

# National Identity and Historical Memory: Functionality of Historical Memory in the Formation and Development of National Identity

Milli Kimlik ve Tarihsel Bellek: Milli Kimliğin Oluşumu ve  
Gelişiminde Tarihsel Belleğin İşlevselliği

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## Abstract

Historical memory, which is shaped within the scope of the value judgments of the society in which an individual lives in the historical process, is an active past that forms the personality of the individual. This historical past has many dynamics, variables, and essential formations shaped by it. National/national identity, one of them, reflects a type of identity that emerges and develops according to the historical memory of the individual. The study focused on the functions of historical memory in forming and developing national identity. In this direction, the main questions addressed by the article are what are the effects of historical memory on the formation of national identity based on the concepts of identity, national identity, nationalism, memory, collective memory, and historical memory.

**Keywords:** Identity, National Identity, Memory, Collective Memory, Historical Memory.

## Öz

Tarihsel süreç içerisinde bir bireyin içerisinde yaşadığı toplumun değer yargıları kapsamında şekillenen tarihsel bellek, bireyin kişiliğini oluşturan aktif bir geçmiştir. Bu tarihsel geçmişin kendi içerisinde birçok dinamiği ve değişkeni olduğu gibi, ona bağlı şekillenen önemli oluşumlarda mevcuttur. Bunlardan biri olan milli/ulusal kimlik, bireyin tarihsel belleğine göre ortaya çıkan ve gelişen bir kimlik türünü yansıtmaktadır. Çalışmada milli kimliğin oluşumu ve gelişiminde tarihsel belleğin fonksiyonları üzerinde duruldu. Bu doğrultuda makalenin ele aldığı temel sorular, kimlik, milli kimlik, milliyetçilik, bellek, kolektif bellek ve tarihsel bellek kavramlarından hareketle, tarihsel belleğin milli kimliğin oluşumu üzerindeki etkilerinin neler olduğudur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Kimlik, Milli Kimlik, Bellek, Kolektif Bellek, Tarihsel Bellek

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## Introduction

In recent years, research in the field of social sciences has produced results that prove and accept that history operates through institutions to create the social world. Based on these results, the question of the effect of historical memory makes the memory of a society on the formation and development of that society's national identity come to the fore. According to the theoretical perspective put forward from this agenda, the ethnic identity of a person and his attitude towards himself and the representatives of other ethnic communities and groups have an essential effect on the formation of historical memory. Because historical memory is a set of facts that emerge from the individual's past experiences, such as the heroes in his past, his relations with other people, and various emotional evaluations of certain events, with these aspects, historical memory is the memory of people's past. This memory has features that strengthen the bond between individuals in the historical process (Gusevskaya-Plotnikova,

2020,1029). While this aspect of historical memory unites the individual with the society in which he lives and develops, it shapes his present characteristics based on the value judgments he receives from his past. This contributes to the formation of national identity by increasing the individual's bond of belonging to the relevant society. So, how functional is historical memory in the construction of national identity? In what ways does historical memory support the formation of national identity?

The present study analyzes the putative theory between historical memory and national identity within the context of related questions. At this point, the study focuses on the functionality of historical memory in forming and developing national identity. The article's primary purpose is to examine the effect of historical memory on the construction of national identity. While many studies have been conducted on the concept of identity, national identity, collective memory, and historical memory in the current literature, the analysis of the effect of historical memory on the formation of national identity has yet to be adequately examined. This shortcoming is because although nationalism studies acknowledge the importance of collective memory, they cannot reveal the concrete impact of these studies on citizenship policies and cannot form a comparative perspective. Similarly, collective memory studies, which develop a narrow and isolated perspective on related issues, look at a single case in detail and cannot create a broader perspective on nation and identity construction from this case. On the other hand, communities in the historical process reveal a culture of remembering in different ways, with Assmann's (1992) expressions. These narrative patterns developed by various communities pave the way for the emergence of distinct national identities (Uğur Çınar, 2018, p. 142-143). From this point of view, the study aims to contribute to the deficiency in the field from a positivist perspective while examining the effect of historical memory on national identity. At this point, the concepts of identity and national identity, memory, and historical memory are discussed in detail to establish the conceptual framework of the subject. Then, around this conceptual framework, the processes affecting the formation of national identity, social and collective memory, and the effects of historical memory on national identity were analyzed.

