

Rommel A. Curaming*

Dark Age versus Golden Age: History Wars over the Memories of the Marcos Era in the Philippines

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Abstract: History wars in the Philippines over the memories of the Marcos era exploded in the open in the months leading to the 2022 presidential elections. They are evident in the bitter and sustained clashes between the proponents of two opposing narratives, the Dark Age versus the Golden Age. This essay seeks to explore the factors that enabled the development of these sharply opposing narratives and what does such development imply about the character of the contemporary Philippine politics and public consumption of history. It shows that these clashing narratives have evolved alongside the shifting power relations in the country between the Marcoses and their supporters, on the one hand, and the broad coalition of groups that opposed them, on the other. While both narratives are problematic as historical knowledge, they are potent as political tools for their respective proponents and opponents. The shifting grounds of politics in the country fueled ambiguities not only in what counts as history but in who or what constitute the conservative and the progressive in the country's historical narratives.

Keywords: history wars; Philippines; Marcos; Memory; Weaponization

The History Wars, according to Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, refers to the struggle over the interpretation of the past fought in the media, in the classroom, in the universities, and in the pages of historical scholarship.¹ Well-known cases involve intense public contestations, such as the Enola Gay controversy in the US in the 1990s,² the

Japanese textbooks controversy, and, in Australia, debates over the nature of colonial encounter and the colonial impact on Aboriginal communities.³ Notable cases in Southeast Asia include the issues over the massive 1965–66 killings of communist-affiliated or suspected groups in Indonesia, and those around the 1969 ‘race’ riots in Malaysia.⁴ The intensity, longevity, and the scope of public and scholarly participation vary depending on what is at stake regarding the issues, which often reflect anxieties in the present and for the future, rather than about the past.⁵ However, since the past needs to be aligned to the desires in the present and the dreams for the future, and various groups often have clashing visions of the future, the interpretation of the past tends to be modified, becoming the focal point of intense contestation.⁶ At the bottom line, history wars involve processes by which a society negotiates which version of the past will be sanctioned as the acceptable foundation for its present identity and future aspirations.

The ongoing history wars in the Philippines involve two sharply opposing historical narratives about the Marcos era (1966–1986) which compete for people's attention and political loyalties. The first is popularly called the ‘Dark Age,’ which paints the period as authoritarian, violent,

¹ Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2003).

² Enola Gay was the airplane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The plan was to make it a centerpiece of an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the World War II, but the contrasting aims and interpretations among stakeholders led to heated disputes in 1994–1995.

*Corresponding author: Rommel A. Curaming, History and International Studies Programme, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Jalan Tungku Link, Gadong, BE1410, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, E-mail: Rommel.curaming@ubd.edu.bn

³ Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, (Metropolitan Books, 1996); Michael Lewis, ed., *“History Wars” and Reconciliation in Japan and Korea: The Roles of Historians, Artists and Activists* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Macintyre and Clark, *The History Wars*.

⁴ Katharine McGregor, “Confronting the Past in Contemporary Indonesia: The Anti-Communist Killings of 1965–66 and the Role of the Nahdlatul Ulama,” *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2009): 195–224, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710902809351>; Adrian Vickers and Katharine E. McGregor, “Public Debates about History: Comparative Notes From Indonesia,” *History Australia* 2, no. 2 (2005): 44–1–44–13; Kua Kia Soong, “Racial Conflict in Malaysia: Against the Official History,” *Race & Class* 49, no. 3 (2008): 33–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396807085900>; Kua Kia Soong, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969*, 2. ed (SUARAM, 2011). New ed or second ed?

⁵ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (April 1989): 7–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.

⁶ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1994), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv131bw3q>; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

extravagant, corrupt, and chaotic. “Never again!” so the accompanying slogan goes, should it happen. This narrative flourished amid the euphoria over the ignominious downfall of the Marcos Sr. regime (to differentiate from the current regime under Marcos Jr.) following the People Power uprisings in 1986, which happened on the long stretch of the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (henceforth EDSA). Since then, it has been widely accepted, and it is carefully guarded by influential and varied groups bound by shared hatred toward the Marcoses and the things they represented. The second, known as the ‘Golden Age,’ offers a starkly oppositional vision: the Marcos Sr. era was a time of discipline, peace and order, grand infrastructures, and economic development. This latter narrative has deep roots in the 1970s and had a sizeable following, but since the regime’s collapse in 1986 it has been side-lined, disparaged, or dismissed in the mainstream public discourses. In the past decade or so, though, it has grown assertive in its resurgence, and even went viral in the lead up to the 2022 presidential elections. It facilitated the astonishing return to power by a scion of the Marcos family, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., popularly known as BBM.⁷

