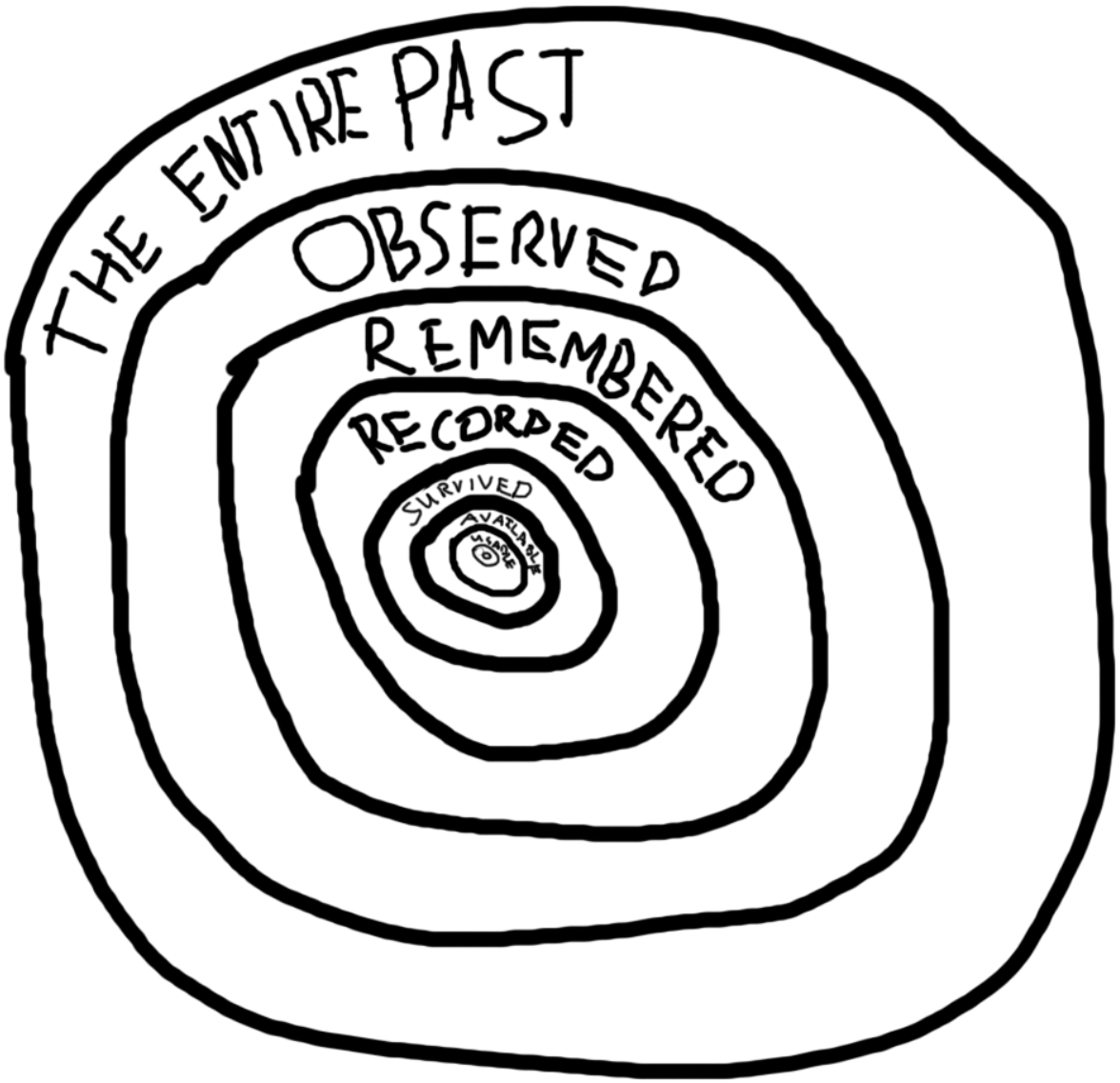
The Philosophy of History



An introduction to the philosophy of History.

