

Thomas Hunt History Extension Project

Question

To what extent is historical negationism dangerous? Discuss the impact of 'The Myth of The Lost Cause' into contemporary times.

Synopsis

*"Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."
-George Orwell*

Whilst studying HSC Modern History and English, specifically Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany and '1984' by George Orwell, it became apparent to me the miscellaneous methods collectives employ to promote an agenda, and 'rewrite history'. A common theme is the group's need to impose their ruptured perspective of prior events, while seeking control, economic and socio-political gain. The term historical negationism entails a falsified historical rewrite in interest of contextual pursuits. Invading popular culture, dominating the media, infiltrating legal systems, education, and religion have all been proven ways of propelling negationism into popular history. These actions show a different approach to history; a malleable intangible able to be manipulated to fit one's desires. This essay will show the dangerous effects of falsifying history, propagating only one perspective in popular history, and the purpose of these practices.

'Traditional' objective history provides an unaltered ordered recount of events, however is incredibly difficult, with context repeatedly impeding on perspective, as heavily present in this essay. With regard to historiography, this essay will focus explicitly on, "approaches to history changing over time", and "purpose of history" as I evaluate the contextual motivations behind historical negationism, and how dangerous it has been for history as a whole.

The essay's focus is the 'Myth of The Lost Cause', a narrative promoted by the Southern states of America, attempting to rewrite the American Civil War from their perspective. My interest for American Civil War history was ignited by my year 11 history investigation assignment, since I have a background knowledge in this area, I pursued this question. The Lost Cause is unique, it's not a result of totalitarian governments or largely powerful collectives. Coined by Edward. A. Pollard in 1866, the myth arises after the South lost the Civil War in 1865, attempting to safeguard the Southern reputation, and revitalise it's social status and economic situation, severely harmed by their reliance on the institution of slavery, abolished Dec 6th 1865. The myth depicts the romantic trope of the Southern 'heroic' soldier only losing due to being outnumbered by Northern troops, the cause of the war not being slavery, and that slavery was just. This myth made it's way into America's popular history of this event by the same methods aforementioned, an interpretation still leaking into contemporary times, which is extremely harmful to the nation's pride, morality and African American cultures.

By completing this task, in a broader context, I have learnt the necessity of objective history, crucialness of critical thinking, the measures which enable falsified history to be accepted, and the importance of maintaining an accurate 'popular history'. This essay will evaluate how negationism has infected America's popular history and the motives of falsifying history. Whilst outlining the requirements of history, the extent to which it can be interpretation, and discussing the immense dangers to communities, society, humanity's future, and the concept of history itself.

Glossary

- Antebellum- before Civil War
- UDC- United Daughters of the Confederacy
- BLM- Black Lives Matter
- Secession- Withdrawing from the Northern Union

Essay

In the extent that historical negationism pierces the popular sphere, it's an extremely dangerous misuse of 'history'. It's found in groups with contextual motivations, specifically the Southern promoters of the 'Lost Cause' narrative, who utilised methods commonly seen in totalitarian regimes to dominate popular history. Whilst considering the validity of negationist history, concerns arise entailing if it can be considered history, and the extent to which history can be interpretation. Nevertheless, negationist rewriting of history is extremely dangerous to the omitted groups at subject, and injecting these falsities into public belief, can still inflict harm even in the 21st century. The only acceptable history is that of objective nature, falsification poses danger to communities, the concept of history itself and humanity's future, especially at the hand of powerful collectives.

Historical negationism entails the deliberate falsification of the historical record to pursue a political agenda. The American Civil War stretched from 12 April 1861- 9 April 1865, just one year after, the Myth of the Lost Cause emerged, a clear case of historical negationism. It's tenet's;

1. States' rights caused the war, not slavery.
2. 'Heroic' Southern soldiers lost by being outnumbered.
3. Slavery was 'just'.

These can all be easily dispute as they bear no connection to reputable evidence, and the context that Southern states were reliant on the institution that had been abolished by the 13th Amendment (1865), evident in antebellum writings. Confederate General. Early stated "During the war, slavery was used as a catch-word—war was not made on our part for slavery" (Early, 1866), contradicting the vice president, Alexander Stevens' cornerstone speech, asserting "African slavery—was the immediate cause of the late rupture—violation of the laws of nature" (Stevens, 1861). Furthermore, when South Carolina seceded from the Union in 1860, it's reasoning was the "increasing hostility on the part of the non-slaveholding States to the institution of slavery" (Little, 2017). Thus, proving the negationist nature of the myth of the Lost Cause, these tenets have been falsified, psychologically damaging African communities.