### 1. Identity and National Identity Concept

Identity, which is a somewhat ambiguous and complex concept etymologically, is expressed as "self" and "identity" in European social science literature (Öztürk, 2007, p. 4). According to Güvenç (1993) identity; is a concept used for the answers given by individuals and groups to questions

such as "Who are you, from whom?" (Güvenç, 1993, p. 3). According to Bosanquet (1988) Identity cannot exist without a difference," identity constitutes the meeting point and synthesis of differences (Bosanquet, 1988, p. 359). Again, in the words of William E. Connolly, "difference identity necessitates difference in identity" (Connolly, 1995, p. 9). Identity, accepted as "a mode of expression, attitude, and behavior," reflects a consciousness that shows continuity over time. In this sense, identity can be evaluated as the sum of the effects and reactions people consciously realize in the historical process (Öztürk, 2007, p. 9-10). The concept of identity, which constitutes the most basic origin of the social system, is the counterpart of the individual's cultural and social status in their environment. With these aspects, identity constitutes the subtitle of a scope that reflects people's lifestyles, such as multidimensional beliefs, attitudes, and value judgments (Yıldız, 2007, p. 9). Identity, a human-specific concept, has two primary components, including identification and recognition and belonging. Again, identities consist of basic identities originating from family-tribal-ancestry and religion and socio-political identities created later, such as nation, social class, king, emperor subjects, and citizenship. In addition, there are different types of identity, such as objective, subjective, individual, cultural, and national/national (Yıldız-Demir, 2015, p. 2-7).

National/national identity, among the identity types, is accepted as the style of national culture that develops individually and socially. In this respect, national identity is a concept used for the features that differentiate the person and society, starting from the closest ones and distinguishing them from similar ones (Yıldız-Demir, 2015, p. 16). The idea of identity was first used in this way by the American anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978). Combining psychological mutants with ethnological observations, Mead stated that research on culture and identity is about "national character." Following Mead's determination, the term identity became a general definition of national identity and entered the agenda of historians with the new process (Öztürk, 2007, p. 6-7).

The historical process has an essential effect on creating and preserving national identity, which gained importance with the emergence of nation-states. (Karakoç-Utkuluer Yıldırım, 2021, p. 33). The idea of nationalism, which was influential in forming nation-states, played an essential role in developing national identity. According to Edensor, attempts to fix national memory and identity form an integral part of the ideological rhetoric of nationalism (Edensor, 1997, p. 175). According to the British sociologist Anthony D. Smith, for nationalism to be associated with a multidimensional concept of national identity, it must

include a specific language, sensitivity, and symbolism. (Smith, 2017, p. 8). Smith's approach shows that the impact of nationalism on national identity should be approached with caution. According to Öztürk (2007) individual characteristics, traditions and customs, moral values, and social norms form individual and social identities by combining in particular times and places. (Öztürk, 2007, p. 8, 10). These determinations of the author contain arguments that reveal the importance of social dynamics in forming identity. All these results show that although the concept of identity is personal, it is shaped in societies formed by people living together, and it is a social concept on a macro scale (Yıldız, 2007, p. 10). Such an approach shows that identity is one of the cornerstones of an individual's life and constitutes his social belonging. In this sense, historical and collective memory have an essential effect on the formation of national identity. It is impossible to think that any developed and modernized society has excluded its values, abandoned its national culture and identity, or reached this point by alienating from its core values and cultures (Yıldız-Demir, 2015, p. 20).

Funkenstein (1989) in his work "Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness," states that a new kind of historical image has emerged from the collective memory in Western culture, starting from ancient times. According to the author, this new image appearing in the West can be called "historical consciousness" uniquely. This "historical consciousness" shaped in the West lies in reminding the past to create a collective identity and integrity and to understand and give meaning to the past (Funkenstein, 1989, p. 12). While these expressions of Funkenstein reveal the importance of history in the individual's life, they also shows that it can be used as a social awareness tool. Another writer, British sociologist Anthony D. Smith (1988) who emphasizes the importance of social value judgments in the formation of national identity, expresses the essential components that make up "national identity" as follows:

1. A common understanding of historical land or homeland,
2. Common myths and historical memory,
3. A common mass public culture,
4. A binding system of rights and duties for all individuals forming the society,
5. It is a shared economy (Cited from Smith, Yıldız, 2007, p. 13).