What are the enabling factors for the development of these sharply opposing narratives? What does such development imply about the evolving character of Philippine politics and public consumption of history? These are the main questions this essay seeks to address. It shows that these clashing narratives have evolved alongside the shifting power relations in the country between the Marcoses and their supporters on the one hand, and the broad coalition of groups that opposed them on the other. While both narratives are problematic as historical knowledge, they are potent as political tools for their respective proponents and opponents. The shifting grounds of politics in the country fueled ambiguities not only in what counts as history, but in who or what constitutes the conservative and the progressive in the country’s historical narratives.

1 Contextual Factors

In the immediate post-Second World War decades, the Philippines took pride in being the “showcase of democracy” in Asia.⁸ Its political system developed by

mimicking the American two-party, liberal democratic system with periodic elections for an orderly transfer of power. Viewed closely, however, the system may be aptly described as an “anarchy of families.”⁹ Transactional alliances and shifting networks of oligarchic families compete intensely over the control of the state apparatuses for their own, rather than the general public’s interests. The periodic fiesta-like elections where people choose their local and national leaders mask the fundamentally elitist character of the *cacique* (local strongman) democracy in the country, prompting an astute observer to label it as perhaps the “most persistently undemocratic democracy in Asia.”¹⁰ No wonder the grounds were, and still are, fertile for discontent that manifested early on in many peasant uprisings¹¹ and communist-led and ethnic separatist rebellions in the country,¹² as well as in the upsurge of people’s trust in populist and authoritarian leaders.¹³ Despite not lacking understanding of the deep structural roots of these problems, politico-economic elites since independence in 1946 opted either to address them superficially or ignore them altogether.

The stability of the post-war liberal democratic order was upended when Marcos Sr., whose rule was

⁹ Alfred W McCoy, ed., *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Joel Rocamora, “Formal Democracy and Its Alternatives in the Philippines: Parties, Elections and Social Movements,” in *Democracy and Civil Society in Asia*, eds. Jayant Lele and Fahimul Quadir (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2004), 196–221, 196.

¹¹ David R. Sturtevant, *Popular Uprisings in the Philippines, 1840–1940* (Cornell University Press, 1976); Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 1979).

¹² Kathleen Weekley, *The Communist Party of the Philippines, 1968–1993: A Story of Its Theory and Practice* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001); Marites D. Vitug and Glenda M. Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs, 2000).

¹³ Nicole Curato, “Beyond Demagogues and Deplorables: Democratizing Populist Rhetoric in Rodrigo Duterte’s Philippines,” in *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach*, eds. Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza, and Benjamin Moffitt, (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003110149>; Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt against Elite Democracy* (Singapore: Palgrave Pivot, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5918-6>; Fernan Talamayan, “Articulating Populism in the Philippines: The Rhetorical Strategies of Joseph Estrada and Rodrigo Duterte,” *Asian Politics and Policy* 17, no. 1 (2025); Adele Webb and Nicole Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” in *Populism Around the World*, ed. Daniel Stockemer (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 49–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96758-5_4.

⁷ Dean Dulay et al., “Continuity, History, and Identity: Why Bongbong Marcos Won the 2022 Philippine Presidential Election,” *Pacific Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2023): 85–104, <https://doi.org/10.5509/202396185>.

⁸ David Wurfel, *Filipino Politics: Development and Decay*, Politics and International Relations of Southeast Asia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

constitutionally bound to end in 1973, successfully declared Martial Law in September 1972, with the broad acquiescence of the public.¹⁴ This masterstroke effectively extended his rule indefinitely, to the consternation of his enemies and their sympathizers. The Marcos regime arrested, incarcerated, tortured, silenced, co-opted, or killed those who opposed it. This included the opposition party leaders, oligarchs, journalists, scholars and other intellectuals, church personnel, organized labor and peasant movements, secessionist groups, and communist rebels.¹⁵ Harassed and victimized by the regime, they were unified by a common enemy; they bitterly remember the era as the most violent, corrupt, and authoritarian in Philippine history. Despite being a minority and ideologically varied in orientation, they were (and still are) well-placed in the media, academia, and other institutions of enormous influence. Their hatred toward the Marcos regime casts a long and deep shadow over the nation's memories of the Marcos era in the post-EDSA decades.

