nearly forty years on, many historians continue to share this view, albeit erroneously. Nevertheless, Watt does highlight one interesting point, and that is that the historians of the present usually have to borrow from other disciplines to give greater depth to their work. Furthermore, in all fairness, writing in the late 1960s, Watt was not able to take into account the tremendous technological advances that have taken place over the past forty years, in all branches of communications, with a particular emphasis, in the past fifteen years, on the greatly increased level of access to information that has been made possible by the World Wide Web. It is these changes that have completely changed our appreciation of recent and current historical interpretation that have given greater legitimacy to what can now be truly termed a history of the present.

Before we go on to consider these changes, let us consider the term ‘history of the present’. At first sight, the term ‘history of the present’ might appear to be an oxymoron, or a complete contradiction in terms. How can you have a ‘history’ of the time that you are living in? In this context, emphasis should be placed more upon the actual professional discipline of history, rather than any actual temporal sense. But this does raise one other question: Where is the hindsight, normally required by historians?

For me, this is the essential difference between the history of the present and contemporary history, for, what the historian of the present may lack in hindsight (with regard to the ‘thirty years rule’ etc.) he/she can make up for with insight. It is this use of insight that is key to my argument in favour of the history of the present as a ‘serious’ form of history. History of the present
is, at its simplest level, history without the hindsight but with the insight, and it is this that makes it different from all other forms of history, and necessitates also that the historian of the present borrows methodologies from other academic disciplines, so that the historian of the present may become the true son or daughter of Herodotus, the father of all historians.

Given that a history of the present borrows from other academic disciplines in a bid to develop and deepen insight, it would, therefore be wrong to consider that the history of the present merely replaces what a previous generation once referred to as Current Affairs, or even what has been pejoratively described as Current Affairs or journalism with footnotes.

So, a new approach to history of the present which is much more positive and presents this branch of historiography in a more professional light than that expressed much earlier by D.C. Watt, is made possible by the greater availability of sources and improved accessibility to the political leaders and the ‘movers and shakers’ of our time.

These changes are due to:

a) The growing use of the Internet since the early-to-mid 1990s.
b) Being able to stay in touch with people across frontiers, during times of conflict.
c) Media, video and television coverage – the positive side of the ‘CNN effect’.
d) The publication of memoirs by key political figures, as soon as they leave office, and
e) Greater access to political leaders, given the decline of deference in recent years.

Let us illustrate these five points with some examples. Firstly, consider the use of the Internet, which has both enabled us to stay in touch with people across frontiers, during times of conflict, as well as gaining immediate access to sources as events unfold. This phenomenon was first noted by Chris
HABLES GREY (1997) in his *Postmodern war: the new politics of conflict*, in which he demonstrated how from the Gulf War in 1991 to the wars of secession in the so-called ‘former’ Yugoslavia (1991–1995), computerisation and related scientific advances had brought about a revolution in warfare. Although he concentrated on the effects of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), Hables Gray also demonstrated remarkable insights into the role of Internet communications across borders, particularly in time of conflict. He illustrated this point by reference to the Chiapas/Zapatistas in Mexico, and how the Chiapas had been empowered by internationalising their cause through international networks provided by their access to the Internet.

This theme of empowerment through the Internet in time of conflict has taken up in an article demonstrating how, during the conflict over Kosovo, in 1999, the Serbian intelligentsia and counterculture groups were able to communicate with the outside world (HUDSON 2002: 129-50). The Kosovo conflict has since been described as the first Internet War (IGNATIEFF 1999), when, for the first time one could communicate with the enemy whilst one’s own state was engaged in military operations against the enemy. This contrasted with the complete disruption of communications in previous conflicts, when the mail and telephones normally had been cut, as the state literally imposed its control over all communications.

Access to the Internet allows us to analyse events for ourselves, as they happen, without the direct interference of other commentators and interests. Consider how, in September 2006, we witnessed Pope Benedict’s speech at the University of Regensburg that sparked off a furore in Islamist and fellow-travelling circles. The difference between the representation and reception of an issue of this nature, by contrast to our reception of news events fifteen or more years ago, is that we were able to access directly the Pope’s speech on the Internet and reach our own conclusions as to whether or not the Pope had insulted Islam.

With regard to media and the use of video recordings, it may similarly be noted how key political figures, whether negotiating at peace conferences
or playing out their roles as active participants and key agents in government and society, are interviewed at the time that events are unfolding. A good example of this is provided by the B.B.C. television documentary Death of Yugoslavia by Laura Silber and Alan Little (1995/6), where throughout the six-part series, all the key Yugoslav leaders and some of the key events were captured on video as they unfolded. This documentary was later shown to Serb audiences in the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, after the war as part of the process of post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation.  