These features revealed by Smith offer the contribution of historical common values in forming national identity. Starting from all these, national identity defines the relations of the individual with the nation and the state. Similarly, national identity, which binds the "abstract" individual to a particular country and state, is a phenomenon in which not only individuals but also collective entities such as the nation and state are influential. With these aspects, national identity can create a common perception that integrates the individual and the country and a common stance that emerges accordingly (Ak, 2019, p. 205). All these shared values and historical accumulation have developed arguments that will contribute to forming and shaping national identity as a super identity above individual identities. These arguments provide data to support the central thesis put forward in the article.

## 2. The Concept of Historical Memory

Memory, which is briefly expressed as "remembering ability," comes from the Latin word "memoria," which means memory and remembering (Demir, 2012, p. 185). The ability to remember is one of the most critical physiological and mental characteristics given to humans individually. This ability is generally defined as retrieving and recalling the information we have received in our memory (Biletska-Şahin-Şükür, 2014, p. 95). For Edensor, remembering, which does not occur solely as a psychological function of a particular part of life, is socially constructed and institutionalized. Therefore, the recall function is never static or monolithic (Edensor, 1997, p. 175). "Perhaps the first task of the history of memory is to historicize memory," says Alon Confino (Confino, 1997, p.1403). According to Funkenstein, "the starting point and reference frame of memory is the system of signs and symbols it uses" (Funkenstein, 1989, p. 7). Very important in all these respects, memory allows us to construct our identity so that past wrongs that persist over time are seen as "ours." Communities or individuals who do not remember the past or make strict distinctions between the past and the present cannot be responsible agents. (Temin-Dahl, 2017, p. 905). In this respect, memory, which resembles a living organism, contributes to individuals' making sense of the present with their value judgments from their past and accordingly shaping their future (Cited from Halbwachs, Erdoğan, 2022, p. 11). In the words of Temin and Dahl, "collective memory, the social counterpart of individual memory, is constructed through a series of narratives and commemoration practices that give meaning to the past, rather than a depiction of the past." (Temin-Dahl, 2017, p. 905). Hamptan and Peifder agree that "collective memory

provides the key to understanding the interaction between past and present, between history and politics" (Hamptan-Peifder, 2007, p. 373).

Such a perspective reveals the contribution of historical memory, a component of the past, in forming today's value judgments. At this point, historical memory is a set of arguments that consists of a reflection on past experiences and carries the individual from the present to the past. Maurice Halbwachs states that having a collective memory is the awareness of the uniqueness of individuals who make up a group or human communities, depending on their past experiences (Cited from Halbwachs, Erdoğan, 2022, p. 11). Similarly, Halbwachs (1992) who states that it will only be possible for people to remember consistently outside the context determined by the groups they belong to, emphasizes the effect of social formations on memory. Based on Sigmund Freud's approach to forgetting rather than remembering, Halbwachs opposes that all past experiences are stored in an individual's subconscious. The French philosopher clarifies the distinction between collective memory and history, based on the thesis that memory can never be the place where all the experiences of the past are stored. The social memory theory put forward by the author here is at the same point as Emile Durkheim's approach (Cited from Halbwachs, Olick, 2014, p. 178-180). British anthropologist Paul Connerton, on the other hand, states that memory is not just the re-enactment of past events. According to Connerton (1999) memory is a process that is determined and shaped according to the dynamics of the present time rather than the (Cited from Connerton, Demir, 2012, p. 186). Indeed, in De Souto's words, "the present and the future are often constructed from the memory of the past and the sense of identity it provides. Since memory helps construct them, there can be no present or future without the past" (De Souto, 2013: 281). These expressions of the author show that identity is shaped not only by the memory of the past but also by the value judgments of the present.

The traditional understanding of the relationship between history and memory, a relatively simple view, is that the historian's function is to be the guardian of the memory of public events. From this point of view, history is written for the benefit of the actors, to make them famous, and to learn from their example to benefit future generations. Alongside Cicero's statement that history is "the life of memory," various historians such as Herodotus, Froissart, and Lord Clarendon have all claimed that they wrote to keep the memory of great deeds and significant events alive (Burke, 1997, p. 43). In this respect, history, although having a subjective point of view, is an essential laboratory of the past.