Meanwhile, many Filipino intellectuals, technocrats, and a broad range of functional or sectoral groups cooperated with the Marcos regime.¹⁶ Under the banner of reforms ostensibly to create *Bagong Lipunan* (New Society), the regime carried out wide-ranging cross-sectoral projects, which appear to have been appreciated and fondly remembered by sizeable segments of the population.¹⁷ This

partly explains the shared memories of the Marcos period that are sharply different from those remembered by the opposing groups noted above.¹⁸ When the Marcos regime collapsed in 1986, the Marcos-initiated projects were abandoned, rescinded, scaled-back, and vilified as part of the massive and systematic campaign of de-Marcosification.¹⁹ Many of the pre-1972 institutions, ideas, and practices were restored, and the body politic and public memories were sanitized of the Marcos legacies.²⁰ Just as history tended to be written by victors, so memories were selected, collected and promoted by them.

Who were these victors? The post-Marcos decades saw series of regimes – from that of the mother Cory Aquino (1986–1992) to the son Noynoy Aquino (2010–2016) – that were rabidly or largely anti-Marcos. Cory Aquino's government set the tone via a sweeping and systematic de-Marcosification effort. By the end of Cory Aquino's administration in 1992, the 'Dark Age' narratives appear to be already well-formed and widely accepted, except among groups that were labelled as "Marcos loyalists." Under the administrations of Fidel Ramos (1992–1998) and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2001–2010) it has been sustained, but cracks began to appear with signs of "People Power fatigue."²¹ The lingering influence of this narrative was demonstrated in 2009–2010 when Cory Aquino fell ill and eventually passed on, and the images, symbols, and memories of Ninoy, Cory, and the EDSA People Power were successfully mobilized in support of the election of the scion of the Aquino family, Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino Jr.²² Facing the still popular Joseph Estrada, who was unceremoniously

14 Conrado De Quiros, *Dead Aim: How Marcos Ambushed Philippine Democracy* (Foundation for Worldwide People's Power, 1997); Rigoberto Tiglao, "The Consolidation of Dictatorship," in *Dictatorship and Revolution: Roots of People's Power*, Aurora Javate-de Dios et al. (Conspectus, 1988), 36–37.

15 Benjamin Muego, *Spectator Society: The Philippines Under Martial Rule* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1988); Raissa Espinosa-Robles, *Marcos Martial Law: Never Again: A Brief History of Torture and Atrocity Under the New Society* (Quezon City: Published by Filipinos for A Better Philippines, Inc., 2016); Mark Thompson, *The Anti-Marcos Struggle: Personalistic Rule and Democratic Transition in the Philippines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

16 Alfred W. McCoy, *Closer than Brothers: Manhood at Philippine Military Academy* (Yale University Press, 1999); Miguel Paolo P. Reyes, "Producing Ferdinand E. Marcos, the Scholarly Author," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 66, no. 2 (2018): 173–218, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2018.0017>; Teresa Tadem, *Philippine Politics and the Marcos Technocrats: The Emergence and Evolution of a Power Elite* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019); Robert Youngblood, *Marcos against the Church: Economic Development and Political Repression in the Philippines* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 1990); Rommel Curaming, *Power and Knowledge in Southeast Asia: State and Scholars in Indonesia and the Philippines* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

17 Gerardo Sicat, "The Economic Legacy of Marcos," University of the Philippines, School of Economics, 2011.

18 Jorge V. Tigno et al., "They Never Left: Drivers of Memory of Dictatorship and Impressions of Ferdinand E. Marcos as President After February 1986," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 43, no. 3 (2024): 430–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034241248763>.

19 Kenneth Cardenas, "The EDSA Republic as Moral Liquidator: Embedded Origins, Unintended Consequences," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 72, no. 4 (2024): 471–509; Ledivina Cariño, "Bureaucracy for a Democracy: The Struggle of the Philippine Political Leadership and the Civil Service in the Post-Marcos Period," *Philippine Journal of Public Administration* 33, no. 2 (1989): 207–52.

20 Benedict Anderson, "Cacique Democracy and the Philippines: Origins and Dreams," *New Left Review* 1/169 (1988): 3–31; Francisco Nemenzo, "From Autocracy to Elite Democracy," in *Dictatorship and Revolution: Roots of People's Power* (Manila: Conspectus, 1987), 220–68.

21 Patricio Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, "The Withering of Philippine Democracy," *Current History*, September 2006, 290–95.

