

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR JAY WINTER

Professor Jay M. Winter, Charles J. Stille Professor of History at Yale University, is best known for his research on World War I and its impact on the 20th Century. His other interests include remembrance of war in the 20th century, such as memorial and mourning sites, European population decline, the causes and institutions of war, British popular culture in the era of the Great War and the Armenian genocide of 1915. Winter is the author and co-author of a dozen books, including *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History, 1914-1918: The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century, Remembering War: The Great War between History and Memory in the 20th Century*, and *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the 20th Century*. He has also co-written and co-produced the PBS series "The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century," which won an Emmy Award, a Peabody Award and a Producers Guild of America Award for best television documentary in 1997.

Professor Jay Winter was interviewed for *Tarih* by **Suzan Meryem Kalaycı**.

Prof. Winter, historians are always very concerned with causes and effects, how do you value personal memoirs within historical narrative? And why do you think we care about individual memories?

PROF. WINTER

Personal memoirs are the major vehicle for the transformation of history from the study of great men to the study of every man. In the past, personal memoirs have been the province of generals, politicians, church men and industrialists, those who have power, money and position. At the beginning of the 21st century the concept of personal memoirs became the province of everybody, and this is a result of the democratization of warfare and of the suffering that warfare brings in its wake. We care about individual memoirs in order to honor and acknowledge the victims of violence and war over the past century. This is what the French historian Anette Wievorka calls the era of the witness; and the witness is a person whose story comes from within evil, from within injustice, from within extreme situations. And those who come back to tell the tale do so as representatives of those who don't.

In the light of personal memoirs, do you think we can have a collective memory as a nation, or an ethnic or religious group? If yes, how do you

define collective memory in the shadow of more and more fragmented societies, internationalism and globalization?

PROF. WINTER

The term “collective memory” has been used and abused for the last eighty or ninety years as a guide to national opinion and the history that nations construct in order to justify their existence and their political form. This is, I think, a distortion of the original version developed by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs who was much more a student of collective memory as the memory of collectives - meaning groups of people who come together in public to talk about the past. Hence the fact that we live in fragmented societies in which transnational life happens – your own life is a good example of this – indicates that collective memory is now multivocal; it is about many different stories that many different collectives construct to describe where they came from and where they are going. Only rarely does this cluster of collective memory coincide with the sense of collective memory as a state. Very rarely. There are occasions where you can say that it happens, but most of the time the best way to understand collective memory is as a cacophony – not even a symphony – a set of mixed sounds which reaches you depending upon who is able to get close to the microphone and that is (usually) the media. So one group’s collective memory can become *the* collective memory if they have the money, power, or the military force to place their memories before the nation and thereby let them pretend that the collective memory of a small collective is, then, the collective memory of the big one.

How do you situate history writing and history in your described context or definition of collective memory as the memory of collectives?

PROF. WINTER

My view of history and memory in this sense is very clear. The early theorists like Halbwachs rigidly separated history and memory as two separate domains. I don’t believe that. For me there are clear differences but there is an overlap: history is memory seen through documents; and memory is history seen through affect, through feelings, through emotions. Collective memory in the sense of stories about the past that people speak about in public occupies the field of force between history and memory. Historians are not immune from the memories of the groups from which they come, and people who create collective memories embed in them historical narratives they have read or heard or learned about. So my view of this matter is that history and memory are not as rigidly separate as Halbwachs thought, or as

the current French theorists Pierre Nora contends. I think that it is a terrible mistake to imagine that historians have nothing to do with memory and that those who work with memory have nothing to do with history. That is one reason that I spend a lot of my time moving out of the academy to speak to people in the public – (people) who come to museums, for example, which are sites of both memory and history, and if they are not both, they will never survive.

What are the parallels between developments in the politics of representation over the last 40 years and changes in approaches to the "politics of memory" within the historical discipline? What has been the effect of moving from a society in which subcultural memories (especially of trauma) are suppressed to one in which such memories are prized, even celebrated?

PROF. WINTER

Between 1945 and 1970, roughly, the politics of representation had as its focus heroism, resistance, the strength of survival under terrifying pressures – not only under the Nazi rule but also under Soviet rule. That story of heroism had no room in it for those who did not resist in an organized fashion or in a military fashion that we can identify with as conventional military history. So between 1945 and 1970 the victims of war were occluded by the noble and honorable heroes of war. From roughly 1970 onwards the politics of representation shifted in such a way to make war a landscape of horror at the center of which are not the heroes, the resister or even the soldiers but the innocent civilians who were massacred in its wake. This shift around 1970 was in part caused by technical developments. The ability to record voices and faces is one of the critical vectors of the transformation of the representation of the past. From 1970 onwards the videocassette, Betamax and then VHS, emerged alongside the audio cassette as cheap and easily portable forms of archiving the voices of anybody who went through historical experiences. This opened the door to the democratization of representations. It is not just about heroes, and it is not just about the winners, it is about those who were crushed by the forces of history that have produced such massive upheavals as the two World Wars, the Soviet revolutions and their consequences for the world. I think what this means is that the historical discipline has shifted its focus away from the heroes of war, away from *men*, to women and children, to those whose voices were not heard normally within the cannon of the historical narrative. At the same time, in the 1970s the feminist movement in Europe insisted upon oral history as a way of complementing the male dominated written archives. So the voices of those who were not in the normal archives of statesmen and generals and so on became fundamentally significant – and those are