Keith Jenkins (2011) states that "history is not the same as the past, history is always for someone, history always has a purpose, history is never innocent but always ideological." From this point of view, for Jenkins, the past is "a construction site, not a foreign land waiting to be discovered" (Jenkins, 2011, p. 12-13). According to Eriksen (1997) who was inspired by Greek mythology, "memory is the mother of history," "memory is the origin of history," and history is "the product of memory" (Eriksen, 1997, p. 129-130). According to this point of view, one of the fundamental dynamics that constitutes the memory and ability to remember the individual is the experiences he has lived in the historical process. An individual's memory is determined by society outside of himself. Collective memory, created in line with this view of Emile Durkheim, one of the pioneers of positivist theory, refers to the shaping of individuals' memories by society (Biletska-Şahin-Şükür, 2014, p. 96-98). According to Jeffrey K. Olick (2014) who developed a different perspective on the relationship between history and collective memory, "While history is a past where we no longer have an organic relationship and no longer has an important place in our lives, collective memory is an active past that shapes our identity" (Olick, 2014, p. 180). According to Ross Poole (2008) individual and collective memory is both cognitive and normative. In other words, memory transmits information from the past to the present and transfers responsibilities to us (Poole, 2008, p. 149). In another study focusing on the role of memory in conveying obligations and commitments from the past, Poole states that the primary function of memory is to get information from the past (Poole, 2008, p. 263-266). The historical memory that emerges from this is the basis and mental core of public consciousness, which provides the ability to define an individual and society. In this respect, historical memory is the most critical catalyst for social consolidation. Famous French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who founded the historical theory of collective memory, defines collective memory as a representation of the past shared and constructed by members of a social group (Cited from Halbwachs, Funkenstein, 1989, p. 9). In this sense, the strength of Halbwachs' ideas of collective memory comes from seeing them instead as a "socially constructed concept." According to this theory, identity has turned into a collective identity by creating, comparing, sharing, negotiating, and building from past events, not out of nothing (Patrick, 2012, p. 6). The collective identity acquired through adopting society-specific features such as norms, values, and social control of a culture defines a kind of social identity (Özdil, 2017, p. 391). This identity feature shows that it is formed and shaped by the historical process. In addition, history wants to control the past and memory to establish the ties of today's societies with the past and to



ensure their development in this way. For this purpose, history, which builds memory spaces to accommodate the past and memory, establishes a connection with the past through these spaces (Kararşlan, 2019, p. 5). Contrary to these approaches, which see history and memory as intertwined elements, according to Pierre Nora (1989) a French scientist who sees history and memory as different things:

Far from being synonymous, memory and history now appear in fundamental opposition. Memory refers to the lives carried by the living societies founded in its name. On the other hand, history is always the reconstruction of the problematic and incomplete of what is no more. Memory, a constantly current phenomenon, connects the individual to the present, while history represents the past. History requires analysis and criticism as it is an intellectual and worldly production. Memory is blind to everyone except the group it attaches to (Nora, 1989, p. 8-9). According to Tamm (2013) who holds a similar view, "history" and "memory" can hardly be considered in the same category. Regarding cultural memory, history is an artistic form, just like religion. Accordingly, history writing should be regarded as one of the many tools of cultural memory (Tamm, 2013, p. 464). Hayden White (1978) who deals with the subject differently from the point of view of Nora and Tamm, states that the distinction between history and collective memory is not that strict. Making determinations regarding academic historiography, White says that historians give meaning to past events by evaluating them in a plot (Cited from White, Uğur Çınar, 2018, p. 139). These determinations of the author characterize the contribution of history to collective memory. According to Ertaş (2021) history, and memory are the most critical factors in transmitting social perception, value judgments, and symbols and symbols, as in forming a collective identity (Ertaş, 2021, p. 174-175). All these approaches are essential because they reflect different perspectives on the relationship between history and memory.