22 Lisandro E. Claudio, *Taming People's Power: The EDSA Revolutions and Their Contradictions* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013).

ousted in 2001, Noynoy pulled off a decisive victory in the elections despite being a total political neophyte. His victory may be attributed significantly to the lingering effects of the Cory or EDSA “magic.”²³

Only Joseph Estrada’s (1998–2001) brief reign was the exception. A movie star who was street smart, well-off but culturally low-brow, Estrada had cultivated anti-elite, pro-poor images that proved appealing to the masses, as evident in his landslide victory in the 1998 presidential elections. An admirer of Marcos Sr., whose body remained unburied since his death in 1989, he expressed support toward the idea of allowing Marcos Sr. to be buried at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* (Heroes’ Cemetery). Such a pronouncement courted for him intense controversy early on in his presidency.²⁴ Charged of extravagance, incompetence, corruption, cronyism, and cozy ties with the Marcoses, Estrada was ousted by a coalition of various groups, including the military.²⁵ His ouster via EDSA 2 (mass protests along EDSA on January 17–21, 2001) eventually led to EDSA 3 (April 25–May 1, 2001) which saw huge numbers of poor people rioting on the streets, triggered by Estrada’s publicly humiliating arrest. Symbolic of the cracks in the erstwhile solid EDSA narrative, Estrada’s short-lived presidency and the ensuing EDSA three would prove to be a harbinger of the rising populist sentiments that drove the rise of Duterte later.²⁶ In hindsight, what could have been an opportunity to resuscitate the images of the Marcos family much earlier had been thwarted. It had to wait until Duterte’s astonishing election in 2016 to gain an explosive momentum.

Duterte is a strongman and an unabashed admirer of Marcos Sr. His presidency (2016–2022) reinforced the resurgence of positive memories of the Marcos era. By allowing, for instance, the burial of Marcos Sr. at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* (Heroes’ Cemetery) in 2016, Duterte has, in the alarmed words of observers, “dangerously opened the floodgates for the re-writing of recent Philippine history” in

favor of Marcos.²⁷ His emphasis on discipline, infrastructure, security, decisive leadership, and community-based projects resonated well among many Filipinos, reinforcing ‘nostalgia’ for Marcos Sr. who also prioritized those things.²⁸ The Marcos Jr. camp-funded sophisticated social media-driven campaigns, with troll farms and paid influencers, to rehabilitate memories of the Marcos era had found a nurturing environment in the Duterte regime’s commanding popularity.²⁹ These campaigns have intensified since the 2016 elections, but efforts along this line appear to have been in place years earlier.³⁰

The stunning victory of Marcos Jr. in the 2022 elections, with almost 60 % votes in a crowded field, seems to imply that most Filipinos do not care about the key issues – human rights violations, Martial Law and authoritarianism, historical revisionism, corruption, violence – that dominate public discourses and are consistently brought up by the liberal-leftists and other anti-Marcos groups against the Marcoses.³¹ It is an interpretation that ‘Dark Agers’ find difficult to contemplate. In their view, Marcos Jr. won mainly because

23 Mark R. Thompson, “Reformism versus Populism in the Philippines,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (2010): 154–68, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2010.0002>.

24 Christian Victor Masangkay and Larah Del Mundo, “Where to Bury Marcos? Dead Body Politics in the Marcos Playbook,” *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 31, no. 2 (2016): 1–28.

25 Amando Doronila, *The Fall of Joseph Estrada: The Inside Story* (Pasig: Anvil Pub, 2001); Aries Arugay, “Mobilizing for Accountability: Contentious Politics in the Anti-Estrada Campaign,” *Philippine Sociological Review* 52, nos. 1–4 (2004): 75–96.

26 Thompson, “Reformism versus Populism in the Philippines,” Talamayan, “Articulating Populism in the Philippines.”

27 Raphael Pangalangan et al., “Marcosian Atrocities: Historical Revisionism and the Legal Constraints on Forgetting,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Human and Law* 19, no. 2 (2018): 140–90, 148.

28 Dulay et al., “Continuity, History, and Identity”; Marco Garrido, “A Conjunctural Account of Upper- and Middle-Class Support for Rodrigo Duterte,” *International Sociology* 35, no. 6 (2020): 651–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580920945978>; Marco Garrido, “Democracy as Disorder: Institutionalized Sources of Democratic Ambivalence Among the Upper and Middle Class in Manila,” *Social Forces* 99, no. 3 (2021): 1036–59, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soaa046>; Fernan Talamayan and John Lee Candelaria, “Populist Desires, Nostalgic Narratives: The Marcos Golden Age Myth and Manipulation of Collective Memories on YouTube,” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 1 (2024): 55–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2024.2416116>; Fernan Talamayan, “The Politics of Nostalgia and the Marcos Golden Age in the Philippines,” *Asia Review* 11, no. 3 (2021): 273–304, <https://doi.org/10.24987/SNUACAR.2021.12.11.3.273>; Tigno et al., “They Never Left.”

