Talks at GS
With David Olusoga, British Historian
And Kene Ejikeme, Global Markets, Goldman Sachs
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David Olusoga: History, it's not an option. You know? It's not an optional subject. We are shaped by it whether we like it or not. Our attitudes, our beliefs, our names, our cultures, our language. All of these things are shaped by history. So, it's there whether we like it or not.

[MUSIC INTRO]

Kene Ejikeme: Good afternoon everyone and welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Kene Ejikeme and I'm a Managing Director here at Goldman Sachs. Today I'm absolutely delighted to be joined by Professor David Olusoga OBE. David is a distinguished historian, author, broadcaster, and a Bafta winning filmmaker. He is a Professor of Public History at the University of Manchester. As well as being a columnist for *The Observer* and a writer for *The Guardian*. And today, Windrush Day, it's truly an honor to have someone of David's talent and experience to lead today's discussion.

So, David, I'm extremely excited to have this discussion with you. But I think, you know, the best place to start is what is Windrush Day? Why is it observed? Because from my perspective, Windrush has only really gained national attention relatively recently, particularly in the years following the Windrush Scandal.

David Olusoga: Oh, first of all, thank you very much for having me here. I love Windrush Day. And I think we should we think of it, not just as a historical anniversary, but as an achievement. We're a small percentage of the population, people who are African heritage in the UK. Between one and two million people. Probably a lot more if people were to do DNA testing, they'd discover there are many more of us than they think.

But our history is now part of national history because Black populations and communities in this country are [UNINTEL] to be part of that history. We've created events like Black History Month and like Windrush Day. We've forced our stories that had been deliberately excluded because they're difficult stories of slavery and empire, we've forced them into the national conversation where they always belonged. Because you can't tell the story of Britain without telling the story of Britain's relationship with Africa and people of African heritage.

So, you know, Windrush Day is an amazing achievement. Ironically, as a historian, I think Windrush Day is a double anniversary, which I think most people don't realize. It was also the 22nd of June when in 1772 when the Somerset case was concluded. This was the case where the legality of slavery in Britain was contested by Granville Sharp on behalf of an enslaved man called James Somerset. And that decision by Lord

Mansfield, the famous Mansfield decision that said slavery was not compatible with British law and that the American/British imperial slave owners couldn't bring enslaved people to Britain and hold them in slavery, that was also the 22nd of June. So, by accident, it's a double anniversary.

But what's, I think, really powerful to think of is those 492 men and women who got off the Windrush in 1948, they didn't know any of this history. And there was nowhere to go for them to find this history because the books hadn't been written. And how might it have changed them? And how might it have helped them think about who they were and their place in Britain's story if this history had been available to them?

Kene Ejikeme: Yeah. And you cover a lot of these stories in some of the work that you've done. But what really struck me though, at that time, is the fact that for somebody with African background like yourself, you went down the humanities track. And not only that, you chose history. And I can tell you for somebody with a Nigerian background, STEM was probably-- it was the only thing on the menu growing up. So, how did you discover your passion for history?

David Olusoga: Well, my father wasn't around to stop me, I think, is a big part of it. He was in Lagos [PH]. I had a very hard time in school. I'm [UNINTEL] dyslexic. So, I think my mother was pleased there was any subject that I had any passion for because I was struggling. I was in very bad schools. I was in the same school as Paul Gascoigne. Fantastic if you wanted to play [UNINTEL]. Terrible if you want to go to university. And so, everyone was disbelieved that I found something that I was interested in.

But I have to say, my interest in history was of the sort of most kind of childish, boys own adventure sort. I was fascinated by the Second World War because-- the '70s wasn't that long ago, long off from the Second World War. And the culture was saturated in the Second World War. All the films on television on a Sunday were war films. I mean, there was a tradition which I think must have died out at some point in the '90s where somewhere around Christmas, every Christmas, they would play the film *Bridge Over the River Kwai*. I never quite worked out what was particularly Christmassy about the war in Southeast Asia. But it was a staple of a British Christmas in the '70s and '80s.

So, I was obsessed with the Second World War. And then one day my mother sort of confronted me and said, "Do you know Nigerians fought in that war?" And I almost didn't believe her. And she said, "In Lagos there's a war memorial to your ancestors who fought in that war and in the First World War." And it was the first time I had ever thought that there were Black people in history. And I'd just see history as a thing, obviously, there were Black people. And in some ways that was the pivotal moment. The interest was already there. But my mother pointing out that Black people were part of history was the [UNINTEL] moment.

And of course, that's a very profound thing because the racism that emerged in the

18th and 19th century, it literally said Black people have no history. They are not part of history. So, I had subconsciously imbibed that because of the absence of Black people in anything I ever read or watched. And it's quite a powerful philosophical point that African and Africans are a part of history. The fact that it has to be said is the problem.