### **3. Formation and Development of National Identity: Functionality of Historical Memory**

The conceptual framework expressed so far shows that national identity is a social dynamic shaped by the influence of historical memory. With these aspects, national identity gains value by being shaped by individual and social memory. The words of Aime Cesaire, "A people without a memory is a people without a future," and the statements of psychologists that "a person without a memory is simply not a person," show that social identity is primarily linked to a shared past (Bouchat-Rime, 2018, p. 2). According to this

point of view, "Historical memory" and "identity" are inseparable concepts with close relations and interdependencies between them. Because preserving memory constitutes one of the most basic conditions for the self-determination of individuals and the strengthening of social groups (Gusevskaya-Plotnikova, 2020, p. 1028). Such an approach contains arguments that will contribute to the formation of social value judgments and the formation of national identity. The construction of national identity, a complex process that requires an ideological infrastructure, is mainly based on creating a helpful past (Uğur Çınar, 2018, p. 145). Individuals with a historical consciousness have a shared history, value judgments, and national identity through their society. For all these reasons, historical memory has an important place and function in forming a national identity based on essential components such as shared history, language, religion, geography, and culture (Hayta-Yakar, 2021, p. 135-137).

Akıncı (2014) states that some old feelings and ethnic origins effectively form national identities. From the author's point of view, factors that make up the familiar past, such as language, history, religion, and myths, have an essential effect on the formation of nations. (Akıncı, 2014, p. 147-148). Historical memory is a significant factor in forming this identity. As a matter of fact, regarding this reality, German scientist Jan Assmann (2011) defines "identity" as "political imagination" conditioned by "cultural memory" (Quoted from Assmann by Gusevskaya-Plotnikova, 2020, p. 1028). At this point, it is possible to say that identity will emerge thanks to a certain unity established between the past, state, and future. The disconnection of these three-time dimensions from each other will affect the society's identity by preventing the formation of order, continuity, and unity in the community's memory. According to Öztürk (2007) who says that history is the essential condition of socialization and gaining identity, "history is the supporter of memory in the creation of identity" (Öztürk, 2007, p. 16). While these expressions of the author reveal the importance of history in forming identity, they also touch on its contribution to creating social norms.

For Gusevskaya and Plotnikova (2020) the roots of ethnic and national identity lie in historical memory. Therefore, manipulating historical memory for political purposes can also cause changes in group identity. Thus, national/national identity emerges as a necessity when choosing the historical path of the nation's development. Such a formation, on the other hand, provides the formation of national identity by acting as a reflection of the past and also in interaction with the future (Gusevskaya-Plotnikova, 2020, p. 1028). According to Pandit (2013) states must develop rituals to

form a national identity and historical memory. These statements of the author provide arguments that support our current thesis. Traditions that express symbolic meanings aim to convey certain concepts and events to societies directly and concretely. In this sense, history books and museums are vital in constructing and disseminating national identity. According to Pandit, states must develop rituals to form a national identity and historical memory. (Pandit, 2013, p. 54). These statements of the author provide arguments that support our current thesis. Traditions that express symbolic meanings aim to convey certain concepts and events to societies directly and concretely. In this sense, history books and museums are vital in constructing and disseminating national identity. However to "identify" history, its relation to memory must be carefully preserved. In this context, commemorations play an essential role. Through such ceremonies or rituals, the knowledge of the past is transmitted to new generations as history and as lived reality, experience, and memory. Modern societies regularly perform such ceremonies, often initiated by the state or organized by some public institution. More is needed for history to be an academy to be necessary to a society, to give a sense of national identity, roots, and belonging. If history is erased from memory, it cools, dies, and is of no interest to anyone but a small circle of scholars. At this point, history must be constantly transformed into memory to develop the relationship between history and memory. Therefore, with the magical effect of rituals, history is continuously transformed into the experience of new, remembered subjects (Eriksen, 1997, p. 134, 137). Dominick LaCapra (2016) who has developed a different perspective on the subject, states that trauma and traumatic events undeniably affect the development of historical memory and related identity (LaCapra, 2016, p. 376). Based on all these, historical memory has essential contributions to constructing national identity. Indeed, history gives identity and roots and creates a sense of continuity and belonging. History tells us who we are. The "lack of history" reveals simple ignorance and the threatening possibilities of being both rootless and irresponsible. In this sense, history has a vital role in the production of national histories, the construction of federal states, and the development of national identities. History develops roots and identities not only because it is an academic discipline but also because it borrows some features from memory. This can be achieved through historical archives, museums, and historical monuments. In this sense, history is defined rhetorically as "the memory of societies" (Eriksen, 1997, p. 130-131). These statements of Eriksen prove that history and the historical memory that emerges depending on it are essential tools in shaping society's identity. Memory is not just a wrong date; It is history told from a particular point of