29 Gemma Mendoza, “Networked Propaganda: How the Marcoses Are Rewriting History,” *Rappler*, November 21, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/features/newsbreak/investigative/245402-networked-propaganda-marcoses-rewriting-history/index.html>; Gemma Mendoza, “Networked Propaganda: How the Marcoses Are Using Social Media to Reclaim Malacañang,” *Rappler*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/features/newsbreak/investigative/245290-marcos-networked-propaganda-social-media/index.html>.

30 Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabanes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines* (Newton Tech4Dev, n.d.); Julio Cabral Teehankee, *Beyond Nostalgia: The Marcos Political Comeback in the Philippines*, Working Paper, Southeast Asia Working Paper Serie (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2023).

31 Dean Dulay et al., “How Do Filipinos Remember Their History? A Descriptive Account of Filipino Historical Memory,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 44, no. 3 (2022): 482–514; Tigno et al., “They Never Left.”

he successfully misinformed the public with fake news, distorting the history of the Marcos era.³² The assumption was, if only people knew what the Marcos regime ‘really’ did, they would have not voted for him. Some scholars have taken exception to this view and opted to pay greater attention to the decades-long structural conditions that made a lot of Filipinos receptive to elements of the ‘Golden Age’ narrative.³³ The possibility that people could have had a genuinely positive experience and appraisals of the Marcos regime, particularly relative to their experience and/or memories of the subsequent anti-Marcos regimes, cannot be ignored. On the other hand, the efforts of many liberal-leftist intellectuals and journalists remain largely focused up to now in debunking and fact-checking any claim that is in line with the ‘Golden Age’ narrative.³⁴ It seems that for them, the Dark Age narrative is an unassailable historical truth while the Golden Age counterpart is pure myth or fake news, or at best a “false nostalgia,” as the title of a book indicates.³⁵ Similarly, ‘Golden Agers’ tend to flatly deny or downplay the sins of the Marcos regimes, often name-calling with expletives those who oppose or raise questions about their claims.

The rise of the Golden Age narrative to the position it occupies now is remarkable, particularly against the backdrop of the deeply-entrenched and widely-imposed obstacles it had to overcome. I grew up during the Martial Law years in the 1970s and I can attest to the elements of the Golden Age narrative, even if I do not subscribe to it. Looking back, however, that was not always the case. Attending university in the late 1980s, immediately following the EDSA People Power that ousted the Marcos regime, I fully embraced the Dark Age narrative espoused by the liberal-leftist professors and the authors I had read. Just like most educated Filipinos, I dismissed aspects of the Golden Age story as a product of the Marcos regime’s propaganda. As a critically thinking university student, or so I thought then, I felt I should cleanse myself of a false consciousness. When I graduated and began teaching in high school and at a university, I endeavored to make my students believe in the Dark Age accounts, too, offering it as an

accurate, critical, and objective history. I was one among the hordes who vowed “Never again!” It was only while completing a PhD in 2002–2006, reading intently about the Marcos regime, EDSA People Power, and post-EDSA period, when I began to realize that, along with many others, I had been lied to about important aspects of both narratives. I began to see through the veil of a moral crusade, painting the Aquinos as the saint and the Marcoses as the evil, and realized that the victors had indeed written history. I felt cheated and wondered what made me, a proudly self-proclaimed critical thinker, allow myself to be gaslighted, and how subtle the process has been. Given that practically everyone in my personal and professional circles are progressive-liberals and leftists who hated the Marcoses so much while feeding, or at least tolerating, the mystiques surrounding the Aquinos, it proved difficult for me to talk about what I knew and felt, even more so to write about it openly. That I finally did so, only after the 2022 elections (on blogposts that were widely shared and discussed amid the post-election shocks, more on this below) was a testament to how tight was the grip of the Dark Age narrative among educated Filipinos like me, and how difficult it was to wriggle out of it.

