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36. HERITAGE & NATIONAL IDENTITY

The capacity of countries to shape political outcomes by influencing the way in which the past is perceived and interpreted is a well-known characteristic of public life. It is not surprising that the education, information and foreign ministries of the modern state devote particular attention to matters of history, especially in the context of a political threat. There are various reasons for this; first, “history” may be used to help consolidate particular types of regime - resources of its educational system are mobilized systematically to inculcate the

ideology of historical materialism; second, contemporary ideological and political battles can be fought by highlighting certain features of the past and suppressing others; third, recourse may be had to history and even to archaeology in justifying contemporary claims to disputed territory; fourth, perceptions of the past can serve the cause of the vanquished. The centrality of historical interpretation lies in axiomatic relation to the process of creating and maintaining ethnic or national solidarity. Countries through their executive arms of

government have been quick to appreciate this. Recognition of this fact by scholars is as old as the study of nationalism itself; ethnic communities and nations are routinely defined as groups of people with a single characteristic self-image, in which the vital ingredient is a sense of shared history or the common possession of memories and ideas held in high esteem by a community.

Ref: John Coakley - Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, 10:531-560, 2004