Historical negationism is not a valid form of historical scholarship. It's very nature opposes Elton's belief that history must be objective; 'reclaimed' from "those who use history to support myths. Historians must relentlessly pursue truth, even if they gain no solace from doing so" (Elton, 1967). Not fulfilling this, will lead to contextual bias impeding interpretation. Resultingly, falsification negatively impacts the omitted endlessly, alike the Myth's threats. Jenkins, a postmodernist believes a "consensus is only reached when dominant voices can silent others" (Jenkins, 1991). Differing historical interpretations always arise, however, historical negationism is not a valid form of historical scholarship due to it's objectivity-rejecting nature. Generally, the historian's role is to objectively present findings, engage in dialogue with scholars and the public, meaning history must be based in academia. Southern 'historians', namely Phillips and Nelson Page, have published works containing; "plantations are 'a school for civilisation' for enslaved people", and 'theories of lynching, rape and race' respectively (Graham, 2020). Although academia-based, a Southern context drenches the aforementioned claims, rupturing African American communities. Page even provides statistics, but makes falsified statements, "lynching is not likely to cease until—murdering women and children is less frequent—wholly confined to the Negro race" (Page, 1904). An academic making such claims enables the spread of harmful stereotypes to African American communities.

Pollard, who coined the phrase 'Lost Cause', doubted whether "slavery—properly applied to that system of servitude in the South—in the interest of human improvement" (Pollard, 1866). Although

not fitting the historian title, being a pro-slavery journalist, his work as a 'history-maker' encapsulates a defeated contextually biased southern voice with romanticist ideals deluding his interpretation. Du Bois effectively combats the myth in 'Black Reconstruction in America' (1935); "the facts of American history have been falsified—South was ashamed because it fought to perpetuate human slavery", "propaganda like this" is where we need to "point out the danger in...misinformation", it was "morally wrong—to build human slavery...in the eighteenth century—many Americans North and South said it at the time" (*D.Bois, 1935*). McPherson, born in 1936, lived in Minnesota, published 'Battle Cry of Freedom', receiving the 1989 Pulitzer Prize. He wasn't impacted by context, and claims the Civil War started due to "uncompromising differences between free and slave", and strives to "cut through—those myths, get closer to—reality" (*McPherson, 2000*). All though objectivity is incredibly hard to achieve, an attempt is still a necessity for the historian, to avoid the dangers historical falsities create; to omitted African Americans, and history itself.

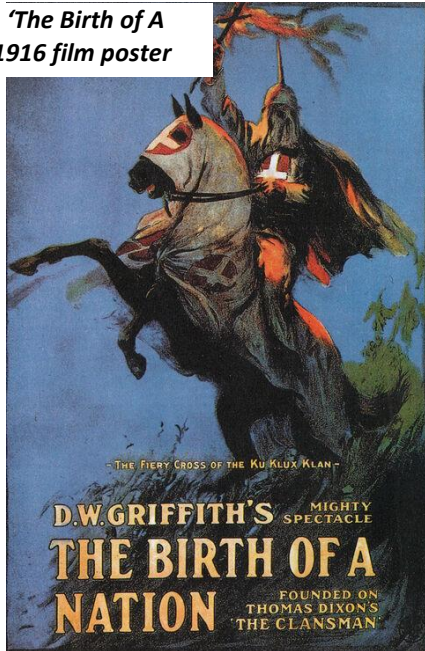
The contextual motivations of historical negationism can be seen across all groups desperate for power. The Southern agrarian economy depended on the abolished institution of slavery, which became increasingly frowned upon by improving social values, as mentioned in "The South had lost more than just the war; its identity, social structure, livelihood, and willpower" (*Davis, n.d.*). Characterised by a struggling economy, losing \$2 billion USD to southern planters, minimalised national government control, poor infrastructure. The romantic narrative allowed a further economic battle with the North; tourism to confederate plantation vs the designation of holidays and support for the southern monuments. The myth was a "restoration" for the south, providing a new identity and enticement for defeated followers; "guidance for anxieties—capitalism, mass immigration, urban life—courage of confederate soldiers used for motivation—plantations as 'pastoral idylls' uncorrupted by hurried pursuit of wealth" (*Graham, 2020*). The purpose was to unite the fallen Southern community in order to benefit economically and socio-politically. To achieve these goals, the UDC and aforementioned 'historians', continued to propagate the myth, but due to it's harmful nature to African communities, there was an inherent, urgent yearning to be debunked to protect communities and history. If not proven untrue, historical negationism in the clutches of ruthless totalitarian regimes make Orwell's '1984' seem not so far-fetched.