The Golden Age narrative remains at the margins of journalistic and academic discourses, but it is far from being at the peripheral in alternative public and digital spaces as it used to be. Popular ‘history’ propagated through social media is awash with this narrative. One may wonder if ordinary people know more about the “subjugated” history of the Marcos era than the highly educated anti-Marcos groups, given that they are exposed to alternative claims that are dismissed offhand as fake news by the latter. There is no denying exaggerations and distortions in much of their claims, but they also contain defensible and verifiable claims based on the documents, experiences, and memories of those who lived then. Unfortunately, Dark Agers easily brush them off as fake news. The scholars who have noticed or pushed for a more nuanced understanding of the Marcos era are still a tiny minority, but they are increasing.

In a startlingly candid commentary on the commotion over the impending victory of Marcos Jr. in the then-forthcoming 2022 presidential elections, the prominent historian Reynaldo Ileto described what was happening as “A Story of Dueling Legacies.” He argues that what was happening appears puzzling only to observers who are oblivious to the ‘alternative history’ of the last 50 years, particularly in relation to the Martial Law, EDSA uprisings, and the Aquino-Marcos families.³⁶ Contrary to the common

32 Mendoza, “Networked Propaganda: How the Marcoses Are Rewriting History”; Ong and Cabanes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines*; Pangalangan et al., “Marcosian Atrocities: Historical Revisionism and the Legal Constraints on Forgetting”; Talamayan and Candelaria, “Populist Desires, Nostalgic Narratives.”

33 Talamayan, “The Politics of Nostalgia and the Marcos Golden Age in the Philippines”; Teehankee, *Beyond Nostalgia: The Marcos Political Comeback in the Philippines*; Garrido, “Democracy as Disorder”

34 Jan Carlo Punongbayan, *False Nostalgia: The Marcos “Golden Age” Myths and How to Debunk Them* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2023).

35 Punongbayan, *False Nostalgia*.

36 Reynaldo Ileto, “The Philippine Presidential Elections: A Story of Dueling Legacies,” *Asia Link*, May 6, 2022, <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/diplomacy/article/philippines-presidential-elections-duelling-legacies/>.

idea among many liberals-leftists that the Marcoses were expelled and clawing back to power through manipulation and historical distortion, Iletto's arguments support the observation that they in fact "never left."³⁷ To the anti-Marcos groups, already disheartened and infuriated by the impending return of a Marcos to the pinnacle of power, being told that it was a duel between two competing legacies with respective legitimate histories was too much to bear. For them, so it seems, any historical account that suggests, let alone acknowledges, any positive attribute or legitimacy to the Marcos regime cannot be a history; it can only be myth, distortion, revisionism, or fake news. In a blogpost entitled "A tale of two historical revisionisms: Why a nuanced history of the Marcos years is necessary?" I traced the development of the two competing narratives and argued that both constitute historical revisionisms prompted by the shifting political fortunes of their respective proponents. In addition, both historical narratives are problematic as they highlight only what are favorable to their political interests and ignore or downplay those that are not. They sorely lack the nuances expected of good history.³⁸

With both sides, equally vociferous and combative, dismissing offhand the possibility that the two-decade Marcos era was a mix of good, bad, and much more, those who push for a more nuanced history of the Marcos era have had rough sailings. For instance, Joseph Scalice's book *Drama of Dictatorship*,³⁹ which was about to be published when the heated public debates were still raging in 2022, elicited very strong pushback from liberal-leftist intellectuals.⁴⁰ It offers a damning critique and nuanced analysis of the role of the traditional elites (both conservatives and liberals) as well as the communist parties during the Marcos era. The

conference "Toward a Nuanced History of the Marcos Era" held on February 28 and March 1, 2023, was met with, at best, very cautious responses from established Filipino scholars, while it excited segments of the public. Only a few big names put themselves forward and agreed to participate. Such a response was understandable given the huge risk of being cancelled, which speaks volumes as to how intolerant and illiberal the liberal intelligentsia in the country has become. This conference was organized in line with Filomeno Aguilar's earlier call in 2019 for a nuanced history,⁴¹ which had apparently fallen on deaf ears within the scholarly community. It turned out that, in previous years, scholar/columnists Antonio Contreras and Rigoberto Tiglao have been raising questions about EDSA and the Marcos era history, and how they figure in contemporary Philippine politics.⁴² They are outliers in the mainstream press, and they have often been disparaged, openly or in private, by many Filipino scholars and intellectuals. Steadily, however, their followings in the alternative social media 'press' have grown tremendously in the past several years. To what extent the Golden Age narrative has caught up with its Dark Age counterpart, and whether this momentum will continue in the future, is an open question. What is clear is that the Golden Age narrative has gained enormous grounds, at least outside of academia and mainstream media, in the past decade, and that both camps are digging trenches, signaling a war of attrition for years, or decades, to come.

