



Negotiating National Pride and Shame: Historical Memory and Public Perspective

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Does a nation's past define its people, or do people shape how the past is remembered? Societies celebrate remarkable moments in their history, yet no nation is free of challenges or controversy. A nation's history is a blend of pride and shame, often creating tension between an individual's conscience and their national heritage. Attitudes toward historical events are complex and constantly evolving, shaped not only by social values, government agendas, and a nation's global role but also by the ways these events are narrated by historians, the media, and education systems. Given the diversity of national experiences, it is neither accurate nor fair to argue that any group should feel solely pride or shame regarding their nation's history.

To explore how individuals might respond to historical events, it is useful to establish philosophical definitions of pride and shame. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines pride as the "crown of the virtues," arising from instances of "true excellence" that distinguish an individual (Aristotle, 350 BCE/2000, Book 4, Sec. 3). Such excellence, while rare, emerges from consistent moral conduct and honorable actions, forming the basis for national pride. Accordingly, sources of pride in a nation's history generally fall into two categories: achievements and social progress.

Achievements represent innovations and accomplishments that improve citizens' lives or showcase national creativity. Japan's shinkansen bullet train, introduced in 1964, exemplifies this. Symbolizing postwar recovery, it became a point of national pride, with Kyoto leaders lobbying for a line to traverse the city, lending it "a global sheen of modernity" (Bohn, 2022). Similarly, artistic or athletic feats can evoke pride, demonstrating a nation's creative or competitive capabilities.

Social progress—advances in freedom and equality—also generates pride. John Locke argued that "the end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom" (Locke, 1689/2003, Ch. 6, Sec. 57). Nations that enact laws promoting civil rights and individual liberties fulfill their responsibility to citizens, strengthening national pride. Finland's 1943 law providing free school meals illustrates this principle: recognizing that hunger impaired learning, the government ensured nearly 850,000 children received

meals today, symbolizing progress toward educational equality (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d.; Finland Toolbox, 2024). Whether through achievements or social reforms, proud moments reflect Aristotle's concept of "true excellence."

In contrast, citizens may feel shame when their nation commits dishonorable acts, particularly if they remain unacknowledged. Aristotle identifies two forms: collective shame, rooted in moral disturbance from disgraceful acts by a community, and comparative shame, arising from observing other nations granting freedoms or protections that one's own nation neglects (Aristotle, 350 BCE/2000, *The Rhetoric*, Book 2, Sec. 6). Both involve tension between national identity and conscience.

Shame can stem from injustice or failure. Injustice occurs when governments mistreat citizens through oppression or discrimination. Operation Murambatsvina in Zimbabwe (2005) forcibly displaced nearly one million lower-income residents, leaving many in inadequate shelters. The operation, derisively called "Operation Tsunami," exemplified blatant government disregard for vulnerable populations (Hughes, 2007; Amnesty International, 2010).

Failure arises when governments cannot protect or provide for citizens, violating social contract obligations (Tuckness, 2005). India's chronic air pollution demonstrates this: political gridlock and weak regulations have produced toxic smog, causing business closures and over 10,000 annual deaths (Chen, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). Yet India has also generated national pride through achievements like the 2014 Mars Orbiter Mission, the first by an Asian nation at a fraction of the cost of similar projects (BBC, 2014). The coexistence of pride and shame within a single nation underscores the impossibility of prescribing a singular emotional response to history.

Attitudes toward history are shaped not only by events but also by context, interpretation, and evolving social values. France's 1985 sabotage of Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior, for instance, elicited both shame and a sense of national strength among some contemporaries. India's environmental crisis provoked collective shame, while its space program inspired pride. The same event may provoke conflicting

reactions depending on perspective, demonstrating that public sentiment cannot be reduced to a simple tally of right or wrong.

Social values also influence the perceived moral weight of historical events. The Netherlands' 2001 legalization of same-sex marriage was initially unprecedented and, retrospectively, a source of national pride. Nearly forty countries later adopted similar reforms, reinforcing Dutch pride in progressive leadership (Associated Press, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2025). Conversely, evolving norms can amplify shame. The forced removal of up to 100,000 Indigenous Australian children in the twentieth century, initially justified by the government as assimilation, is now recognized as cultural genocide. The 2008 formal apology by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd acknowledged past injustice, shaping contemporary national memory (Australians Together, 2025; The Lancet Authors, 2018). These examples show that pride and shame are fluid, shifting with changing cultural values.

Beyond social values, the narration of history profoundly affects emotional responses. Germany's Holocaust memorials and mandatory education foster collective reflection and shame to prevent repetition. In Japan, debates over World War II textbooks demonstrate how historical representation can emphasize victimhood or minimize atrocities, influencing collective memory. Public sentiment is actively shaped by those controlling historical narratives.

A nation's size and global influence further modulate reactions. Small nations may celebrate achievements that larger nations overlook. Saint Lucia, population ~180,000, celebrated sprinter Julien Alfred's 2024 Olympic gold with national songs, poems, and even a holiday, highlighting how success can amplify national pride (Coto, 2024; World Population Review, 2024). Conversely, prominent nations may experience intensified shame when failures are globally visible. France's Rainbow Warrior incident sparked international outrage, magnifying collective embarrassment and tarnishing its reputation abroad (Huch, 2023; New Zealand History, n.d.).

The interplay of achievement, injustice, social progress, failure, and global visibility illustrates that national pride and shame are inseparable from perspective and context. Individuals form responses based on prior knowledge, cultural norms, and relational connections, meaning that one person's pride may be another's shame. Historical events are constant, but their interpretation is dynamic, mediated by governments, media, education, and public debate.

In conclusion, national pride and shame cannot be dictated as a moral imperative. They are complex, evolving components of national identity, shaped by achievements, social reforms, injustices, failures, narration, and shifting social values. Like a statue, history appears fixed, yet different perspectives

reveal new interpretations. Nations and their citizens continuously negotiate their emotional relationship to the past, and this negotiation is crucial to understanding the politics of memory. History belongs not only to the events themselves but to those who interpret and reinterpret them for future generations.

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