
ISIS (Re)Writes History

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HISTORY, WE ARE OFTEN TOLD, IS WRITTEN BY THE WINNERS. MODERN STATES AND PEOPLES ARE THE PRODUCTS OF SUCCESS; HISTORIANS SEEK THE ORIGINS OF THEIR GLORY. The victors make it easy: they leave voluminous records and they ransack the records of those they have defeated.

What would history written by losers look like? It would look a lot like the history that the Islamic State is writing now.

Islamic history has a good amount of winning in it. Not only did medieval Muslim armies conquer lands from Spain to India, but Muslim traders spread the religion still further into the Far East and Southeast Asia. For centuries, Islamic math and science led the world, and Muslim scholars helped preserve the manuscripts of antiquity. Renaissance scholars relied on them as they rediscovered ancient Greece and Rome.

This winning is not central to the historiography of the Islamic State. The group's followers swim in a sea of victimhood, resentment, and vengeance, and they luxuriate in paranoia and xenophobia. The group's central organizing truth is not about the power Muslims hold but instead the power that Muslims have lost. Grievance motivates them, and it is precisely the group's abject weakness that drives and legitimates its most barbaric acts against symbols of global power. If one looks at the Islamic State's videos, a single theme is overwhelming. The Islamic State desperately seeks equivalence to infinitely stronger and more capable foes. Its imagery is all about promoting feelings of agency among its fighters; often it is accompanied by an effort to enfeeble a symbol of some hostile force.





The Islamic State did not invent the instrumentalization of history. Saddam Hussein reveled in the symbolism of Babylonia, and the Shah of Iran sought to tie himself to Persepolis and the empire of Cyrus the Great. Benito Mussolini sought to rebuild the glories of Rome, and Ataturk moved Turkey's capital from cosmopolitan Constantinople to the Anatolian heartland in order to engender an "authentic" Turkish identity.

What the Islamic State is doing is different, though. It is more like Adolph Hitler's reliance on—and sometimes invention of—Aryan history to inspire and guide a modern society. Common to both projects is the passionate marriage between a utopian social vision and a conspiratorial worldview—a society locked in endless battle against myriad enemies. The utopian vision inspires, and enemies help preserve solidarity. History helps bind the two.

But it is a certain kind of history at play. Real history is chaotic, messy, and full of ambiguity. Its lessons are hard to discern, when they can be discerned at all.

The history peddled by these groups is different. It is streamlined, possessing a clear moral objective and a clear enemy. It not only projects legitimacy on its adherents, but it connects them to an eternal truth. Groups use this kind of history to grasp at immortality. In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, the scholar Svetlana Boym discusses how history can permit the "transformation of fatality into continuity." Everyday acts can be sanctified because they are invested with the spirit of lost generations. Each generation struggles to remain as true to its ancestors as the preceding generation did, despite the temptations of innovation and modernity.

Some of these traditions have shallower roots than one might suppose. More than three decades ago, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger gathered a series of spectacular nineteenth-century efforts to weave modern traditions from the threads of historical evidence. Perhaps most colorful example was the Victorian effort to create a unified Scottish culture full of kilts and proprietary clan tartans. The truth was

much more of a muddle, involving cloth merchants and a rising sense of Scottish nationalism.

Adherents to the Islamic State are engaged in a spectacular act of invention, seeking to dress their mod-

ern-century society of pious believers. They are gathering the dispossessed and disaffected to an invented homeland that strives to provide certainty, intimacy, and empowerment to a population that feels too little of any of them.

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ern reign in ancient garments. They insist on the timelessness of what they claim to be ancient and holy customs, and they harshly punish those who depart from those customs. But are those customs really ancient and holy? One of the most visible symbols of Islamic practice, women's veiling, certainly is not commanded in the Quran, and it is largely an interpretation of the privacy afforded to women in the Prophet Muhammad's family.

Did the Prophet Muhammad lash his followers for smoking cigarettes? He couldn't have, as cigarettes were invented more than 1,200 years after his death, and tobacco itself did not come to the Middle East until 950 years afterwards. Bans on television, recorded music, soccer games, and the like all reflect innovations.

What the Islamic State is, in fact, is a wholly modern movement that seeks to be ancient. Like the photo booths in tourist towns that produce sepia-toned photographs of contemporary subjects in period clothing, its wink toward the present is part of its appeal. Its followers are not recreating a holy sev-

There is little use quibbling with their distortions of history, which are too numerous to mention. Instead, what is risible is their solemn use of history at all. This group is wholly modern and wholly innovative. It is wholly disruptive, as it seeks to be. Its followers should not be ennobled by their purported connection to history.

Western governments and their allies in the Middle East should not fall into the trap of seeing the Islamic State and its like as groups hostile to modernity. Instead, they should highlight how truly modern these groups are, and how selective they are in their readings of history. They do not guide their followers back to the well-worn path of tradition, but instead blaze a new trail of confrontation with the rest of the world.

Stripped of their historical costumes, we can see them as they are: the angry and the weak, praying on those even weaker than themselves.

There is glory to be found in Islam. It is not to be found in them. □