2 Conclusions

What factors enabled the opposing narratives, and what do they reveal about Philippine politics, history, and the nature of history wars? At the heart of the contentious debates lie the primary questions of unequal power relations: who or

37 Tigno et al., "They Never Left;" Antonio Contreras, "Actually, the Marcoses Never Left," *Manila Times*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2022/02/19/opinion/columns/actually-the-marcoses-never-left/1833484>; Manuel III Quezon, "The Marcos Restoration: 30 Years in the Making Rewriting the Family History," *Asia Sentinel*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.quezon.ph/2022/05/15/asia-sentinel-the-marcos-restoration-30-years-in-the-making/>.

38 Rommel A. Curaming, "A Tale of Two Historical Revisionisms: Why Is a Nuanced History of the Marcos Years Necessary?" *Southeast Asia: Analytics, Politics and Ethics of Scholarship*, May 17, 2022. <https://diasporicminds.blogspot.com/2022/05/a-tale-of-two-historical-revisions.html?m=1>.

39 Joseph Scalice, *The Drama of Dictatorship: Martial Law and the Communist Parties of the Philippines* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

40 Earlier, Lisandro Claudio had written a powerful critique of the EDSA or People Power narrative that organically links with the Dark Age view. It is the first major work that provides a nuanced and penetrating analysis of this iconic episode. See his *Taming People's Power: The Edsa Revolutions and Their Contradictions*.

41 Filomeno V. Aguilar, "Political Conjuncture and Scholarly Disjuncture: Reflections on Studies of the Philippine State under Marcos," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 67, no. 1 (2019): 3–30, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2019.0004>.

42 Antonio Contreras, "Monopolizing History, Reifying Marcos as Evil and Deifying the Aquinos as Heroes," *Manila Times*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2016/11/22/opinion/analysis/monopolizing-history-reifying-marcos-evil-deifying-aquinos-heroes/297750>; Antonio Contreras, "A History Blinded by Hate," *Manila Times*, January 17, 2017; Rigoberto Tiglao, "Did EDSA Matter 1986?," *Manila Times*, February 20, 2014, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2014/02/20/opinion/columnists/topanalysis/did-edsa-1986-matter/77211>; Rigoberto Tiglao, "(Martial Law) History Is the Propaganda of the Victors," *Manila Times*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2017/09/20/opinion/columnists/topanalysis/martial-law-history-propaganda-victors/351639>.

what is positioned more favorably at the confluence of intersecting and dynamic power relations at a particular time and place, that determines *de facto* what legitimate history is, who has the right to claim it, which version is ‘truly’ right, and who has the right to declare what is right. Driven by a claim to moral imperative and moral ascendancy, many scholars of both conservative and progressive orientations in the Philippines, and perhaps elsewhere as well, tend to collapse the two meanings of right into what is morally acceptable, eliding in the process the determinant role of unequal power relations, and the accompanying demand for accountability. This tendency seems driven by a fear, particularly strong among progressive scholars, of being accused of justifying or abetting, rather than opposing, inequality. But inequality of power is ubiquitous, and it cannot be thought away simply by liberal aspirations. Analytic fairness requires acknowledging the facticity of power relations in every aspect of knowledge production and consumption, regardless of accuracy. The liberal dreams of equality and justice may be better served by doing this, as the demand for accountability is foregrounded.

The shifting power relations that enable the repositioning of clashing narratives suggests the possibly organic link between knowledge and power, obscured or side-lined by over a century of the professionalization of history that piggybacked into the rise of science as the authorized way of knowing.⁴³ The latter nurtured the idea of oppositional relations between power and knowledge by supposing that it only takes getting things empirically, conceptually, theoretically, and methodologically right – in short, expertise – to overcome or neutralize the political.⁴⁴ One cannot miss a supreme irony here: the liberal-progressive assertion of human agency, evident in the ‘can-do’ and ‘can-know’ spirit exemplified by the very aspiration for objectivity that accompanied the rise of science and historical profession, appears to be the same sources of reactionary attitude, not just among the proponents of Golden Age narrative, but also among liberal-progressive defenders of the Dark Age orthodoxy. As their interests are served, they both deny the rights of others to know or do otherwise, simply because

they can. Rather than co-existing, they tend to cancel each other out, nurturing the state of unending conflict.