The danger of historical negationism becomes amplified through all-pervasive methods to convert false narratives into 'popular history'. These changing approaches to constructing history consist of creating propaganda, invading popular culture, geography, legal and educational systems. The UDC "created a memorial, intellectual landscape that dominated public life" (*Graham, 2020*), by erecting monuments of Southern war 'heroes'. The Stonewall Jackson monument was erected July 21st 1861, in honour of a Confederate General. Another negative impact of popularised negationism, this bronze statue stood for decades, influencing audiences to respect the Lost Cause, until it's removal on July 1st 2020, after BLM protesting against the symbolic lack of freedom and justice African Americans had (*Helsel, 2020*).

Pro-slavery Southern 'historian', Miss Mildred Rutherford developed state-wide policies for textbooks in her 1920 'Measuring Rod' text. The requirements; "every textbook on history—should be tested by those desiring the truth"—"scrawl 'unjust to the South' on the title pages" of any "unacceptable" books (*Yacovone, 2023*). For Northern publishers to keep their business, they had to appease the Lost Cause narrative, and reinforce it, "increasingly the Southern version of events— influenced how and what Americans learned no matter where they lived" (*Marquez, 2018*). Scates' 1936 textbook, 'A School History of Tennessee' stated "southerners stood firm upon the doctrine of states' rights—held that slaves were property—could be taken like other property" indoctrinating the youth with falsities. The Children of the Confederacy was a group created by the UDC, designed

to indoctrinate children, by actively participating in this false history, via call-and-response ‘truths’ from “Confederate Catechism”, spreading the myth for generations, inevitably harming African American communities (Vox, 2017). Indoctrinating youth has also occurred in totalitarian regimes; Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.

Griffith's 'The Birth of A Nation' 1916 film poster



Rampant propaganda elevated the myth’s legitimacy. The myth dominated popular culture, ‘Birth of a Nation’ (1916) characterised African Americans as sexually aggressive, the root of all evil, whilst showcasing the ‘heroic’ Ku Klux Klan saving white women, brandishing confederate iconography. It achieved national distribution in its release year, was screened at the white house and was seen by nearly three million people (Pfeiffer, 2023). The film was based on ‘The Clansman’ (1905), whose author, Dixon romanticised the group, stating "I believe that Almighty God anointed the white men of the South—led by the Clansmen...to demonstrate to the world that the white man must...be supreme" (Leonard, 2022). The effect of this popular culture invasion caused the re-emergence of the KKK ‘Second Klan’, now adopting confederate flags and promoting white supremacy, reigniting the racial separation a century before, an extremely damaging impact of historical negationism, as a hateful collective arose, determined to terrorise these communities.

Propaganda is an incredibly powerful weapon, the all-pervasiveness of confederate iconography creates an ‘illusory truth effect’ (Ann, 2021), further placing the Lost Cause at the forefront of America’s popular history. Whitman Wire compares this to ‘1984’, “Orwellian social order—propaganda without historical fact liberally employed to keep citizens docile—historical negationism is a tool employed by groups...to reach...partisan goals” (2017), highlighting the danger of these methods. Historical negationism is most dangerous when elevated into popular history. “They say that history is written by the victors—Civil War has been the rare exception” (Laselle, 2015). Laselle illuminates the precise actions of myth-promoters to effectively disrupt popular history via propaganda. If the defeated, backward Southern states were able to alter America’s popular history, coincidingly omitting African Americans horrifically into contemporary times, one can only imagine a totalitarian regime doing the same.



Encyclopedia Virginia, Human Confederate Flag Postcard created 1907, by Pratt Cook, a primary example of the rapid spread of the Lost Cause

Historical negationism has an increasing negative impact on communities and history itself. Owsley states “(the myth) has been attacked only recently, ie. civil rights movement. It’s not dead—less popular because of identification with racism—can only suspect that it will rise again” as it has “gained such widespread acceptance” (Owsley, 1974). A valid prediction, as this negationism has now become ‘popular history’ by irreversible methods.