individuals who suffered from systematic persecution in some cases terrifying, and in other cases, as in sexual prejudice or racist prejudices, we might argue tolerable, but devastating. Nonetheless, the spectrum moves towards extreme experience and the existence of these technical means enabled us to understand that what history does and what the study of memory does in the public sphere is to mediate the recognition – the recognition – and the realization of the situation of victims of violence in the 20th century and afterwards. This entails the acknowledgment of victims; using active knowledge not only to register that these victims were there, but also to respond to their plight.

As an historian, how do you think you have to compromise your own political and ethnic affiliations to be able to research and write, and how much is your position on certain topics instrumentalized by groups and lobbies of a certain political cause?

PROF. WINTER

History is written by people who do not write autobiography. I do not speak about the First World War, which I have researched for over 40 years, as an individual with a particular ethnic or gender view point, for that matter. I remember when I first started writing about the Armenian Genocide in “Le Monde” in Paris, a number of Armenians who had no idea who I was (and there was no reason why they should) assumed from my name Jay that I was a woman and the question was: is there a woman’s viewpoint in what I write? I like that – that people were mistaken about my subject position. So the first part of it is; there is absolutely no reason why my political or ethnic affliction has a bearing about my interpretation. And most people who have read my work had no idea that I come from a Holocaust survivors’ family – not at all – and I like that and I think that is right. What I do is based upon research, and archives and the footnotes matter. Footnotes stop people from lying about the past, archives stop people from lying about the past. I have the references and that is why I can speak about the past. On the other hand, people may try to instrumentalize the narratives I have written. That may be true, but I have never believed for a moment that the work I have been doing has had a purpose that is outside of the understanding of suffering in the past. I have focused on that, and I believe rightly so, because the history of war is no longer the history of victory and defeat; it is the history of survivors and those who did not survive; that is the basic change in my lifetime. Nothing in my ethnic background or political affiliations has shaped that. Nothing. It is there in the record, if you only have the eyes to see it.

In recent years you have been writing more and more about the Armenian Genocide. How did you get interested in this topic? And why do you think – apart from the obvious reasons – is this topic important not only for Turkish historiography but for world history in general?

PROF. WINTER

I got interested in the Armenian Genocide (of 1915-16) because I got interested in the concept of “total war.” And in my view the concept of “total war” is the appropriate framework in which to locate a whole series of devastating changes in the rules of engagement of warfare. In my view, the 20th century has been marked and marred by scars inflicted by a new institution the world has never seen before; that is, industrialized, assembly-line killing. Warfare became industrialized for the first time, fully around the world, with great empires having the resources to funnel into the cornucopia of destruction more lethal killing material than the world had ever seen before. And the concept of “total warfare” is one that has not fully been conceptualized. Certainly when I started it didn’t exist and I spent a lot of my time in doing just that. What is a total war? It is one in which the military participatory ratio, the proportion of population in uniform, is much bigger than ever before. It is one where the links between the front and the home-front are very strong; it is not that the army goes off to fight and the home front simply stays behind; they are constantly engaged in working together, so that the army becomes the cutting edge of the nation of war, and attacking civilians makes sense in military terms because they are part of the war effort. Not only does it make sense; it is culturally justified through propaganda, through mobilization of the intellect, through images that explain to people why they have to go to war and why they have to continue until victory. And that cultural preparation of war under total conditions becomes a total preparation for hatred, and total hatred leads to the dehumanization of the enemy, both within and without. Genocide is a product of total war. There were other genocides done for other reasons – and in other ways – but the 20th century had the bad fortune to create a set of institutions of war that the world had never seen before and they had the power and the reach to kill anybody. So I got interested in the Armenian Genocide because I got interested in “total war.” And historians have to do so, because “total war” is one of the fundamental features of the world in which we live.

You have introduced the concept of “silence” as an additional instance or level between memory and the writing of (or making of) history. Could you explain why you think it is important to stress silence as part of the historical process? Do you consider the twofold nature of the concept of silence as either the absence of or the absence from an articulated story?