To give a United Kingdom perspective on the publication of memoirs by key political figures, consider recent media developments in the UK – in September 2006 - when the tapes of the former Home Secretary, David Blunket were published in book format and serialised in The Guardian, at the same time that former prime minister Blair’s spokesman, Alasdair Campbell made interesting revelations on the early years of the New Labour government in the media. Both authors shed a light on the tensions within the Labour government over the whole debate over whether or not to go to war over Iraq in the run-up to the onset of hostilities in 2003.

These examples all serve to demonstrate the interrelationship between the history of the present and journalism, the media and reportage. Though their professional approaches are clearly distinguishable, they both, nevertheless, rely upon each other.

History of the present can also be described as the ‘history of the living and the breathing,’ as ‘experiential history’ or ‘real time history’. You write up or represent the events at the time that they are happening or very shortly afterwards. This is what one of my French colleagues in contemporary history, used to refer to as the j’y étais (‘I was there’) school of history in his classes on the Second World War or the Wars in Indochina and Algeria. Also, with the

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4 It would have a devastating impact in helping members of the Serbian intelligentsia re-assess the role of the FRY government, and its military, alongside the deeds of paramilitaries, and key participating actors from the Republika Srpska (Bosnian Serb Republic).

5 Professor Michel Denis, former President of the Université de Rennes II – Haute Bretagne and Directeur d’Etudes at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques (Rennes).
insight of a society or culture rather than the historical hindsight that underpins the history of the present, one can more readily visualise events that have taken place because one has already been there and knows the places and organisations or has spoken to the individuals that were involved in these events. 6

Being a historian of the present often requires fieldwork, and conducting interviews rather than working in the ‘dusty’ archives normally associated with the work of the more conventional historian. Indeed, to some extent one works very much more like an anthropologist, or even a journalist, than a ‘traditional’ historian.

People think of history of the present, as a history of our own time and they think of Contemporary History as post 1945 (post 1940) history, though Geoffrey Barraclough, writing in the early 1960s described contemporary history as a history that: ‘begins when the problems that are actual in the world today first take visible shape.’ (BARRACLOUGH 1964: 20). We should perhaps view both contemporary history and the history of the present as moveable feasts, given that a history of the present, like contemporary history, does not really describe any particular period, but rather a style of writing, an epistemology, a way of thinking and organising our knowledge.

For example, Theucydides’ History of the Peleponnesian War serves as both a contemporary history and a history of the present, yet this book was written in the 5th century BC, two and a half millennia ago. What makes this work a history of the present is that Theucydides was not only writing about events that took place in his time, but that he had also served as a general in the Athenian army in the war against Sparta, and was therefore directly

6 In my own work on the former Yugoslavia and its successor states, I have been able to draw upon my own knowledge, for example of: The Hotel Intercontinental in Belgrade, where I stayed on several occasions in the second half of the 1990s, and the hotel foyer where Arkan was assassinated in 2000; similarly I remember the RTS studios in Belgrade, which I had visited in 1997 and 1998, which would be bombed by NATO in 1999; or of my visits to Studio B and B92 which were focal in the opposition to the Milošević regime. Likewise I think of ‘snipers alley’, the streets, markets, and the National Library, in Sarajevo, a city in which I had lived in as a post-graduate student on a scholarship from the Yugoslav government at the end of the 1970s. Knowledge of the terrain was very useful when it came to teaching and writing about the wars in the former-Yugoslavia, over the past fifteen years.
involved in the events that he wrote about. The same criteria may be applied to Winston Churchill, who not only played a crucial role as Britain’s Prime Minister in the Second World War, but also got to write about it as the long-time acknowledged official historian of the Second World War, in the late 1940s.

The historian of the present should have a deep knowledge of the culture of the area that he/she is researching and representing. This involves the insight, and this is given more credibility if the historian knows the language(s) of the area concerned and has mastered other disciplines, such as literature, or anthropology, politics and linguistics.

It may also be observed that when a crisis or a conflict begins, there is a thirst for information about the area concerned, in a bid to search for and root out the historical/cultural causes of the current problem, crisis or conflict. One British historian, Arthur Marwick, noted the sudden resort to history books on Eastern Europe in the 1980s and he made reference to the instant popularity of God’s Playground, a two volume history of Poland, by Norman Davies, which was published at the height of the Solidarity crisis in Poland, in 1981. Indeed, many historians have been turned into instant media celebrities, when crises concerning their areas suddenly flared up, and MARWICK (1993) comments on how: ‘Quite possibly some obscure young man, grittily pursuing his PhD, with a dissertation on ‘Population Movements and Social Change in Old Tajikistan found himself famous overnight’.