As a busy history student, you are probably interested in more quantifiable outcomes of how TOK can make you a better history student who gets better grades. Obviously, an interest in history TOK issues will help you with your TOK presentation and essay. History is a privileged 'area of knowledge' in that unlike most IB subjects, history has its own section in the TOK syllabus. Why history has its own section, whereas Geography or Biology, for example, do not? In brief, history is special with its own very unique set of epistemological problems.

Epistemology - the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to what can and cannot be known.

To your TOK teacher you are a history specialist. You have been studying history for a number of years and can therefore expect special attention when the TOK class comes around to study history as an 'area of knowledge'. You can anticipate being quizzed on the big epistemological questions of our subject: so, what exactly is history? Or how can we know what happened in the past? Or what is the point of studying history?

You can also expect smug grins from your peers if you give the impression of never having considered these questions before. But be reassured this is not your fault. It is a product of what the great English social historian Raphael Samuel once described as history's *'naive realism'* - historians like to do history; they don't tend to think much about how they do it (philosophy of History).

A serious approach to TOK history will make you a more thoughtful and original history student. For example, the close (micro) document analysis of Paper 1 will benefit from a broader philosophical (macro) approach to what makes sources useful or reliable.

The essay writing process of Papers 2 and 3 is enhanced with an understanding of how history is written, where interpretations come from and why historians might disagree. And most obviously, the major research assignments of Internal Assessment and Extended Essay will score much more highly if there is evidence of an original, self-reflective voice that is in control of both the narrative and the methodology behind the assignment.[1]

Methodology - Systematic study of methods that are, can be, or have been applied within a discipline, in this case history.

Guiding Questions

- ✓ How reliable is eyewitness testimony as a primary source for history?
- ✓ To what extent is any certainty attainable in history?
- ✓ What knowledge issues arise in gathering historical knowledge?
- ✓ Should historians make moral judgments about the past?
- ✓ Can we apply the scientific method to history? How does history differ from the other social sciences?
- ✓ In what way is all history fictive?

What is History and Why do we Study it?

Discussion - Is History;

- ✓ An art
- ✓ A science
- ✓ A social science
- ✓ A philosophy

[1] IB Tok History – What is History? www.internationalschoolhistory.net

‘History is the bodies of knowledge about the past produced by historians, together with everything that is involved in the production, communication of, and teaching about that knowledge’. – Prof Arthur Marwick

All developed countries have their National Archives (called the Public Record Office in Britain) and a historical profession, both paid for out of taxpayers' money. This is in recognition of the simple fact that knowledge of the past is *essential* to society. ……Without knowledge of the past we would be without identity, we would be lost on an endless sea of time. The simplest answer to the questions "Why do history?" or "What is the use of history?" is: "Try to imagine what it would be like to live in a society where there was absolutely no knowledge of the past." The mind boggles. Of course, if history has this vital importance for society, then it must be as accurate as possible, it must be based on evidence and logical thought, not on specious theory or political ideology. Prof Arthur Marwick

The task of the historian is to locate and interrogate appropriate sources for the reconstruction of an era.

"History" is not "What happened in the past" or even "The surviving evidence of what happened in the past". It means "What historians choose to interpret from the surviving evidence of the past"

To reduce this to a formula, we might say: **Sources + Historians = Histories**

It is important to consider what the nature of the surviving evidence is, and how historians then choose to select and present it – (See methodology below)

History is not the past.

This semantic problem is not helped by the fact that in English we tend to use the words ‘history’ and ‘the past’ interchangeably. One of the most useful things you can do in studying history is to begin to use the words to signify very different things.

The past is a term used to indicate all the events which occurred before a given point in time: everything that has ever happened to everyone, everywhere at any time before now. The past is neither the present nor the future.

Semantics is the study of what words and symbols mean.

In contrast, history is a narrative text, written in the present about the past, using evidence that the past has left behind **(Sources + Historians = Histories)**. This is important because all history must just be an interpretation of the past and never the ‘same thing’ as the past.

