

**International History Initiative [IHI]
The Historical Commissions Project
Of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs**

MISSION STATEMENT: IHI will promote the use of historical commissions as potential component of transition and conflict resolution, underscoring the need to come to terms with the past. The role of historical commission is to complement the work of tribunals and truth and reconciliation commissions. IHI inquiries will attune to particular historical situations, since no single instrument can cover the various needs of communities to come to terms with their difficult and contested pasts.

Executive Summary

The International History Initiative [IHI] aims to establish how and in which kinds of cases historical commissions can best contribute to reckoning with contested pasts in order to strengthen peaceful coexistence in the wake of conflicts and massive human rights abuses. IHI will bring together local and international historians to write new, “negotiated” histories of conflicts with particular reference to those issues which are the most politically contested and virulent. IHI sees historical commissions as potential components of transition and reckoning with the past that can complement the work of tribunals and truth and reconciliation commissions, as no single instrument can cover the various needs of communities to come to terms with their difficult and contested pasts. “Negotiated” histories can add an important layer by providing a mechanism for historians from both sides of a dispute, together with outsiders and, when appropriate, third and fourth parties to the conflict, to engage each other in establishing a narrative that is sufficiently detailed and rich that it can be recognized by both sides. The outcomes of the project are the process of engagement itself, the new narrative which would emerge from a successful historical commission, and the public dissemination of IHI’s findings. The public side of IHI is integral to the historical research and analysis. Its goals are to disseminate the results widely, and to engage public intellectuals, politicians, educators and selected media. IHI will aim reach out to educators and publishers to enable and encourage incorporation of commission findings in textbooks and other educational media.

Introduction to the Project

The Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs and Elazar Barkan, of Claremont Graduate University, initiated the IHI in 2001. The first meeting with the support of an advisors group of distinguished historians took place on February 15-16, 2002, at the Pocantico Conference Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

The goal of the project is to address historical issues of a disputed past in order to transform historical disputes from a cause of further or renewed conflict to a tool in long-term reconciliation and peace-building. IHI brings together historians and other scholars from opposing sides of historical conflicts to jointly research and discuss difficult parts of their common histories. In attempting to bring long-term historical perspectives to bear in redressing contemporary conflicts, we expect to encounter thematic and practical challenges. We recognize that the complex nature of history means that each conflict is unique in many respects. Yet we expect that comparative work would enable IHI to articulate several key areas of inquiry regarding those aspects of conflicts and post-conflict transition that are shared. These could include: the role of mediators and outsiders in bridging historical

narratives; types of conflicts most likely to benefit from this tool, and at which stage(s); an investigation of the related roles of historians' commissions and truth commissions, as well as their differences; and the challenge of how best to disseminate the resulting collaboratively produced historical narratives to the public in order to promote deliberation for further political and social reconciliation.

IHI proposes to bring together groups for each case study that would determine as a fundamental part of their mandate an agenda of critical issues for each case, as well as the methodology with which to address it. The flexibility to reframe a debate will provide new opportunities to address old conflicts from a fresh perspective. External initiatives are necessary to commence the process for the many conflicts where political actors lack the will or interest to facilitate such a historical inquiry, and to rigorously assess its potential.

A note on terminology: As a project with global agenda and aspirations, the intercultural difficulties of presenting these concepts, not all of which can be translated in a neutral, value-free form, create added difficulties. Finding the right terminology for each case study is one challenge the project will address. Three terms are especially problematical: "reconciliation," a concept seen by many to be primarily informed by Christian principles, is a case in point. "Commission" is another that carries negative connotations in some cultures. Finally, "negotiated" history does not mean bartering about truth and evidence, nor of treating all claims as valid. Rather, "negotiated" means taking account of the other's narrative and attempting to incorporate it into one's own; joint research and discussions delegitimize patently false claims, and narrow the gap between the interlocutors. The outcome of successful negotiated history is both the respect shown to the defensible narratives of both sides of a conflict, and, as importantly, the process itself, which underscores the willingness of the current generation to overcome the burden of historical conflict.

Why IHI?

The convening of historical commissions as an attempt to clarify contentious historical issues that undermine the development of peaceful, cooperative relations between groups or states is not new. IHI's unique contribution lies in several areas. First of all, historical commissions as tools for transition and reconciliation have received relatively little attention compared to such projects as truth commissions, trials, lustration and the opening of secret police files. IHI as a vehicle for convening historical commissions will contribute to our collective knowledge of how such commissions work and when they work best. (This will be supplemented by an initial scholarly study of past historical commissions and their achievements conducted by IHI co-director Elazar Barkan with funding from the United States Institute of Peace). Unlike most earlier commissions, which were convened by governments as official, bilateral bodies, the commissions envisioned by IHI are unique in being convened by civil society actors and in being multilateral. The commissions will bring transnational approaches to history to bear on questions of contested histories. Civil society involvement can lower the political stakes and enable greater openness of historical investigations, including in cases where governments are not willing or able to do so.

