The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is most known for his writings on existential philosophy. He has however written a small book on history, mostly concerned with the social and cultural role of historical writing and interpretation: *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life (Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben)*, printed in 1874. In this thin pamphlet Nietzsche discusses concepts of history, not as much on strict philosophical grounds, but rather on moral, ideological and social.

Nietzsche was wary of his contemporaries’ fixation with the past. He argued that it was important to live in the present, to not let the past get the upper hand when forming your views on life and society. However, he did not totally reject history (in the meaning of remembrance of the past) either, as he recognised it as positive when used in moderation and for the right reasons. One should neither totally ignore the past, nor let oneself be engulfed in it. History should be *used*, but not *abused*.

To illustrate his point Nietzsche defined three forms of attitudes towards history and argued that all three are sound, but that they all also have their respective drawbacks and may be a threat to any individual or society if they are allowed to become too dominant. The three are Monumental, Antiquarian and Critical history respectively.

* **Monumental history** is history as inspiration, ideal and to some extent as comfort. It improves the moral of people struggling to create a present and a future to their own liking, by using good examples in the past. On the other hand, too much focus on monumental history creates or deepens antagonism in the present, antagonism that otherwise may have been possible to avoid or at least overcome. One’s mind is drawn to present day Balkan or Northern Ireland.

* **Antiquarian history** reminds in many ways of monumental. It also denotes a positive attitude towards the past, but it is more passive. The users of antiquarian history are more interested in continuity and preservation than those who use history in a monumental way. It makes people feel safe and close to one another and helps them to accept the less pleasant aspects of the present, knowing that things once were better. Too much emphasis on antiquarian history leans however toward fetishism of the past. People forget that they still live in the present and therefore they tend to get passive: “Antiquarian history knows only how to preserve life, not how to generate it.”

* **Critical history** is history for radicals or maybe even revolutionaries. If monumental history inspires people working for a change within the system or a slower change of it, critical history is embraced by people working against the current system. Where monumental history builds and antiquarian history preserves, critical history tears down and thus liberates. Contrary to the other two uses of history this one inspires (or is inspired by) negative feelings towards the past. Nietzsche finds nothing wrong with this *per se* but warns that to much critical history means that the user denies the tradition she is actually a part of. By that she denies an important part of herself and also conceals the basis for her own starting points.

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2. This presentation is not only based on Nietzsche’s own words but also on my own interpretation and to some extent on Johansson, Alf W: “Är historien farlig? Friedrich Nietzsches Om historiens nytta och skada.” i Nietzsche 1998.
As we can see, all three uses are practical or existential more than analytical. Therefore Nietzsche does not associate the academic use of history with any of these uses. He is as a matter of fact quite negative toward academic history. It serves knowledge and science but it does not serve life and that is history’s main purpose, according to Nietzsche. By being obsessed by facts and knowledge it distances itself from the true values of history: to give people moral and political guidelines in everyday life:

Every person and every people, according to its goals, forces, and needs, uses a certain knowledge of the past, sometimes as monumental history, sometimes as antiquarian history, and sometimes as critical history, but not as a crowd of pure thinkers only watching life closely, not as people eager for knowledge, individuals only satisfied by knowledge, for whom an increase of understanding is the only goal, but always only for the purpose of living and, in addition, under the command and the highest guidance of this life. This is the natural relationship to history of an age, a culture, and a people: summoned up by hunger, regulated by the degree of the need, held to limits by the plastic power within, the understanding of the past is desired at all times to serve the future and the present, not to weaken the present, not to uproot a forceful living future. All that is simple, as the truth is simple, and is also immediately convincing for anyone who does not begin by letting himself be guided by historical proof.