History is both a process and a product.

History is an activity that is done (the process of doing history) and an end result (a product of historical text). History is made (written) as a result of a highly skilled process known as doing history. Historians will have spent many years after their undergraduate degree in history learning the skills of researching and writing history. If the product – a text about the past – is not a result of the highly skilled process, it is not history. This is important because anyone can tell stories about the past that may appear historical, but if their process (methodology) is not historical, then it’s not history.

History is made by historians.

You are not an historian and neither are teachers. History is done by historians generally working in a university history department. Many people may do things that look similar and may have similar qualifications – teach history, direct historical documentary films, curate in museums – but these people generally are not historians. This is important because although they may do many useful things with the past – teach children, inform a wider public, preserve documents – their primary purpose is not the same as the historians. As a history teacher, my primary purpose is to prepare students for the IB history examination, this is not what historians do. Historians have their own reasons (motives) for ‘doing history’. These will shape their interpretations and their views.

History is both an art and a (social) science.

This partly explains history's special position within most universities as both a humanities subject and an art. Historians can use methodologies that resemble those of the most quantitative social sciences – e.g. cliometricians'[2] computer processed analysis of census data. But they are just as likely to use methods that require qualitative appreciation of things that cannot begin to be measured - e.g. empathetic sensitivity to long-gone attitudes and opinions. Being an historian involves familiarity with a challengingly wide range of skills. This is important because historians may legitimately engage with the past in any number of ways and this will result in a very wide range of different types of history and interpretations.

History is plural.

Rather than history we should really be talking about histories. There are many possible interpretations to any event and to any period of history. As I look out of my window I see a world that reflects by world view as a history graduate. I see a medieval church with Gothic spires alongside a post-war town constructed from the ruins of WWII bombing. In contrast, the geographer may draw attention to river basin or an urban pattern that corresponds to a particular land-use model, whilst a biologist may be more interested in the spiders on a web just outside the window. The past is like the view from the window and historians may legitimately focus on any aspect of the view they wish. This is important because although historians are theoretically free to choose what they like, they tend to focus on similar things. This introduces us to the question of the power behind history. History tends to reflect what the state and its educational institutions want it to reflect. Historical consensus about history (especially national history) is neither natural nor inevitable and therefore it needs to be created and defended.

Methodology of History – How do we do 'it'?

Key Questions:

- ✓ How do we compile evidence to write history?
- ✓ How do we study the past?
- ✓ What approach do we take in compiling histories?

<u>Good history is not easy</u>

'...there is no doubt that the old history, traditional history, is hard. Hard – but exciting precisely because it is hard.' Gertrude Himmelfarb

What you are learning to do for IB, to analyse and evaluate sources is not easy. In learning to write essays, to structure a coherent account about the past that is persuasive and well supported by the facts, is intellectually challenging. You may not be a historian, but you are beginning to replicate the skills that historians use.

Real history is hard going: it is a methodical, sometimes lonely existence of reading, checking and double checking, of immersing yourself in the past and trying to empathise with the dead, of writing-up carefully and reaching qualified judgements scrupulously, whilst providing explicit, accurate references for everything you write. As the French author Flaubert once said, 'Writing history is like drinking an ocean and p***ing a cupful'.

The American historian William Dunning discovered through careful archival research and comparison of handwriting that Andrew Jackson's first message to Congress had in fact been drafted by George Bancroft. How much time must this comparison have taken? How many samples of handwriting had Dunning reviewed? The end result is relatively trivial, but it is also central to the historical process because 'it is not only new it is also true.' The uncovering of new truths is a significant part of what history does. It is a cumulative process and over time we come to know more about the past than we once did.