Drawing on the observation that historians, together with lawyers, are increasingly being drawn into debates about the past and questions of justice and reconciliation without having the tradition of involvement in policy debates that lawyers do, IHI will search for the most effective way to involve historians in this public arena without compromising their scholarly integrity. This will enlarge the circle of actors whose expertise can be utilized in the search for new tools to promote long-term peace and civic engagement.

Finally, the record of publicizing the findings of historical commissions to date is mixed. Many historical commissions remain virtually unknown to the greater public, while the results of some, such as the Czech-German Historical Commission, have been publicized through creative work with history educators. One of IHI's top priorities is to ensure that the findings of successful historical commissions are disseminated beyond the narrow range of elite actors initially involved in political normalization efforts to engage a broader array of citizens, including the university, secondary school teachers and students, and the media. In this effort, IHI will both draw on the best practices of earlier historical commissions as well as find new and creative ways to further to publicize the commissions' findings.

Case Studies

IHI is currently exploring the feasibility of various case studies, with the intent of focusing on the most promising ones. These include:

- An East Central Europe case, beginning with Polish–Jewish history.
- A Pacific Asian case focusing on considerations of Japan's colonial history as an essential backdrop to the events of World War II; the first study within this case will be Korea-Japan.
- Zimbabwe: the legacy of violence within the liberation movement as a source of contemporary conflict.
- Cyprus, potentially in conjunction with the evolving political discussions, which might yield results in a relatively short time.
- A Turkish-Armenian investigation.
- An Indonesian-East Timor case, which would seek to bring Indonesian historiography into contact with the East Timorese narrative. This case would also involve a pilot training component, involving training in archival research and data base creation at Yale University's Genocide Studies Program, which already successfully trained the researchers at the Cambodian Documentation Commission.
- An Irish historical commission whose mission would develop around an investigation of the "Two Traditions," the popular notion that Irish nationalist/Catholic/"Gaelic" history exists separate from and parallel to Unionist/Protestant/"British" history.

The selection and the conducting of cases, once begun, would take place on a rolling basis.

Anticipated Outcomes/Products

The first outcome of the project will be the successful convening of all the planned historians' meetings for a given case study and the issuing of a joint report. This will indicate the furtherance of conversations or deliberations which have not taken place before and which were at the very least fraught with difficulty at the outset. This construction of a public space which did not exist before could facilitate and instigate further work by others who are not directly part of the project.

A second outcome will be the public dissemination of the results of the commission. Material based on the initial scholarly report will be published both in print format and on a website and will be broadly advertised to scholars, policy makers, the media, educators and others. We are considering a format resembling the report issued by the Tulsa Race Riot Commission (<http://www.ok-history.mus.ok.us/trrc/trrc.htm>), which is written in accessible language and, in addition to the historical narrative, publicizes the Commissions' methods and the dilemmas it faced, with a summary of which of the most contested issues the

Commissioners now believe based on their research to be true, which are false, what is probable, what will probably never be known and why, and what the Commission members could not in the end agree on. This kind of explication is important, as it underscores the point that no historical commission can be an “end of history” exercise but aims, in the words of Michael Ignatieff, “to narrow the range of permissible lies.”

It will be crucial to involve select media, non-governmental organizations and educators in the promotion of discussions and deliberation about the results of the commissions. These can help to create activities that ensure the findings reach those outside the narrow range the political elite usually involved in political reconciliation, thereby creating a broader process, not limited to diplomats, government leaders and the academy. Religious institutions, leaders and educators would be essential to this effort, as religious institutions have grass-roots, locally based constituencies that can be mobilized. NGOs that could be partners in these efforts would be educational ones like Germany’s Georg Eckert Institute, which focuses on revision of history and social science textbooks and collaboration with international textbook commissions, and the U.S.-based Facing History and Ourselves and Teaching for Tolerance, both of which use challenging material about traumatic pasts to promote moral deliberation among secondary school students.

A third outcome will be the development of training programs: many conflicts which could benefit from the creation of a historical commission take place in countries where historians do not have adequate access to written archives or data-basing capability. Indeed, many conflicts are so recent that the skills needed would be in the taking of oral histories more than archival research; and in some places there are very few formally trained historians. The development of training methods and resources would be a valuable contribution to the capacity of societies in which there is a widely recognized need for greater transparency and knowledge about past human rights abuses, but currently insufficient skills and resources to undertake such historical inquiries.

Project Directors

Elazar Barkan is Professor of History and Cultural Studies at Claremont Graduate University and the author of *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Norton, 2000) and the editor of a multi-authored volume on the role of apology in political reconciliation (forthcoming).

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