Another problem of this process of desperately seeking information to explain the origins of a sudden crisis or conflict is the knee-jerk resort to old and outdated histories. We saw this in 1991, when a plethora of books dating back to the period 1913–1918 was re-published on the Balkan Wars and the fighting in Serbia, Albania and Salonika by the Serb Army as well as a raft of travelogues on the Balkan Peninsula that dated back to the 1860s. The dangers of this kind of re-publishing of old works was that it helped fuel a lapse into essentialism, Balkanism, ‘othering the other’, and a resort to the ‘blood-drenched earth’ and ‘centuries of ethnic hatred’ school of writing, that
became so popular amongst some journalists (and some academics too) back in the early 1990s, of which Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts* (1997) provides a typical example of the genre.

**The relationship between the history of the present and journalism/reportage**

When journalism is bad, it is described as being too academic and when history is bad, it is described as being too journalistic! (GARTON ASH 2000).

Yet, some of the very best journalists make excellent and natural historians of the present; notable examples in the United Kingdom are: Misha Glenny, Noel Malcolm and Tim Judah – who as journalists wrote extensively on the Balkans; produced landmark books; read history at university level, and were conversant in the languages of the people whom they wrote about. Then I think of Robert Fisk, with a doctorate in Irish History, who regularly contributes to *The Independent* and in my mind had produced some excellent reportage (indeed, history of the present) whilst based in Belgrade, during the Kosovo Conflict of 1999, to say nothing of his more recent work on Iraq. Then there is Timothy Garton Ash, the Oxford historian who sits astride the two disciplines of history and journalism and regularly contributes to the *New York Review of Books* and *The Guardian*.

I now want to present you with a historical example that would seem to demonstrate well the differences between producing a history of the present and writing reportage. My example concerns three particular writers of the early twentieth century, who were all active during the period of the First World War: R.W. Seton- Watson, Bernard Pares and John Reed. Yet, whilst I would not hesitate to describe retrospectively both Seton-Watson and Pares as historians of the present, I would consider Reed to have been a journalist who produced reportage.
Robert Seton-Watson had widely visited Eastern and Central Europe before the First World War and had met most of the key political, nationalist and intellectual figures in the region. He played a formative role in the formation of the new post-war states of Eastern Europe (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Poland) and would set up the School of Slavonic Studies and East European Studies at the University of London, in 1915, where Tomáš Masaryk, one of his acquaintances and founder of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, in 1918, would fund one of the School’s first chairs.

Bernard Pares had visited the Revolutionary Peasant Congress, in Russia, in 1905. He visited the Russian front-line in Galicia, in 1915, from where he was able to provide invaluable information on the condition of the soldiers in the trenches. Like Seton-Watson, he would be a father figure of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, and during the Second World War he served the British Government by helping to develop and improve Anglo-Soviet relations. Both of these men were good, solid, reliable historians who ‘lived their times’ and wrote authoritatively about them.

Then, we have John Reed, a journalist and key figure in the foundation of the United States Communist Party. He is the author of *Ten Days that shook the World*, which has been described as: ‘one of the most influential pieces of reportage ever written.’ (GARTON ASH 2000). Note the use of the word ‘reportage’. Furthermore, we also learn that Reed spoke virtually no Russian and that he: ‘…regularly made up dialogue, offered second hand accounts as first hand, mixed up dates and added imaginative detail.’ (ibid.) Whilst another Historian, Neal Ascherson adds that Reed: ‘…gives a thrilling account of Lenin’s appearance at a closed Bolshevik meeting in Smolny on 3 November, allegedly communicated to him outside the door by Volodarsky as the meeting went on. *No such meeting took place.*’ (ASCHERSON 1996). [my emphasis]. So, Reed has not presented the truth. His eye-witness account loses its objectivity and credibility. He has betrayed history. Reed’s account underlines the absolute need for both historians and serious writers to understand the language of the culture and society that they are writing about. As Garton Ash puts it: ‘The first thing to ask of anyone writing about anywhere
is, does he or she know the language’ (GARTON ASH 2000: xxi). This in my opinion is an essential prerequisite for any historian of the present, and it is this lack of language ability, coupled with a failure of deviating from the truth in his writing and a lack of care in the authenticity of his sources which precludes Reed from being categorised as a historian of the present.

**Thoughts on the relevance of history of the present and contemporary history to Peace and Conflict Research**

The relationship between Contemporary history, ‘history of the present’ and peace and Conflict Research, seems, to me, to be self-evident, to the extent that it would be practically impossible to engage in Peace and Conflict Research without a fairly solid grounding in history; even at the very simplest level of understanding the past to explain how we get to the present. That this is so, is borne out by the flow of memoirs and histories by generals, political leaders, contemporary commentators and historians who have played a part in conflicts or engaged in post-conflict resolution from classical times (Theucydides, Caesar, Josephus, Tacitus and Procopius *inter alia*) through to the present. As recently as 2004, one political scientist, E. Newman re-emphasised that: ‘It is important for social scientists, and especially scholars of international relations, to embrace historical narrative in their research’ (NEWMAN 2004: 186).