It is far easier not to bother with monotonous archival research or to write about the past as if the people of the past were just like us. It is far easier not to provide detailed footnotes or to just select the lessons of the past because they suit our present needs. When those in positions of political power or economic influence tell stories about the past to justify their actions, it is only the professionally trained historian who has the real authority to challenge them. It is something else that can make history hard, that historians play the role of professional sceptics, often charged with being unpatriotic or disloyal. For those in power and defending the status quo, history can be a dangerous subject that teaches that the world hasn't always been like this, that change has happened and by implication can happen again.

Good history is not fiction

'We historians are firmly bound by the authority of our sources (and by no other authority, human or divine), nor must we use fiction to fill in the gaps...' Sir Geoffrey Elton[3]

Finally, and above all else, good history is concerned with facts about real events that actually happened. Events cannot be invented that did not happen, nor can the chronology of these events be reversed. There are real limitations to the narratives that can be told about the past and those limitations are fixed by the facts. There was a revolution in Cuba before the Cuban Missile Crisis and a year later President Kennedy was assassinated. As the historian G.M Trevelyan once argued '...the poetry of history does not consist of imagination roaming at large, but of imagination pursuing the fact and fastening upon it.'[4]

For any claim historian's make about the past they must provide evidential support from the historical record. And the historian must be open and accurate about this. The historian must provide clear referencing to allow the authenticity of the original source to be verified and to allow their interpretative reading of these sources to be analysed.

One of the negative consequences of the Internet revolution has been decline in importance of the academic authority that was once more or less guaranteed by the published book. Now anyone can publish their views about the past on a website, blog or discussion board, irrespective of whether they have respected the traditional requirements of academic historical scholarship or not. Conspiracy theory websites of variable quality rank highly in search results alongside reputable institutional history sites. Politically motivated sites can promote selective nationalist history and revisionist sites can deny that the Holocaust ever happened. In the face of such narratives it is clearly not enough that there are simply alternative narratives. There must also be accounts that are founded on the factual record. For these accounts we depend on history. As Richard J Evans forcefully argues: 'There is a massive, carefully empirical literature on the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Clearly, to regard it as fictional, unreal, or no nearer to historical reality than, say, the work of the "revisionists" who deny that Auschwitz ever happened at all, is simply wrong. Here is an issue where evidence really counts, and can be used to establish the essential facts. Auschwitz was not a discourse. It trivializes mass murder to see it as a text. The gas chambers were not a piece of rhetoric. Auschwitz was inherently a tragedy and cannot be seen either as a comedy or a

The Historians and their Sources

Key Question: How do we compile evidence to write history?

In theory, History should be 'knowable'. Historians should be able to use the sources to tel us what happened. In reality, History is not 'knowable' in this way. Historians must select and interpret sources which themselves are incomplete and unreliable. Moreover, the most important job of the historian is not to tell us 'what' happened but rather 'why': only in this way can we hope to male sense of the present and prepare for the future[5]. The first way in which we gain knowledge of the past is through historical evidence ("sources"). Two questions raise themselves:

How can we extract knowledge from the sources? (issues of quality and quantity)

Quantity – how complete is the historical record? E.g. for Medieval historians there aren't enough sources, for modern historians there are too many. For all historians the problem is that all sources, by definition are untypical. Every historical record in incomplete because important sources have been lost.

Historians get their information from two different kinds of sources: primary and secondary.

- ✓ *Primary sources are first hand sources;*
- ✓ *secondary sources are second-hand sources.*

For example, suppose there had been a car accident. The description of the accident which a witness gives to the police is a primary source because it comes from someone actually there at the time. The story in the newspaper the next day is a secondary source because the reporter who wrote the story did not actually witness it. The reporter is presenting a way of understanding the accident or an *interpretation*.

As an academic discipline history emerged in the late nineteenth century, although great historians have reoccurred in Western civilization since the early Greeks. Fundamentally history involves a process of interpreting the past based on evidence available in the present. This entails using accounts inherited from earlier times. Although each generation re-interprets history in light of contemporary questions, history claims a scientific status through its careful use of sources and the weighing of evidence.