PROF. WINTER

Silence is a space where nobody speaks what everybody knows, and it is an area which is socially regulated, socially constructed, socially preserved, and socially destroyed. All societies have spaces of silence. I see them along essentially two lines: First there are liturgical silences, which is what happens to us when we pray, where our hearts rise to God. This happens more through silence than through words. This is indeed an old Jewish tradition, but is there in many other traditions. You know that there are many ways where the predicament of the fragility of life can only be faced through silence. So much religious experience is about the paradox of theodicy; “how is evil possible if God is all good?” and all of those questions require silence; so liturgical silence is what we know about, and commemorative silences draw upon them. The second silences are political silences, and they are amongst societies – all societies – that have a past that is unsavory or destructive. Every society has chapters within its history that are inglorious or un-heroic, or to a degree criminal, always to a degree. And political silences are social compacts, contracts, not to talk about something that can destroy the cohesion of society. The best example I know about is the transition in Spain from Franco’s dictatorship to democracy; the Socialist party agreed not to talk about the killings, the murders, the tortures, the crimes of the Franco regime as the price of an orderly and peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy. And it was done openly, as a social pact, as a contract, and it worked. It is unraveling now, but it worked, and for many other instances. And the notion of silence, I think, also explains the extent to which the disasters of the 20th century have configured demographically through generations. Those who have been visibly, as I suppose, the objects of this murderous activity in the 20th century, have been millions of people in different parts of the world from Cambodia to Armenia. There are just millions of people caught in this web of violence produced by the institution I call “total war.” When we realize how many there are and we realize to what extent the survivors want anything but a series of repetitive narratives of their sufferings, which can also be performative... In other words, when you tell the story of Auschwitz, or other such stories, the pain individuals went through can come back. It is understandable that people who went through that want to turn away from misery and pain. Rape victims frequently speak of the same need to turn away. So what happens to their children? Frequently the children of victims of dramatic history want to be normal – they simply want to join the societies they are in. So there is, I think, an unspoken assumption that the story of trauma is not one that can be told well or easily in society until the third generation which perhaps is, let’s say, 70 years after the initial events. And there what happens is the wonderful complicity and

alliance between grandparents and grandchildren over the head of the parents in the middle. Because grandchildren are curious they see their grandparents as special; they had access to some kind of history the world doesn't talk about, and they want to know what grandfather did when he was a young boy. "Where did" – in my case not the grandfather but the grand-uncle – "Where did he get the numbers on his arms? Which concentration camp?" and so on. So the grandchild stimulates the breaking of silence, so that the stories of big collectives become the stories of individual families. This has produced the avalanche of memory work within families and societies – not from states, but from below – which has generated archives and works of poetry, works of art, or scholarship of memorialization from below, which, in my view, describe something about global civil society: it is a place in which the victims of this bloody world are finally acknowledged, two generations, three generations after the insult they suffered. And I think that explains why the Holocaust is such an enormous subject. It is not because it wasn't such an enormous subject at the time – it was. And it explains maybe why the Armenian Genocide has had a statutory period before it could come to represent a fundamental feature of the past century. It is also the case that this demographic shift, this time-span of 70 years, helps us to see why it is now that the concept of human rights is defined as requiring the recognition and the acknowledgement of the existence of the suffering of these victims. That is why I believe it is absolutely in the interest of Turkey and Turkish society to recognize that the Armenian genocide is something that happened in another society, under another regime. Atatürk himself recognized what happened; it is not a new point. The social contract of silence can only be broken in time, over a long period of time and it is now your generation, not mine, and your children's generation which will have the chance to re-write the social contract of history and memory.

The only thing that I regret is that I wasn't born earlier because now I am not able to interview survivors and record their stories.

PROF. WINTER

That doesn't matter. In fact, I know this from my work on the First World War; all the veterans are dead, but their children and grandchildren are alive, they are around and their grandchildren are around. There is a momentum in the history of trauma which does not go away. There is something like post-memory; it is the memory of children of people who suffered and their grandchildren. You and I share it; we are speaking a chapter of post-history right now in this room, in this exact moment. The existence of these individuals, of course, it would have been good, but you shouldn't regret

being the age you are, in fact you should celebrate it because you will be able to do things long after I am gone.

The formal part of the interview is over, thank you very much for this very inspiring conversation with you. You gave me a lot of hope in myself but also in the historical profession... Is there anything you would like to add? You know this is the first issue of the new Graduate Journal of History at Bogazici University. Maybe you would like to give us, the students of history and young historians, some last advice?

PROF. WINTER

Maybe I will say one thing: if I had two bits of advice I would give to young historians it would be these: first, never succumb to cynicism; and secondly, remember that you have a right to express your feelings, not only your thoughts, in writing history. If you do both of these you speak from the heart, and that is the best kind of history you can write.

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