I think that this relationship between history and Peace and Conflict Research is also well summarised in the following quotation by the well-known British historian, Arthur Marwick, in a paper, written in 1993: ‘Wherever the glorious events, wherever the crises, wherever the killings, the circumstances giving rise to them lie in the past: inevitably, in trying to comprehend them, we turn to the historians and their histories.’ (MARWICK 1993: 107).

And writing in the same year, in a similar vein, James Gow commented:
In the 1990s, Yugoslav studies and Security Studies, have much in common. Most of the burning issues in the field of contemporary security studies are focused on the disintegration of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. The burning of the buildings and bodies in parts of the territory which comprised that state are a security concern in themselves and, in a range of ways, will be the focus for Yugoslav, or Post-Yugoslav (or however the region becomes known), studies for a long time to come.

(GOW 1993: 169).

Of course, at the time of writing, Gow was absolutely right in his assessment of the interrelationship between ‘Yugoslav Studies’ and Security Studies, or Peace and Conflict Studies, with or without the benefit of hindsight. But, as a word of caution, the historian should never attempt to predict the future. Obviously, from the position of hindsight, we can see how this relationship between studies of the Yugoslav successor states and Peace and Conflict Research would only be short lived, and how, in the aftermath of the events of ‘September 11th’, ‘Yugoslavia’ would soon be knocked off the agenda by the so-called ‘War against Terror’ or the ‘Long War’ and its concomitant conflicts in Iran and Afghanistan.

SECOND SECTION

The potential problems and pitfalls that may be encountered in the representation of the history of the present and contemporary history

Living through events can be an advantage because of accumulated personal knowledge, lived experience and insight into events.

Yet, on the other side of the coin, this can also prove to be a disadvantage, because, by the very fact that one has lived through the events, one might not always be best able to judge the lasting significance of those events, and there can be distortion in how we see the importance of specific details within the wider context. For example, in 1981, at the height of what
we now refer to as the ‘second Cold War’ (we didn’t use that expression at the time). There was the general concern in ‘the West’ (a term that is no longer in vogue) that Poland might be invaded by the Soviet Union, based upon recent experience of the Brezhnev Doctrine in practice, namely, what had happened in Hungary, in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia, in 1968. Similarly, in the late 1970s there had been a concern that Yugoslavia might suffer a fate similar to that of Czechoslovakia, on the eventual demise of President Tito. Yet there were to be no Warsaw Pact invasions because of the debilitating effect that the Soviet entanglement in Afghanistan, since 1980, was having on the Soviet Army, to say nothing of the state of the Soviet economy at the time. Against the background of the Cold War, who in the ‘western Europe’ (another archaic term) of the early 1980s would have foreseen that the United Kingdom (which we then referred to as Great Britain) would have gone to war against Argentina over the Falklands/Malvinas? The upshot of this is that we cannot, in the present time, anticipate what historians will say in the future. Nor should historians of the present ever attempt to predict the future.

This brings to mind a broadcast by Alan Taylor, in the mid-1980s, when he predicted on television that the Cold War could only end with the resort to the atomic bomb. In another television history documentary, broadcast in 1991, Norman Stone, stood in front of the television camera, on a Black Sea location. The Hymn of the Soviet Union played softly in the background as Stone predicted that the USSR would continue for many years to come. Remember, he was speaking in 1991!

The historian of the present is confronted with another obstacle, closely related to the absence of hindsight, namely the lack of perspective. Something important at the time seems insignificant in the long term, when we know what comes after the event. So we need to stand back a bit, otherwise there is a danger of concentrating on the wrong factors.

Consider how we were subject to distortion and manipulation during the Romanian Revolution, in 1989. I was teaching in a French university at the
time and I well remember the shock of images on French television, on 23 December, of a dead naked woman photographed alongside her dead baby, exhumed in a hospital compound; the implication being that mother and baby had been killed in the rioting, presumably by members of the Securitate. These images by Romanian cameramen were beamed across Europe, and they hardened peoples’ attitudes to the Ceaucescu regime; perhaps making it easier for international public opinion to accept the execution of the Ceaucescus, two days later, without too much question of conscience, not realising that their execution denied the Romanian people the kind of transparency and reconciliation that was so essential for the reconstruction of their country in its post-communist aftermath. A couple of months later we would learn that the body of the supposed mother was that of a woman that had died of cirrhosis and was not related to the baby, who had been still born.

The Cold War had ended and we found ourselves in a state of limbo during the early years of the post-1989 transition period in Eastern and Central Europe. Scholars were looking for different ways to explain the new condition. Inter alia, We had The End of History (1992), by Francis Fukuyama, implying that there was a return to ‘history’ or earlier narratives, such as nationalism and religious and cultural identities; The Clash of Civilizations (1993 & 1997) by Samuel Huntington, that seemed to advocate deeper ethnic hatreds and divides in the world as though these cleavages were lines carved in stone across Europe and the rest of the world, and Democracy without Enemies (1998) by Ulrich Beck, implying that democracies actually need enemies to sustain their own identities. All the old frameworks and terms of reference, based on a bi-polar cleavage between two competing economic, social and political systems, seemed to have disappeared, almost overnight.

