Collective Memory and Official History in Lebanon: A Struggle Over Narrating the Past

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A Torn Memory Between War and Official History

Since the end of the Civil War, Lebanon has lived in a state of historical paralysis, where the questions of war were pushed to the margins of national memory. Between a wounded collective memory and an incomplete official history, the consciousness of new generations has been shaped on fragile ground, riddled with conflicting narratives.

In schools, the war is presented as an "exceptional circumstance" that ended with a political agreement, while families pass down personal stories steeped in fear, blood, and division. This split between memory and official history not only distorts our view of the past but also threatens the very possibility of building a shared future.

The challenge is even greater because every political party and sect in Lebanon has its own version of the war, stories that often glorify itself while demonizing or diminishing the other. The Lebanese Forces' narrative, for instance, frames the war as a struggle for survival and a threatened Christian identity. Amal and Hezbollah recall their past as a legitimate resistance against marginalization and occupation. The National Movement champions a story of defending social and economic rights. Each has its saints and its demons, its martyrs honored year after year—proof that, in many ways, Lebanon has never really left the war behind.

Political-sectarian parties have invested directly in writing these versions, magnifying their own role and belittling the other, turning narratives into tools of ongoing political mobilization that feed division instead of healing it.

A Passage of Fear in Wartime

I grew up hearing stories of the war seeping into family gatherings. My mother, like many of her generation, carried the memory of fear in her heart, even when she did not always put it into words.

One story she told remains etched in my mind as if I had lived it myself:

In 1983, as a young woman, she was traveling with her uncle from her hometown of Sarain in Baalbek to Beirut. They took the road through Dhour al-Shweir, where they were stopped at an armed checkpoint by militiamen, either Kataeb or Lebanese Forces, as she recalls. She had no ID on her at the time. Panic set in. Her uncle pleaded with the gunman: “For the sake of the Qur’an, this is my brother’s daughter.”

The fighter, holding a Pepsi bottle in his hand, responded with chilling sarcasm: “I have the Qur’an, the Bible, and this Pepsi bottle—all at once.”

At that moment, their fate seemed sealed—until chance intervened. Another fighter at the checkpoint recognized her uncle; he was from their village. Without that coincidence, the outcome might have been tragic.

This story, passed down to me by my mother, was more than a personal memory. It was a window into how sectarian belonging and imposed identities could decide life or death in a single instant.

Like thousands of other family stories, it reveals a bitter truth: in wartime Lebanon, sectarian identity was the only passport—or a death sentence.

The “checkpoint story” is not just a personal incident. It distills the very logic of the Lebanese war: the dominance of weapons, sectarian killings, and a life lived under the fear of one’s name, sect, or birthplace. Death often came not through combat but through arbitrary decisions made at checkpoints—based on an ID card, an accent, or a place of origin. It was a terrifying reminder of human fragility in wartime, when identity itself became a deadly burden.

Decades later, these stories have not faded. They continue to circulate—sometimes whispered, sometimes told aloud as part of a collective narrative passed to younger generations, whether through family tales or partisan youth activities that keep the memory of war alive to sustain a sense of perpetual threat.

The question is unavoidable: Is remembering enough to close the chapter? Or does repeating these stories, without critical reflection, keep them alive and ready to resurface?

Sectarian narratives are still told with the same fervor, rarely questioned or deconstructed. That makes them more than memory—they remain an ever-present possibility. Those who once killed according to sect no longer stand at checkpoints, but they live on in stories never verified, and in a public space filled with images of "saviors" who were never held accountable.

Grand Narratives and the Individual Experience

The story my mother told—like thousands of others never officially recorded—shows clearly how political and sectarian forces reshape collective memory to serve their interests.

Postwar Lebanon never built a unified national memory. Instead, fragmented memories persisted. Each party, sect, and region chose to preserve its own version of the past, glorifying itself and demonizing others. Schools, books, and media all reinforce these parallel narratives, which rarely meet.

Thus, even a small incident at a checkpoint can take on national symbolism: crossing from one area to another was never just physical movement, but a passage through a complex web of fear, identity, and imposed belonging.

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Telling such personal stories, and setting them against political and official discourses, gives us a rare chance to question dominant narratives and rethink what it truly means to build an inclusive collective memory—one that accommodates everyone, not just the victors or the loudest voices.

Identity as a Weapon, Sectarian Killings, and the Army's Collapse

Sectarian killings were one of the ugliest practices of Lebanon's Civil War. Religious or regional markers—exposed by a name or ID card—became tools of deadly selection at militia checkpoints.

Sectarian belonging ceased to be a mere social attribute; it became a criterion for survival or annihilation. Thousands of ordinary citizens who had no active role in the conflict fell victim to this coercive classification.

The Lebanese Army itself was not immune. Despite attempts to maintain national neutrality, the army disintegrated as the conflict escalated, with units splitting along sectarian and regional lines. This not only weakened the institution's ability to act as a guarantor of stability, but also made many soldiers themselves targets of sectarian killings at frontline zones.

These experiences of sectarian killings and the army's fragmentation are not just episodes in Lebanon's violent history. They are open wounds in collective memory. To recall them honestly and consciously—beyond sectarian narratives—is a necessary step toward building a national story that transcends divisions and fosters a more mature understanding of a past that continues to cast heavy shadows on the present and future.

Divided Memories, Competing Narratives

Lebanon's streets still speak the language of division. Today, the country remains fractured even in its memory of the war.

In Beirut's southern suburbs, narratives describe the war as a legitimate resistance against aggression. In regions like Keserwan, Metn, and Jbeil, the story is told as resistance against the Palestinian presence and the weapons of leftist parties. Neighborhoods and cities each have their own history, their own local heroes, and their own carefully drawn enemies.

What is most alarming is that this fragmentation is not confined to the older generation; it continues across generations. Parties instill their versions of the past in children through youth camps, partisan activities, and even educational curricula.

Official narratives have ignored these lived experiences and bitter truths. The postwar political order chose to craft a sanitized history that obscures collective responsibility, presenting the war as the work of "external forces" or a domestic "misunderstanding" quickly overcome through reconciliation. The aim was not just to move on from the past but to protect a political class largely responsible for the war itself. The Taif Agreement sealed this by promoting "forgetting" in exchange for sharing present-day power.

These partisan narratives did not remain confined to history books or past speeches; they were carefully reproduced and entrenched in the consciousness of new generations. They spread not only in political events and party publications but also through party-run scout camps, where children are raised to glorify their "martyrs," relive the symbols of battle, and chant wartime slogans as if the war had never ended.

Beyond that, parties dominate the public sphere through visual symbols: portraits of martyrs, sectarian flags, party slogans covering walls, and renamed streets and squares that reflect the narrative of whichever group prevailed locally. In the southern suburbs, the space tells the story of heroic resistance against Israeli occupation, while parts of Metn and Keserwan project the story of a "Christian" survival against an existential threat. Places themselves have become mirrors of narratives, tools that normalize one version of history in everyday life.

Building a Collective Memory Beyond Divisions

Bridging the deep gap between collective memory and official history in Lebanon requires extraordinary courage. The first step is to acknowledge the multiplicity of narratives without erasing one another, and to accept that each community, each sect, has its own story. These stories are not necessarily contradictory; together, they are fragments of a larger national tragedy.

Official history cannot be written truthfully unless it begins from these individual experiences and shared sufferings. Only by linking the national story to real, inherited, lived accounts can we build a collective memory that is healthy—not based on denial, falsehoods, or erasure, but on recognition, accountability, and hope.