[3] Geoffrey Elton – 'Return to Essentials' in Keith Jenkins - ibid p.179
[4] Gertrude Himmelfarb – op cit p.166

Using Primary Evidence

These are the earliest available accounts of an event which are used by later writers to interpret that event. They are the raw material used by other writers to provide them with information and data. In using primary sources it is important to recognize the value judgements made by the people who wrote them and the intent of the author in writing the original document. Primary sources are interesting to read for their own sake: they give us first hand, you-are-there insights into the past. They are also the most important tools an historian has for developing an understanding of an event. Primary sources serve as the evidence an historian uses in developing an interpretation and in building an argument to support that interpretation. You will be using primary sources not only to help you better understand what went on, but also as evidence as you answer questions and develop arguments about the past.

Types of primary sources:

1) Original handwritten documents, early copies of original documents, letters, diaries, and book manuscripts;
2) Printed documents, published books;
3) Personal documents, private documents, government documents, public documents;
4) Pictures, photographs and film;
5) Archaeological evidence; statistical data derived from documents;
7) Oral evidence.

I. Reading a primary source.

Primary Sources do not speak for themselves, they have to be interpreted. That is, we can't always immediately understand what a primary source means, especially if it is from a culture significantly different from our own. It is therefore necessary to try to understand what it means and to figure out what the source can tell us about the past.

Using Secondary Evidence

These are works that discuss a subject either from a great distance or after the event on the basis of second-hand or even more remote information. Secondary sources provide interpretations and make judgements about primary sources. When using secondary sources it is important to realize that the account they give, even when it involves lengthy quotations from primary sources, may not be accurate. Secondary sources can be used to understand primary sources but must not be confused with them. Several cautions need to be observed when working with secondary sources. The most important are: -

1. Secondary sources as primary sources:

Sometimes a secondary source may be used as a primary source for information about the period when the secondary source was written. Thus, Mill's *History of India* is a secondary source for Indian history but a primary source for anyone wanting to understand James Mill's thinking about India.

2. Are anthologies primary or secondary sources?

Anthologies such as Peter Gay's *The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology* contains short extracts from a large number of published primary sources. As such it is very useful to students but it must be used with great care and not confused with true primary sources. The problem is that the reader must trust that the editor's selection of material, in this case Gay's, is representative of the subject, i.e. the Enlightenment. The reader must also accept that wherever translations are used from French or German sources the translations are accurate.

3. Translations:

Although it is often necessary to work with translated materials translations must always be identified as such and never treated as an original primary source.

There is a strong temptation in a history class to believe that the answers to all the questions are found in the textbook and that the object of the course is to learn the textbook.

I. Three ways to use a secondary source.

A. As a collection of facts.

Use a secondary source if you need to find a particular piece of information quickly. You might need to know, for example, when Ghengis Khan lived, in what year the cotton gin was invented or the population of London in 1648.

B. As a source of background material.

If your interests are focused on one subject, but you need to know something about what else was going on at that time or what happened earlier, you can use a secondary source to find the background material you might need. For example, if you are writing about Luther's 95 Theses, you should use a secondary source to help you understand the Catholic Church in the Renaissance.

C. As an interpretation.

Since the facts do not speak for themselves, it is necessary for the historian to make give them some shape and to put them in an order people can understand. This is called an interpretation. Many secondary sources provide not only information, but a way of making sense of that information. You should use a secondary source if you wish to understand how an historian makes sense of a particular event, person, or trend.

Historians often disagree on interpretations.

Some facts are ambiguous. Historians ask different questions about the past. Historians have different values and come to the material with different beliefs about the world. For these and other reasons, historians often arrive at different interpretations of the same event. For example, many historians see the French Revolution as the result of beliefs in liberty and equality; other historians see the French Revolution as the result of the economic demands of a rising middle class. It is, therefore, important to be able to critically evaluate an historian's interpretation.

What are the 'big' problems with Historical investigation?