Another problem of commenting upon one’s own period, of living through a sequence of events, is that we can often lack objectivity. In the absence of official records, there can be an over-reliance on eye-witnesses, each of whom has their own axe to grind and their own variations of the truth to tell, boosting their own egos and placing themselves in a better light along the way.
Furthermore, later events can distort and colour our understanding of events as they happened. A good example of this is provided by Winston Churchill’s epic six-volume history, *The Second World War*. David Reynolds has analysed this clearly and skilfully in his masterly work, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (2004). Reynolds comments that when it came to both diplomacy and defence, Churchill, writing retrospectively, in the aftermath of the Second World War, and informed by the events of 1940, distorted the events of the 1930s and, at times, his own part in them. The following statement is quite revealing:

Since the archives were opened in the 1970s, it has become clear that British policymakers discerned a potential three-front threat in the 1930s. The menace of German airpower at home was combined with Japan’s challenge to British interests in Asia and with Italy’s threat to Egypt and the Suez Canal. Japan was, in fact, the initial concern after its invasion of Manchuria in 1931, and this provided the spur to British rearmament. Although the revival of German power took precedence after Hitler became Führer, in 1936–7 it was the combination of Mussolini’s empire-building in Abyssinia and the Spanish Civil War that preoccupied ministers. Not until 1938, with the Austrian Anschluss and the Czech crisis did Germany return to centre-stage. Even then policymakers could not forget that from July 1937 Japanese and Chinese forces were locked in a major war across eastern China.

(Reynolds 2005: 100)

The point to all this is that in the first volume to his History of the Second World War, Churchill all the time concentrated on events in Germany and only occasionally commented on the far East and the fighting between China and Japan. Elsewhere, in this volume, the events of the emerging Cold War colour Churchill’s reflections on diplomacy with both the United States and the Soviet Union, and with regard to the former, Reynolds comments that: ‘After Lend-Lease and the Marshall Plan, it was hard to recall the suspicion in
1930s Britain about American isolationism’ (REYNOLDS 2005:103). Otherwise, throughout his work Churchill avoided offending world leaders such as Tito and de Gaulle. This was done to avoid offending men who still mattered in current diplomacy (REYNOLDS 2005: xxiv). Churchill’s stormy relationship with de Gaulle has already been well-catalogued since the ground-breaking work by KERSAUDY (1982) on de Gaulle, Churchill and Roosevelt at the beginning of the 1980s, although rather less has been written about Churchill’s tense relations with Tito.

Indeed, this relationship has traditionally been portrayed in a rosy light that focussed on the switch from supporting Mihailović and his Četniks to supporting Tito’s Partizans in 1943. This friendly relationship was perpetuated by the pro-Titoist narratives of Fitzroy MACLEAN (1949) and Phyllis AUTY (1970). So it comes rather as a surprise to read of comments made in December 1944, in Churchill’s unpublished correspondence to Sir Anthony Eden, that in Tito: ‘we have nursed a viper’ and ‘he has started biting us’ (REYNOLDS 2005: 461). So why has the Tito-Churchill relationship always been presented in such a positive light? The current thinking is that Churchill’s representation of Tito was heavily influenced by post-war diplomacy and that when he was writing his volumes ‘Closing the Ring’ and ‘Triumph and Tragedy’ between 1946 and 1955, because Tito had already been ostracised by Stalin in 1948, Churchill represented him as a quasi fellow-traveller with the West. (REYNOLDS 2005: 410-11) Reynolds also argues that the sudden switch from supporting Mihailović’s Četniks to Tito’s Partisans, which was not welcomed by the Foreign Office at the time, may be attributed to his knowledge of German signal traffic, which could not be mentioned in post war years, because of the need to keep Ultra (British breaking of German signal traffic) secret until long after the war. The Foreign Office did not have access to Ultra.

Historians also need to handle newspapers with care. Whereas newspapers can provide the historian with an indication of what was being said and thought at the time, and this can be very valuable to the contemporary historian’s representation of the past, it must be noted that
great care must be taken in our handling of newspaper sources, otherwise they can sometimes distort our image of the particular period that we may be researching. Should a misreading of the past also be based upon an erroneous historiography, this can be quite disastrous.