Another important factor in understanding history wars is the battle for epistemic authority. It manifests in the salience of opposing historical interpretations in the political interests of both groups, foregrounding in the process the interpretative, an essential partner of declarative and descriptive, character of historical knowledge. Whether what is claimed or denied by each side as history was in fact a “real” history (in the sense that it actually happened) or fake news, is analytically less important in understanding history wars than the amount of support each side manages to mobilize for whatever purpose and why. From an analytical viewpoint, the question of accuracy takes a backseat to the shifting power configurations. From the standpoint of the political interests of competing groups, on the other hand, not only is the claim to objectivity of central importance, it is also the validating precondition for their politics. This explains why both sides are heavily and emotionally invested in claiming objectivity for their versions of history. History wars illustrate the centrality of history, along with science, as a validator of truth that is essential in constituting the political.⁴⁵

The morally indignant positioning of the liberal-progressive proponents of the Dark Age narrative conceals the assertion of their own power and interests. They easily called out the political interests of the proponents of the Golden Age narrative but blindsided themselves of their own. Convinced that the truth is on their side, they believe they were only “speaking truth to power,” not simultaneously asserting their own. Forgotten or ignored was Foucault’s insight that truth may be a function of power, not its antidote or opposite.⁴⁶ Similarly, the Golden Agers felt that the truth was long denied to them, and they now assert it not because of political interests or to grab the opportunity afforded by a more favorable political atmosphere, but because it is truth and it is a moral imperative to do so. The moral sublation of the political here points to an important point about the seemingly paradoxical nature power that is well covered by several thinkers but is often ignored by analysts: power tends to erase or hide itself, making itself

43 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gordon et al. (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980); Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997); Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

44 I have discussed this point in great detail in Curaming, *Power and Knowledge in Southeast Asia*.

45 Sheila Jasanoff, ed., *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Dominick LaCapra, *History & Criticism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country - Revisited*, Revised and updated ed. (Cambridge, MA: University Press, 2015).

46 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977); id., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*.

invisible, or assuming other forms like morality, truth, law, religion, science, etc.⁴⁷

The Philippines is no stranger to politically driven historical debates, but none have come close to the scale and intensity of the ongoing history wars over the memories of the Marcos era. Long heralded as a “showcase of democracy” in Asia, the stakes were high for the West’s liberal democratic project during the Cold War, and are more so now against the backdrop of the seemingly intensifying crisis of liberalism. Previous cases involving disputes over heroes⁴⁸ mainly involved clashes among factions within the elites or elite-wannabes (conservatives, liberals, Marxists, the Catholic Church). Each side assumed or claimed to represent and speak on behalf of the nation. This time, sizeable segments of the public actively, even passionately, participated. For most people whose idea of history is simply what is learned from school or read in books, participation in an intensely contested historical question opens up a much deeper and wider view on what the nature of history is and why it is important. The heightening of historical consciousness may be glimpsed, similar to what happened in Australia and the US when issues such as the cultural ‘genocide’ of Aboriginal communities and African American slaves, or the Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian Air and

Space Museum, were fiercely contested in public. While some critics bemoan history wars for “killing history” and promoting relativism and fake news,⁴⁹ others claim they encourage public engagement with the past.⁵⁰ Rather than degrading the historical profession, they render visible the ethical and political dimensions of historiography that historians assiduously mull over. As Aleida Assman and Paul Ricoeur remind us, contestations over historical memory can open new paths to recognition and reconciliation, transforming the pain of the past into be the basis for a more just and open future.⁵¹

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47 Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006); Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Reprinted, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Phronesis (London: Verso, 1989).

48 Lisandro Claudio, *Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking the State in 20th-Century Philippines* (Singapore and Kyoto: NUS Press and Kyoto University Press, 2017); Renato Constantino, “Veneration without Understanding,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 1, no. 4 (1972): 3–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472337185390141>; Reynaldo Ileto, “Heroes, Historians, and the New Propaganda Movement, 1950–1953,” *Philippine Studies* 58, no. 1/2 (2010): 223–38; Glenn Anthony May, *Inventing a Hero: The Posthumous Re-Creation of Andres Bonifacio* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1996); Ambeth R. Ocampo, *Rizal without the Overcoat*, expanded ed. (Pasig: Anvil, 2004).

49 Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997); Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

50 Anna Clark, *History’s Children: History Wars in the Classroom* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008); Macintyre and Clark, *The History Wars*.

51 Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).