But is this really history’s purpose? This is where I think most modern scholars in history—at least in Sweden—, including me, would beg to differ with the great German philosopher. The general opinion among Swedish academic historians today is that history, and other humanities, serve people and society best by not making a stand in questions concerning politics and morality, i.e. questions concerning what Nietzsche would label life. Our task is to analyse; not to moralise, not to take active part in the construction of identities and not to give certain guidelines for action. (The fact that we constantly do that, voluntary or involuntary, is another question, I am here referring to ideals.)

Among professional historians, non academic use of history is generally considered as an abuse. It is flawed by political or economical interests and therefore dubious. This is not to say that historians or other scholars should lock themselves up in the ivory tower and never try to connect with the world outside. The aforementioned moral and practical guidelines are just not the right way to do it. Those are for people to make themselves; the best historians can do is to provide people with tools to help them make their own choices. Therefore, history should not idolise, nor condemn the past, just try to understand it, and by that, try to understand the present. Whether Genghis Khan or Robespierre were good or bad people is of less concern to us than the question what we can learn about society and humanity from their actions. None of us should feel neither joy, nor sorrow over which side won the battles of Salamis or Agincourt, but instead try to find out why and what we learn from that.

This was clearly formulated in the early 1990s by the Swedish historian Thomas Lindkvist. When asked about his feelings about Sweden’s Age of Greatness (1611–1721)—provoked by a statement by the journalist and amateur historian Herman Lindqvist that it was time for the Swedish people to once again be proud of the Age of Greatness—he answered: “I find it hard to be either proud or ashamed over deeds performed by unknown

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3 Nietzsche 1874, chapter IV.
4 There are exceptions in Sweden, for example Kristian Gerner, who has argued that history as science to some extent must be based on fundamental moral values, concerning for example genocide. Gerner, Kristian “Kommunismens anatomi. En historiemoralisk översikt.” i Historisk Tidsskrift 1999.
people several centuries ago.”6 By this quote Lindkvist in one sentence summarises the anti-Nietzschean, purely intellectual, attitude towards the past. He rejects both monumental (“proud”) and critical (“ashamed”) uses of history. The antiquarian is not touched upon, but with his statement he implicitly makes it clear that distance is the right approach towards history. The historian should not feel emotionally connected to the past, but look upon it as an outsider.

Needless to say, not everyone today share this opinion, which shows that Nietzsche after all is absolutely right. As a matter of fact, I think one could honestly say that the view on history represented by Lindkvist is a view for a privileged few. Outside a small group of scholars and intellectuals, most people tend to use history for life in a very Nietzschean way. They need it to build character, to uphold ideals, and to feel safe in an ever changing world. The opinion that history should be used to try to understand our existence only intellectually is in a way elitist. It is a privilege for people who already are safe in their individual or collective identity, people who feel that they understand and to some extent have control over their own situation. Not everyone is so fortunate. The fact is that by choosing the academic path of knowledge before values and emotions, the path Nietzsche rejected, Swedish historians seem to have alienated themselves from the majority of people interested in history. Yet another indication that Nietzsche should not be thrown on the dust pile of the history of ideas.

For me personally this is a serious intellectual conflict. I do believe that keeping a distance to the past is the best way in which the historian and his subject serve humanity and society. Academic history is an intellectual activity. Its object is to analyse and that is best done if you are not emotionally involved in your subject of studies. This point of view was of course not in Nietzsche’s liking: “Indeed, people go as far as to assume that the person whom a moment in the past does not affect in the slightest is competent to present it.”7 In this quote one can argue that Nietzsche is a bit unfair or maybe even wrong, at least by the standards of modern scientific history. Being unaffected (or rather feeling unaffected) is an important condition for being able to analyse and understand the past without getting emotionally biased (see the quote by Lindkvist above). However, this seems to be exactly the difference between Nietzsche and the average Swedish historian of today. Nietzsche did not want history to be a primarily intellectual activity; he wanted it to be something else. A source where everyone, not just scholars, could find reasons and arguments for their present projects, whether it was to build, to preserve or to liberate—of course without stopping people from remembering the world they were living in. In that point of view an analytical, level-headed approach is more an abuse than a use. Action, not reflection, was Nietzsche’s ideal.