view and with a specific focus. Just as an individual's memory is a story of the past from that individual's point of view, the memory of a nation is a story of the past from its point of view. But in both cases, the narrative genre of memory is autobiography. Many of the great historians of the 19th century (e.g., Michelet, Ranke, Macaulay, Bancroft) were creating memories for nations struggling to take their place on the world-historical scene. Since national memory becomes an entity in the individual's life, each country prioritizes its history in its own school and education system. Just as the map on the classroom wall introduces students to what their government is and isn't, the stories told introduce them to their past and what's not. These stories are confirmed in the monuments on the street, in the museums they visit, and in the national holidays they celebrate. These artifacts and rituals refer to the nation's past as part of their meaning. At this point, historical memory is accepted as an essential element of national culture. Therefore, new nation members begin to think of themselves in terms of these stories and thus become part of the national community. The memory of being a nation member carries specific responsibilities and commitments, but it also opens the door to a more prosperous emotional world than a solitary individual can have. National memories are no more than individual memories, just records of past events. They are also "memories of the will" in Nietzsche's sense. Their role is to record glorious events from the past as a source of pride and inspiration. However they also record commitments that the current generation has to fulfill and even disasters to which it is a responsibility to respond. This is integral to building the nation as a "memory community," as W. James Booth put it. Just as our memory gives an idea of our existence in time, our national memory gives us a sense of belonging to a community that has existed over time. Just as our memory tells us what we owe to our past, our national memory tells us what we owe to our national history (Poole, 2008, p. 275-276).

History books, museums, antiques, monuments preservation, etc., can all be seen as contexts in which collective memory is created and validated. Through such institutions, it becomes clear what the society chooses as its collective memory and how this memory is constructed. However, to work not only as a cold and dead science but as memory, as history that gives identity, the chosen one must, to some extent, agree with the already existing collective memory (Eriksen, 1997, p. 132). According to the German philosopher F. Nietzsche (1997) individuation and gaining identity is not just a biological process; individuation is a situation created by the relations between individuals who develop a standard communication network with certain groups and share these communication elements

(Nietzsche, 1997, p. 62). In this sense, while personal memory contributes to socialization, it is also built with essential sharing. A classical society emerges and develops due to the gathering of its members under an identity. "It is the registration of the identity of a past society." In this sense, the society, which takes its homogeneity and consistency from its past, gains continuity with a shared identity between unchanging elements such as time and space. However an organization can only have continuity in time and space with identity. Time creates the past-now-future coordinates.

On the other hand, the identity that a person gains over time and space actually expresses a formation that emerged in a historical process. In other words, individuals are beings created by history (Öztürk, 2007, p. 9-12). In addition to this undeniable influence of history in the formation of national identity, "who does not have a positivist view of scientific history as a "reservoir" of historical memory" (Gusevskaya-Plotnikova, 2020, p. 1026). Nietzsche (1997) brought up the view that it is impossible to live without the possibility of forgetting and that forgetting is necessary for all kinds of actions (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 62). This approach of Nietzsche can be supported by Renan's (1994) statement that "For nations, the main thing is that the individuals included in it have many things in common, as well as that they have forgotten many things in common" (citing from Renan, Uğur Çınar, 2018, p. 143).

### Conclusion

As stated in the article, the formation of historical memory, which is accepted as the memory of the past, and this memory has an undeniable effect on the shaping of national identity shaped accordingly. Since society's value judgments affect collective memory, historical memory is very effective on national identity. Knowing their past experiences increases the current responsibilities of individuals and creates national identity awareness. This process is related to the determination of the individual's memory by society, and the collective memory that emerges from this reflects an active past that shapes individual and national identities. Such a result shows that in today's organizations, identity appears according to the historical memory of that society. While this situation ensures that historical events are transformed into memory, not lost and transferred to today's organizations, this interaction makes individuals a part of the nation by increasing the historical responsibility and consciousness of being a nation.

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