Subjectivity

Many who call themselves "historians" do, indeed, use "history" as a vehicle for expressing their own political commitment. That is sheer self-indulgence. History is a scholarly, not a political, activity, and while, as citizens, we certainly should act upon our political views, in writing history we have an absolute obligation to try to exclude them. Most historians, like, most scientists, are motivated by the urge to *find out*. Much nonsense is talked about historians inevitably being "subjective"; the real point is that, being mere human beings, they are "fallible", and subject to many kinds of career and social pressures, or indeed common incompetence. Historians do disagree with each other in their interpretations, as do scientists. But history deals with human values, in a way the sciences do not, so there is more scope for differences in evaluation. Historical evidence is fragmentary, intractable, and imperfect. Individual books and articles may clash with each other; there will always be areas where uncertainty persists, but steadily agreed knowledge emerges in the form of works of synthesis and high-quality textbooks. History, like the sciences, is a co-operative enterprise. Some historians today still seem to perceive historians (usually themselves) as great literary and media figures, as individual intellectual and moral giants giving leadership to ordinary readers. Such historians - subscribers to what I call the "*auteur* theory" - tend to glory in their own subjectivity. By all means enjoy their literary flourishes, but always remember that the aims of a work of history are very different from those of a work of literature.

The most common mistake made by history students and, occasionally, well established historians is to project views and opinions common in one era back onto an earlier era. This cannot legitimately be done without strong evidence that those views and opinions were held at the earlier time. In particular people are prone to project contemporary assumptions onto the past.

Student task: Make a list of similarities and differences between the two periods?

How similar was life in 1967 to life today?

What has changed and what remains the same? How have our attitudes changed? Why have they changed?

Another very common error is to assume that a short passage of time makes little or no difference to the intellectual climate of the time. In fact, in political, social and other spheres of life ten years can make a very big difference particularly when dealing with modern history. The historian cannot assume that something, which was commonly believed by people in England in 1066, was shared with people who lived in 966. The modern history of Germany shows how difficult it is to generalize about the past.

For example the popular *A History of Germany*[6] published in 1913 stresses the peaceful and pro-British nature of the Germans who are seen as allies against the cunning French. The book ends by saying that Germans "know the value of peace, and pray that it may long continue"[7]. Since the Second World War it has been very difficult to find an English book which expresses such sentiments.

The three epistemological weaknesses of history

There are three distinct epistemological problems that relate to each of three stages inherent in the study of history: the weaknesses of the raw material (sources), the process of historical research (method) and the textual presentation (product).

1. Epistemological problem 1 - The historian's sources

'The Memory of the world is not a bright, shining crystal, but a heap of broken fragments, a few fine flashes of light that break through the darkness.' Herbert Butterfield [8]

The first thing that makes historical knowledge difficult to acquire is the inadequacy of the raw materials that the historian is forced to work with. Unlike a social scientist who can directly observe participants in a controlled experimental context, our inability to travel through time means that the historian relies on indirect and uncontrollable evidence – the 'heap of broken fragments'- that the past has left behind. Even more significantly, most of the past has left no evidence at all of what happened, it is simply unknowable – this is the 'darkness' that Butterfield refers to. Most people who have ever lived and most events that have ever happened left no record, no fragments from which historians might reconstruct a version of the past. Those records that do exist are often atypical or accidental. We may have sources deliberately left to posterity but their atypicality makes them unrepresentative. The same is true of sources that have survived centuries of fires, wars and revolutions. The historian has to use sources never intended for future interpretation, accidental by-products of past events, unintended communiqués with the future. The evidence only speaks to us indirectly, with no guarantee that they will answer the questions historian's pose. As a consequence, historians must resign themselves to a patient trawl through the records most of which have no relevance to their needs.

2. Epistemological problem 2 -The historian's method - interpreting the evidence

'I am beginning to believe that nothing can ever be proved... slow, lazy, sulky, the facts adapt themselves at a pinch to the order I wish to give them'. Antoine Roquetin the historian in Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea[9]

One of the key features of the scientific method depends on an ability to test theories by predictive experimentation. We can examine the importance of light as a cause of plant growth by examining parallel plants, one in the light and one in the dark. But history lacks this ability to control the variables so essential to the scientific method. We cannot stop the car from making a wrong turning on the 28th June 1914 to see if the First World War would have happened without the assassination of Franz Ferdinand.