One example of such an erroneous historiography may be provided by how we view the French wars of decolonisation between 1945 and 1962, with specific reference to Algeria and Indochina. The traditional interpretation of the Algerian War has been that it was a natural continuation of the war in Indochina; effectively another stage in the wars of decolonisation that involved the same people, the same values and the same methods. This was an idea that was presented in the mid-to-late 1950s and a view that is still widely held today. So, for example, one can read of this sense of continuity (‘la même guerre qui continue’)\(^7\) written by a contemporary writer, Jean Lartéguy, in his epic novel, *Les Centurions* (1960), whilst as recently as November 2005, the journal *Modern and Contemporary France* contained a book review which comments upon: ‘...the ineluctable elision of the Indochina War to the Algerian War where the same personnel reappear, to the echo of the same ideological themes...’ (MAJUNDAR 2005: 504). Certainly, the names of those fighting in both wars are, in many cases the same, as are the names of those who opposed both wars. Against officers such as Bigeard, Massu and de Bollardièrè, may be ranged the names of the same opponents to both, wars: Bourdet, Simon and de Montvalon inter alia and the same journals, *Les Temps modernes*, *Temoignage Chrétien* and *Esprit*. However, the problem with this ‘it’s the same conflict’ approach is that it gives a seemingly natural interpretation to the continuation of practice in an almost seamless web, so that one might begin to believe that the same policies and conduct in the war

\(^7\) At the end of the first part of *Les Centurions*, the key protagonists in the book, officers who had been prisoners in a Viet-Minh camp after the fall of Dien-Bien-Phu in May 1954, who would later serve again as paras in Algeria, are returning home to France by ship. They are docked in Algiers, on 11 November 1954, ten days after insurrection had broken out. One of the junior officers, Lieutenant Boisfeuras, comes out with the comment that ‘It’s the same war continuing’. He is rebuffed by a Major in the Zouaves, who argues that conditions are totally different from Indochina, only to be rebuffed in turn, by Boisfera’s commanding officer, Colonel Raspéguy who supports his subordinate Lieutenant Boisferas, adding that people are already talking about the situation in Algeria as ‘tomorrow’s war’. Jean Larteguy, *Les Centurions*, Presses de la Cité, Paris, 1960, p.165-166. With hindsight the Zouve major was quite right in his historical assessment of the situation, though he would be open to disdain from these fellow-officers in the novel.
in Algeria were being used earlier by the French in Vietnam. This is a syllogism of course.

Furthermore, this idea of continuation can very easily be pulled apart, just on detail

- Algeria (technically) was not a colony, (at least from a French perspective) therefore technically, the war in Algeria was not a colonial conflict.

- The proximity of Algeria to France, made a big difference to French public opinion by contrast with the vast distance of 8.000 miles between Indochina and the French Metropole.

- The FLN was not a communist organisation, unlike the Vietminh. Therefore, the war in Algeria was not a key product of the Cold War, unlike the re-assment of the war in French Indochina, in 1950, following the outbreak of the war in Korea, when some commentators saw Indochina as the second ‘hot’ front of the Cold War.

- The war in Algeria required the use of conscript soldiers (the contingent) unlike the war in Indochina, which had relied on volunteers and professional soldiers – this meant that almost every family was affected by the Algerian conflict, unlike that of Indochina.

- There was a large European population in Algeria, this was not the case of Indochina.

- The war in Algeria was technically a police operation, and therefore police methods were employed. Indeed *La guerre sans nom*\(^8\) was not referred to in official circles as a war, until a recent decree passed by President Chirac in 2002.

\(^8\) The reference here is to ROTMAN & TAVERNIER (1992), which is based on the four hour documentary of the same name which enabled veterans of the ‘war’ in Algeria to give voice publicly to their experiences for the very first time.
But the real danger of this approach, of saying that the war in Algeria was the continuation of the same conflict in Indochina, is that it might lend support to a belief that all the methods used by the military in Algeria were first employed in Vietnam, and within this framework lies the peril of falling into the trap of believing in the existence of similar police measures that included the systematic use of torture by the French Expeditionary Corps. Returning to the newspapers, this viewpoint is actually supported by the contemporary French print media, especially when one resorts to reading certain key journals of the Left wing, fellow-travelling press in France from the period 1949 to 1950, where a series of eyewitness accounts were published, alleging that the French Expeditionary Corps engaged in the systematic use of torture. But it is only when you go to the archives and court cases against the editors of these journals that you realise that the whole torture issue was closely linked up with the propaganda battle being fought by the PCF (French Communist Party) against both the war in Vietnam and also about the re-arming of Germany and the European Defence Community (EDC). Hence, a total misrepresentation of France’s recent colonial past.