Hale, in 'The Lost Cause and the Meaning of History' (2013) depicts the contemporary experience of living in Southern state Virginia, whilst also teaching civil war history. She states "bits of the past pierce the present in ways both startling and routine", discussing the impacts of the falsified myth; uncertainty around Civil War events, 'Lost Cause' promotional contradictions, harm towards African Americans, re-emerging civil war racial separation. She entails that she saw "an African woman waving—confederate flag...in front of the Virginia museum of fine arts". A member of the omitted community perpetuating it's principles, a remarkable impact of negationism. Hale continually proves Owsley's theory ie., "the White Citizens Council used confederate versions of the past in it's opposition to African American equality".

The re-emergence of the KKK is one of the worst impacts of this specific historical negationism. The group is still influential, "July 2017 torchlight parade of Klansmen marching through Charlottesville chanting, 'Jews will not replace us.'—Lost Cause-parallel movements' militia are with us" (Heim, 2017). The march resulted in one death, dozens of injuries, and an abundance of hate-fuelled white supremacist worldviews influenced by confederate iconography. The Charlottesville incident represents the devastating impacts to the omitted African American culture in the Lost Cause's embedded historical prevalence. Further, "black worshippers in South Carolina, expressed racial sentiments close to Nelson Page" (Graham, 2020). In 2015, a 21-year-old inspired by confederate white supremacist ideology committed a mass murder in an AME Church, where 9 African American lives were lost, the tenth one injured. Sharon Risher, the daughter of a victim states "They welcomed him in—killed them like they were animals" because of 'who they represented' (Elliot, 2020). Because of the Lost Cause' continual prevalence and omitting nature, these atrocities have occurred.



Jefferson Davis Memorial, Richmond, VA, 2017. Photo from David Streever

Confederate monuments are still erected, continuing the myths propagation, although 73 monuments were removed in 2021, 723 still remained (CNN, 2022). The UDC are still active, it's President, Widowski states "Our members—have spent 128 years honouring their memory—in the fields of education, history and charity, promoting patriotism, good citizenship. The UDC totally denounces any group that promotes racial divisiveness or white supremacy". However this contradicts the intentions of erecting the monuments originally, to promote the myth, in effect omitting Africans. Various BLM protests have demanded more monuments be removed, "I would say all that blood is on their hands—will continue to be until they—take these monuments down, be a part of actual racial justice" (Little, 2018). Cox depicts the UDC's true intentions, "The UDC's silence

in the face of rapid social change speaks volumes about the organization's decline and changes in the American South" (2020). Positively, museums are evolving to reflect interests of social historians, taking African American history seriously, but only after harsh social pressures.

The irreversible damage to historical recollection can be explicitly seen. In a Washington Post-SSRS survey conducted in 2019, only 52% out of the 1,025 American Adults, believed slavery caused the civil war, representing a lack of truth and a prevalence of the myth even in the 21st century. Further, 34% of 34,000 Americans thought the Confederate Flag means heritage rather than racism (*Sanders, 2020*), enhancing the Myth of The Lost Cause's attractiveness. Historical negationism when ruthlessly forced into popular history eradicates any truth that was present beforehand, damaging the fortifications of history.

To prevent the danger that historical negationism causes, development of the criteria of what makes 'positive' history is to be made. History must be true, it's purpose must not be for any contextual motives, and must attempt to be objective. No matter how hard this may be, the historian must be dedicated to provide only what happened in events. Richard J Evans discredits negationist 'historians', "Reputable, professional historians do not suppress parts of quotations from documents that go against their own case—amend...accordingly—assess all the available figures—don't wilfully invent incidents and events" (*Evans, 2001*).

To protect history, communities, society, and the future, historical negationism must be eradicated. All emerging false narratives must be debunked, like the opposition to the Lost Cause. Propaganda must be monitored, false histories must be censored. Social media must be tracked to be true. School syllabuses must be objective and teach students to think critically. Academic objective historians must prevail.

Rewriting history isn't dangerous, it's negationism that is. True revisionism is positive, it allows more knowledge of the valid voices of history that are ignored or unknown. Biased rewriting with an agenda is what creates danger for the future. The Lost Cause Myth is only one example, other groups have used the same methods to infiltrate popular history, having the same damaging effects.

Historical negationism is an extremely dangerous purpose and approach to history, especially when elevated into popular history. It undermines the fortifications of objective history, and continues the unequal nature of it's original promoters, censoring the targeted communities. The Lost Cause myth has harmfully impacted the African American community, distorted the 'popular history' of the American civil war, rupturing not only communities but society, and history itself. Objective history must be maintained, no matter how hard of a feat. If we let our historical integrity disintegrate from our grasps and into higher powers, alike the Orwellian state of Oceania, our intellectual sovereignty will not ever be reclaimed, as we lose all fabric of reality.

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