All history can do is interpret; it constructs plausible meanings from the evidence that the past has left behind. But what this means in reality is two levels of interpretation. In the first level of interpretation, historians depend entirely on the people who have interpreted the events they have lived through and who have left us a record to consider. The process of making sense of the world, of committing thoughts to paper or a photograph to posterity is itself an interpretation. One of the best illustrations of this first level of interpretation is made by E.H. Carr in the classic introduction to the philosophy of history: What is History? Carr describes the archive of 'primary documents' left by the Weimar Germany's Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann and the hundreds of diplomatic conversations he conducted. What do the documents tell us, asks Carr?

'They depict Stresemann as having the lion's share of the conversations and reveal his arguments as invariably well put and cogent, while those of his partner are for the most part scanty, confused and unconvincing. This is a familiar characteristic of all diplomatic conversations. The documents do not tell us what happened, but only what Stresemann thought had happened, or what he wanted others to think, or perhaps what he wanted himself to think, had happened.' [10]

Social psychologists have explained that individuals are prone to provide explanations for events that are at odds with their thinking at the time of the event. They call this cognitive dissonance theory. How can we know what people in the past thought if we cannot be certain that people in the past knew themselves? How can we trust the eyes and ears of those who lack the detachment and objectivity that can only come with the passage of time and cool reflective hindsight?

The second stage of interpretation is of course the interpretation of the past evidence by the historians themselves. The historian gives the past meaning that the past itself cannot have had for those who lived through it. As Sir Herbert Butterfield once argued, the role of the historian is to understand the people of the past 'better than they understood themselves'.[11] Historians look back on the past seeing connections between events, the significance, and the patterns of cause and effect that were impossible for

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[6] H.E. Marshall, *A History of Germany*, London, Henry Frowde and Hodder & Stoughton, 1913.]
[7] Ibid, p. 449
[8] Butterfield – Historical Novel (1924) p.15
[9] Sartre – Nausea (1964) p.26
[10] EH Carr – What is History? (1961) Macmillan 1986 pp. 12-13
[11] Herbert Butterfield – The Whig Interpretation of History (1931) 1959 Bell and Sons p.3

those living through the events to see for themselves. As Margaret MacMillan has recently argued 'The idea that those who actually took part in great events or lived through particular times have a superior understanding to those who came later is a deeply held yet wrong-headed one.'[12] Nobody in 1917 could know how significant the Bolshevik Revolution was. Few expected Lenin's party to hold on to power for long and had the Bolsheviks lost the Civil War then the relative significance of the Revolution would have been different to what it became at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s. And now 20 years after the end of the Cold War, the study of 1917 no longer seems to have the same urgency it once did, with the study of the history of China and the Middle East now seeming much more pertinent This is one of those odd features of history that people often struggle to understand, that history continues to change and evolve even though it's the same old past that is being described. Each generation writes its own history of the French Revolution or of the First World War, why is this? Part of the explanation for the continual need to produce new histories of old subjects is to be found in the uncovering of new evidence in the archives. For example, the periodic declassification of once secret government documents provides a regular supply of new materials that inevitably changes our earlier perspectives. But a much more profound explanation for our need for new histories is to be found in the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce's famous observation that 'All history is contemporary history'.

History is made by historians and what they write will therefore reflect both their personality and more importantly the times they are living in. Take this extract from the Oxford historian A L Rowse's introductory text The Use of History published in 1927 where he considers the role of history in the school curriculum:

'I think the royal road to appealing to the interest of the schoolboy...is the biographical: lives of great men, especially men of action, like the great English seamen or soldiers and adventurers and their exciting stories...Schoolboys respond immediately to the appeal of patriotism, to the spirit of self-devotion in such lives as Wolfe, Sir John Moore, Nelson, Livingstone, General Gordon, Scott of the Antarctic, Lawrence of Arabia. They feel the thrill of achievement in such careers as Clive's or Drake's or Rhodes...'