Kene Ejikeme: Yeah, I think your passion, it comes across very clearly to anybody that kind of looks at your work. But sort of the last 12 to 18 months have been pretty challenging. I'm not sure I have the right adjectives to describe it. But pretty, pretty challenging for everyone, for obvious reasons, the COVID-19 pandemic and increased prosecution of people with Asian background as a consequence of the pandemic, and of course the brutal murder of George Floyd has forced everyone around the world, and particularly here home in the UK to have conversations about race that have been put off for decades, or in most cases avoided completely. What observations have you made about where we are today as a nation on the topic of race?

David Olusoga: Well, I think one of the ways of thinking about this is to imagine that you are back in January 2020. And imagine what you might have thought would have been possible in discussions about race, inequality, structural inequalities in the coming 12 months. And then think about what actually happened.

We had conversations that, as you said, had long been put off. Take publishing. In publishing, within the space of a few months, almost all the Black writers in Britain got together and formed a union, The Guild of Black Writers. You know, we couldn't meet up together. And through Zoom and through email we organized a union. We then forced the industry, and the industry was willing to be questioned by us, to have a series of meetings in which we said, "Tell us which Black books you're publishing. Tell us which Black authors that you're supporting. Tell us who you're looking at and [UNINTEL] through. And tell us about your own staff, how many people have you promoted? How many senior people are--?" And the entire industry had meetings with us. Admitted. Gave us this data. And made commitments to change.

Now that didn't happen in 2019 or 2018. It happened in 2020 because of this absolutely incredible, unpredictable, and I think still unexplainable, partly, moment when this conversation suddenly happened.

I mean, I think we have to presume part of it was down to the pandemic. What I like to think, and what I often find myself saying is, my suspicion is it took us, our society, to have the volume turned down on everything else for us to actually hear the voices and the complaints and the issues facing young Black people. And I think the passion for the younger generation, the millennial generation for equity for social justice, for anti-racism, I think, again, that was audible because the background murmur of our society was turned down by the pandemic.

But there's more to it. And I don't think we'll ever fully understand why it was that

moment and why it was not another moment.

But I think if you think about what happened in sector after sector, the initiatives that have been launched, the discussions that have been had, the commitments made to change, none of that was predictable at the beginning of last year. All of it's remarkable.

Kene Ejikeme: What do you think the utility is of history? And I'm saying that, you know, from somebody's who's got a STEM background and really came to history and really came to read a lot of the work that you've done at a very late stage and have come to understand its utility. But to you, what do you think the utility is of history?

David Olusoga: Well, I don't think we can know ourselves why we think what we think without understanding where we've come from as individuals in the society. James Baldwin said, "People are trapped in history. And history is trapped in them." We are all shaped by the histories of the nations that we come from. I am a product, and you are a product of the British Empire. I mean I'm a Nigerian [UNINTEL]. That needs some explanation of why it is my parents were able to meet in university just a few hundred meters from where I am today. That story, I don't make sense without history. Millions of us don't make any sense. Anybody in this country with Irish descent doesn't make any sense. Our relationship as a conglomerate of four separate nations, that can't be made sense of without history.

So, history, it's not an option. You know? It's not an optional subject. We are shaped by it whether we like it or not. Our attitudes, our beliefs, our names, our cultures, our language. All of these things are shaped by history. So, it's there whether we like it or not. But what it isn't, which I think is what you're intimating, what it isn't is a form of recreation or a form of therapy. History doesn't care about our feelings. It's not there to make us feel happy or special, all fuzzy or warm. History is just history. It is an account as accurate as can be produced, flawed inevitably because historians are human beings like everybody else. It is an attempt to tell the story of where we've been, what we've done, how we became who we are. It's not a form of recreation.

And if you try to make it a form of recreation, as I think we often do in this country, you need to fundamentally change its content. You need to take out the parts that don't fit with that new function that you're giving history. You need to take away the difficult, uncomfortable, unpleasant parts of it. You need to look at men and only remember their heroic deeds and not remember their crimes.

And if you do that, you end up with something that isn't really history. And I think very often that is what we've done in this country, and other countries. And if you're [UNINTEL] in that, if that is the history that you're taught at school, if that is the history upon which your identity is built, because remember, history lives in us and we live-- we are trapped in history and history is trapped in us, if you're trapped in a form of history which is about making you feel good and telling you that you're from a magical,

exceptional country that's only ever done good, when people like me and other historians come along and go, "Actually, that philanthropist did some terrible things." Or "That part of history is missing this terrible chapter," it's extremely challenging because people convinced themselves entirely wrongly that this is an attack on their history and, therefore, their identity. But as I often find myself saying, "My history as a Black British person, as somebody who is a product of the British Empire, is not a challenge or an attack on your history. It is your history. Because these are shared histories. Black British history is British history. It belongs to absolutely everybody. It affects absolutely everybody. We're all shaped by the stories that are contained within that history."

So, it takes a certain form of manipulation, and it takes a certain form, I think, of misunderstanding the nature, the true nature of history, for people to be convinced that British historians writing about British history is a threat to them and their Britishness. That is exactly where we are.

Kene Ejikeme: Thank you very much Professor Olusoga for speaking so candidly and openly.

David Olusoga: Thank you very much. Thank you for the perfect pronunciation of my name, better than I can do.

Kene Ejikeme: I've been practicing. Thank you so much.