Although the wars I have referred to might be defined as belonging to contemporary history, rather than the history of the present. It must be remembered that the current debate over French actions in Algeria, namely public admissions by participants of the use of systematic torture is being widely discussed currently, and is highly sensitive and has repercussions in France today. To some extent this has been exacerbated by the introduction of the loi du 25 février 2005 (since repealed following a huge protest by historians) which insisted that school teachers and university lecturers put a positive spin on French colonialism. It would not be unreasonable to add that the unrest in France two years ago was in some way due to dissatisfaction over the representation of France’s recent colonial past.
The responsibility of the historian of the present when confronted with the ‘lessons of history’

The responsibility of the historian is to expose myth and false analogy, and it is the historian who has the expertise to do this. (WARREN 1999: 147). The creation of myths and false analogies may be encountered when journalists and politicians give voice to the so-called ‘lessons of history’. Yet, such a process can lead to sloppy thinking, truly lazy journalism and poor political analysis. Certainly, many politicians and journalists have believed and continue to believe that such lessons may be learned. More often than not, references and false analogies are based upon comparing present-day crises and political developments with problems in the not too distant past. Consider the constant references in contemporary political discourse to Hitler, Pol Pot, Munich, the Holocaust and Suez. A good example of this process was demonstrated during the conflict over Kosovo, when, in reference to the forced evacuation of Kosovar Albanians from that region, and the alleged systematic murder of men and boys from the age of 5 to 60, the American journalist, Roger Lippman commented: ‘These crimes are comparable to the Khmer Rouge destruction of Cambodia, the Serb destruction of Bosnia, or the U.S. in Vietnam’ (LIPPMAN 1999), and he added that Milošević had ‘instituted a brutal occupation very similar to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.’ (Ibid.), commenting that:

The ‘socialism’ of Milošević is akin to the dehumanisation, ethnic chauvinism, forced evacuation, and mass murders of civilians characteristic of the ‘socialism’ of Pol Pot, or the National Socialism of Germany. (LIPPMAN 1999: 7)

Clearly, Lippman the journalist was resorting to the utmost hyperbole in time of international conflict, and it would seem as though he wanted to have his cake and eat it. However, not only were his comments ‘over the top’, but they also were full of historical and political errors. For example, Kosovo was, then, as ‘Kosmet’, an integral part of the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, therefore no occupation by the Yugoslav Army had taken place. No genocide
of the Kosovar Albanian population ever occurred, and clearly Milošević was no Pol Pot, whilst the regime in Belgrade could never be described as National Socialist. Indeed, such a misrepresentation of contemporary history would fly in the face of the sufferings inflicted as a result of the axis invasion and occupation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, in 1941, when civilian deaths during the Second World War, numbered 1.4 million and accounted for 10 percent of Yugoslavia’s pre-war population (JUDT 2005: 17-18).  

Further examples of this kind of gross distortion of history have been provided by this conflict over Kosovo, when President Clinton compared Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević’s campaign of ethnic cleansing with the holocaust. Similarly, UK Defence Secretary, George Robertson commented that:

…the UK could not stand idly by while ordinary families were wiped out…. We must learn the lesson of the early days of Hitler. Had we stood up to his tyranny early, the course of history might have been very different.

Why do politicians and journalists resort to these terms and analogies? Probably because these themes themselves have become symbolic name tags, terms of reference that will provoke a knee jerk reaction in the minds of readers, viewers and listeners. Furthermore, for politicians, they serve their purposes as propaganda. Whilst from a media perspective, these analogies can simply be described as lazy, polemical journalism of the worst kind. Of course the previous few examples might also serve as examples of political manipulation, rather like the British government’s claims about WMD in Iraq.

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9 JUDT comments that Yugoslavia lost 20 percent of its vineyards, 50 percent of all livestock, 60 percent of the country’s roads, 75 percent of all its plough and railway bridges, one in five of its dwellings and a third of its limited industrial wealth.


11 Source: Kosovo Crisis Center http://www.alb-net.com/kcc/051399e2.htm, updated at 4:10 pm on 13 May, 1999, accessed on 29/07/06.
as a *casus belli* and the report that appeared, in September 2002, claiming that Iraqi missiles could be launched against the UK in 45 minutes.

Henry Kissinger provided some interesting insight on this theme, when, writing in April 1999, he commented that: ‘finding a solution to the Kosovo crisis must begin by rejecting false analogies to the traumas of the past.’ And he added that:

The president has invoked historical analogies or current threats that are extremely dubious. Where he does injury to history: Slobodan Milošević is not Hitler but a Balkan thug, and the crisis in Kosovo has no analogy to the events preceding World War 1.\(^{12}\)

And, finally on this issue, Martin McLaughlin, provides an interesting article entitled: ‘What really has happened in Kosovo’, on the World Socialist Web site:

In the US-NATO assault on Yugoslavia, accusations of genocide in Kosovo play the same role in the propaganda war as cruise missiles and cluster bombs in the air war. The claims that Serbian troops and paramilitary forces are slaughtering thousands, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanians, the invocation of the Holocaust – all these serve as weapons, if not to convince, at least to intimidate public opinion.

The purpose of this propaganda, whose tone has been set by the Whitehouse, is to block any critical thought or even serious reflection on the part of the American people about the mushrooming conflict in the Balkans. The hysterical comparison of the events in Kosovo to the Nazi death camps – which reached their peak in the claims by some US officials that as many as 500,000 Albanian men were unaccounted for – demonstrates the extreme weakness of the political position of the

Clinton administration, which has been unable to find any rationale for the bombing except these wild and unsupported allegations.