Even for those who do not agree on that, Nietzsche’s opinion is still worth some consideration, whether we like it or not. As said, most people outside the study chamber of the professional historian seems to embrace the notion that history for life is something else than history for science. They feel that they need it in just the ways Nietzsche described: to seek comfort and inspiration, to feel continuity or to reject it for a better future. And even though I myself wish things were different, neither I nor any of my colleagues could change this, at least not in an instant. Therefore we have to accept a breach between our own concept of history and a more general, try to argue for the academic uses of history and be patient when people seem to have another view upon the use and abuse of history. Otherwise

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6 Originally from an interview on Swedish Radio (SR), 1992. Lindkvist’s exact formulation is forgotten by both me and him, but upon my request Lindkvist confirmed the statement and gave me his permission to quote him. The translation is done by me and approved by Lindkvist.

7 Nietzsche 1874, chapter VI.
we truly condemn ourselves to be placed outside life. However important knowledge is it can never be more important than life itself, or by Nietzsche’s own words:

Is life to rule over knowledge now, over science, or is knowledge to rule over life? Which of the two forces is the higher and the decisive one? No one will have any doubt: life is the higher, the ruling power, for knowledge which destroyed life would in the process have destroyed itself. Knowledge presupposes life and has the same interest in preserving life which every being has in its own continuing existence. So science needs a higher supervision and control. A doctrine of a healthy life is positioned close beside science[.]

* So, why am I presenting this paper here in Vinnytsya? As I have argued above, not all people are prepared, willing or even able to view history only as a field of analysis. In Sweden the most important borderline goes between academic scholars and most people generally interested in history. In that way the academic use of history have alienated professional historians from people in general and can be considered a bit elitist. The prerequisite to be able to look on the past in this way is however not only a question of education, but even more a question of how deeply you feel that the past has affected you personally. Since Sweden has experienced a calm modern history, with no wars since 1814, and a rather benevolent autocracy in the 19th century followed by a stable democracy and extreme growth in material welfare in the 20th, it is possible to free oneself from the past. We have no great tragedies to linger on. But if the last few generations have not been as lucky, is it still possible?

The Swedish historian Klas-Göran Karlsson has argued that in Eastern Europe there is hard to find one single grown up person who has not been strongly individually affected by recent history, either in person or indirect, through some close relative or friend. In countries where such facts affect people, everyone can be expected to have an emotional approach towards history. This of course does not only work on an individual level, but also on a social. In most countries with a turbulent modern history, it must be hard to distance oneself emotionally from events and processes even if they did not directly affect oneself or some acquaintance. Therefore it is reasonable to argue that the purely scientific approach to history is hard to embrace. Not only do you have to be a member of a certain profession, you also have to be born in a country with a calm and prosperous history, at least for the last generations.

So, still not prepared to accept Nietzsche’s view on the use and abuse of history, I am not either prepared to dismiss it, at least not as guideline for the entire human population in the world as it looks today. We have to accept that even if we wish for history and humanities to be based on reasons purely—as science—the concept is utopian. A person able to look upon the past without letting her feelings decide her judgement should in most cases as a matter of fact have had to live outside history. And thus the question remains: Is it even reasonable to uphold an ideal, no matter how good the intentions are, when the ideal is unreachable?

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8 Nietzsche 1874, chapter X.
9 One can of course argue that it is practically impossible to put oneself outside ones own values and hopes, no matter how high ones ideals (or education) are. So, as a matter of fact I think it is only fair to say that academic historians use history for monumental, antiquarian and critical reasons too, consciously or subconsciously. I mention this to not seem naïve, but it is of less concern, since I am here discussing the ideals of the professional historian, and in that aspect most of us are quite clear.
10 Karlsson 1999, p. 64.