

Department of Germanic and Romance Studies
University of Delhi
Winter school
Lest we forget: Entanglements of History and Memory
20 - 24 January 2025



Traces of memory, history, and the past have often served as raw materials for various cultural productions since time immemorial. Be it the cave paintings of Bhimbetka or Altamira, or the inscriptions in Egyptian pyramids, folk songs and tales of different communities, or the literary texts written in various epochs, they all bear testimony to the human being's zeal to preserve its memory for generations to come. History and memory are two concepts that often serve as critical sources for reconstructing the past. Traditionally, the discipline of history is thought to provide an objective and systematic account of the past based on documented records, analysed by trained historians to reconstruct a coherent narrative of the bygone era. In contrast, memory is considered to be a fluid and subjective process deeply rooted in individual and collective experiences. Nevertheless, the two fields have increasingly intersected, with memory enriching history by supplementing it with narratives that official histories may have overlooked.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, although remembering is an individual activity, memory is social in nature. Individuals belong to groups, such as families, communities, or nations, and they create collective memories of their past in conjunction with the social, cultural, and political frameworks. Moreover, memory is not static but an active phenomenon, as the present continuously shapes and reimagines how societies remember their past. Consequently, these collective memories also influence how individuals perceive themselves in relation to the groups they belong to, thereby creating a sense of collective identity and solidarity.

According to Pierre Nora, due to the fading of traditional ways of remembering – such as rituals, traditions, oral testimonies etc. – societies started to preserve or crystallize its memories in *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), which are physical or symbolic spaces. These sites of memory including memorials, museums, monuments, and commemorative events help societies to sustain their collective memory over time.

Furthermore, memories are often institutionalized by dominant power structures which impose a hegemonic understanding of the past. These official versions of the past are also challenged by counter-memories that offer alternative or suppressed accounts of the past, such as those of marginalized, oppressed, or minority groups. Often, traumatic memories find no space in official accounts as they are too overwhelming to be understood in the moment, potentially resulting in fragmentary, repressed, or distorted memories.

Thinkers like Hayden White have argued that history writing is subjective in the sense that it is a selective storytelling and interpretation of the past influenced by present cultural, social, and political dynamics. Thus, the past is reconstructed through narratives that provide meaning and structure to memories, shaping how events are remembered, interpreted, and transmitted over time. The issue of narrativity complicates traditional history's claims of providing an authentic and accurate account of the past.

Subjectivity in historiography is difficult to avoid as historians' preferences and choices are also influenced by their background, ideologies, and social contexts. Besides, the sources that historians refer to as “evidence” and employ to narrate the past are themselves derived from other people's memories of what happened in the past. In this context, memory, in its different forms – such as oral and written testimonies, autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, diaries, as well as writings like historical fiction, science fiction, and fantasy literature – provide alternative perspectives that are often excluded or overlooked in formal history.

The Winter School proposes to engage with the theme of history and memory from a critical and interdisciplinary perspective. The objective of the course will be to decode how instead of viewing history and memory as antagonistic compartments, they can be seen as complementary ways of engaging with the past, thereby developing a more nuanced understanding of our past, present and future. Apart from a critical appraisal of various theoretical and methodological debates related to the theme, it will aim to study the representation of this theme in contemporary literary, artistic, cinematic and other cultural productions. The sessions will be interactive since the experts in specific fields will analyse both primary and secondary resources available on a particular perspective along with presentations and discussions by participants. The Winter School will be focussing on the following subthemes:

- Theoretical frameworks of Studying history and memory
- History, Memory and the Nation State
- Oral History, Subaltern History and History from the Margins
- Alternate History
- The Duty of Memory: Collective memory and communicative memory
- Memory and Identity
- Memory and Trauma
- Sites of memory and the archive
- Forgetting: questioning institutional, official, collective and selective amnesia
- Generic debates: Testimonial narrative genres, Historical novels, life writings etc.
- Post-memory

Research scholars interested in registering for the Winter School are invited to fill up the Google Form by 30 November 2024

<https://forms.gle/hmwP7rxYB7TRa4Fo6>