Now, clearly McLaughlin has his own axe to grind, but at least he is attempting to redress the balance from the hysteria of the time. It revolves around the old chestnut as to which came first, the expulsion of the Kosovar Albanian population or the NATO bombings.

As the above examples have shown, many political mistakes can be made by resorting to false analogy and ‘learning the lessons of history’. The examples of learning the ‘lessons of Munich’ or the ‘lessons of Suez’ provide the final example in this section, and the need for the historian to redress the balance. Let us return to Donald Cameron Watt’s choice of Suez, in his commentary on the role of contemporary history, referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Suez is particularly interesting at the time of writing, as these are events that happened fifty years ago and are currently receiving considerable media attention in the United Kingdom as we commemorate this turning point in British history.

According to the process of writing and researching contemporary history, enunciated by Watt, work on Suez today has entered the final stage of writing history, that of historical re-evaluation, when the crisis can be fitted into the whole history of the 1950s and the post-war period. Most interestingly, Watt adds: ‘Only then can one begin to say that it has really been seized by the historians and abandoned by the polemicists.’ (WATT 1970: 64) Yet, ironically, in the media, comparisons are being made between Suez and the current debacle over Iraq, although it is in assessing the impact of Iraq rather than that of the Suez crisis that the polemic has been focussed. Nevertheless, after fifty years, hindsight has fully kicked in, and we can see how the humiliating abandonment of the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Suez, signalled a turning point in Britain’s retreat from empire and ensured that London would never again attempt global military action on its own, without first seeking the green light from Washington.
Of course, historians have known, for some time, thanks to the advantage of hindsight, that the former British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden, in an attempt to learn from the ‘lessons of history’ had made a huge gaffe, when he compared Gamal Nasser to Adolf Hitler, and the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, in 1956, to the situation in Czechoslovakia and the Sudentenland in 1938. The upshot was that Eden feared that Nasser’s appeal to Arab nationalism would undercut Britain’s position in the Middle East, and Eden worried about the fact that Nasser had accepted Soviet arms, at the height of the Cold War (NYE 1993:142). But, Eden had clearly misread the so-called lessons of history, by reading into the situation the dangers of appeasement over Munich, and referring to the mistake that his predecessor, Neville Chamberlain had made in 1938 that led to the Second World War. What Eden had ignored was the impact of the colonial legacy that and its concomitant grievances in the mind of Nasser, given that the British had only left Egypt just two years previously.

And as if the reference of learning the lessons of both Suez and Munich will not go away, it is currently being argued that the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair had been making similar mistakes recently by evoking the ghosts of the past when he claimed, just a few days before the invasion of Iraq, that he could not endure the ‘shame of appeasement’ (reference once again to Munich) and that Britain would face a ‘living nightmare’ if it appeased Saddam Hussein. Thus Blair too, had succumbed to that most dangerous affliction of political leaders, that of misreading the lessons history. Although Saddam may have been a dictator, he was no Hitler. Richard Norton-Taylor picked up the argument of Blair’s fear of appeasement in *The Guardian* on Wednesday, 12 July 2006, and made other parallels between the invasions of Egypt and Iraq, drawing the conclusion that Blair may be seen by future historians as the ‘Eden of our time’ in what Norton-Taylor referred to as another Middle East crisis of the West’s own

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13 To what extent was Eden’s view of this influenced by Churchill’s representation of the Munich, appeasement and Chamberlain in ‘Gathering Storm’, his first volume of The Second World War, which had been published only a few years before Suez, in 1948?

14 I remember that this same comparison was mistakenly made in the popular media, back in 1991, in the run up to what we now refer to as the ‘First Gulf War’, but in the 1990s was referred to more simply as the Gulf War.
making. However, *caveat emptor*; the historian should never attempt to predict the future!

**Conclusion**

History, and particularly the history of the present, plays an integral part in the study of peace and conflict. What this chapter has set out to achieve is to outline some of the key issues confronting the historian of the present who is engaged in peace and conflict research. In this paper, I have defined the expression ‘history of the present’ as a discrete, but related branch of contemporary history. I have shown that what differentiates history of the present from journalism *per se* is the level of analysis employed and the need to take a neutral position and non-polemical stance in evaluating the events of the present. Often, the historian of the present will have to borrow from other disciplines so that the essential difference between a history of the present and contemporary history is the historian’s insight rather than their reliance upon hindsight, and this is often based upon their language awareness and a deep understanding of the cultures that they are analysing. More times than not, the historian of the present will work in the field rather than in the archives, and will also rely upon new technologies and advances in the media and information technology. All of these factors, alongside considerable training in the field of contemporary history make the historiography of the present an indispensable tool in the field of peace and conflict research.

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