School history as patriotic storytelling of the lives of great white English, empire building men seems strangely archaic today. But it is his appeal to the schoolboy and not girl that does most to date Rowse to the early 20 century. Is he deliberately excluding girls in his choice of the word 'schoolboy'? On the role of science in school he is unambiguous

: '...I deeply doubt whether physics and chemistry have any educational value in girls' schools at all. I should have thought that in these their place might be more profitably taken, for obvious reasons, by biology, hygiene and natural history – sciences of life rather than of matter.'[13]

What is 'obvious' - that which needs no explanation - are the unconscious, hidden assumptions that makes Rowse a man of his age, nationality and social class. History changed in the 20 century because historians stopped being exclusively men like Rowse. The success of socialism, feminism and decolonisation in the 20 century, broadened social and educational opportunities so that history today reflects the wider agenda of those the 20century emancipated and empowered. During the 20 century history became concerned with the working classes, women and ethnic minorities; groups that had literally been hidden from history and neglected to exist only in the past. The problem epistemologically then is profound. Knowledge of the past is never fixed and always mediated though two levels of interpretation. History is never complete; it is always a work in progress

Edward Hallett "Ted" Carr CBE (1892 –1982) was a left-wing British historian, journalist and diplomat. Carr was best known for his 14-volume history of the Soviet Union, in which he provided an account of Soviet history from 1917 to 1929, for his writings on international relations, and for his classic 1961 introduction to the study of the history, What is History?

Glossary – Cognitive dissonance theory - A classical example of this idea (and the origin of the expression "sour grapes") is expressed in the fable The Fox and the Grapes by Aesop (ca. 620–564 BCE). In the story, a fox sees some high-hanging grapes and wishes to eat them. When the fox is unable to think of a way to reach them, he surmises that the grapes are probably not worth eating, as they must not be ripe or that they are sour.

3. Epistemological problem 3 -The historian's product - writing the history text

'We won't understand a thing about human life if we persist in avoiding the most obvious fact: that a reality no longer is what it was; it cannot be reconstructed.' Milan Kundera (left) [14]

The final epistemological weakness of history stems from the simple inability to be able to compare like with like. History cannot be compared with the past and cannot be verified against the past, because the past and history are different things. This is what philosophy calls the correspondence theory of truth. The historical text, the narrative account can never correspond to the past as it was, because unlike history the past was not a text, it was a series of events, experiences, situations etc. If I drew a picture of you and then took a photograph from exactly the same position I can guarantee that the photograph would provide the more

[12] Margaret MacMillan – The Uses and Abuses of History (2009) Profile Books, London p.44 [8]

[13] [7] A L Rowse - The Use of History (1927) p.145

[14] Kundera – Ignorance (2002) p. 123

reliable indication of what you look like 'in reality'. But when a historian writes an account of the past, all there is to compare it to are other written accounts whether contemporary or historical. History has no absolute or 'objective reality'[15]to compare itself to, only other texts.

So in the absence of an 'objective reality' to judge against, what does our society consider to be good history? Factual accuracy is assumed and does not in itself constitute good history. Read the reviews of the latest historical best seller and they do not commend the author for 'getting her dates right' or for 'putting events in chronological order'. Much more likely is praise for the historian's 'depth of research' or his or her ability to 'bring the past alive'. If archival research constitutes the social-scientific craft of the historian, then bringing the past alive relies on the historian's art; a creative, artistic ability that is rarely acknowledged. If history is just a text, its artistic effectiveness must rely upon the same skills that make all literature 'good', whether factual or fictional.

Consider the following set of extracts from one of the most celebrated recent historians of the Russian Revolution, Orlando Figes, as he describes the events of Bloody Sunday 1905:

Snow had fallen in the night and St Petersburg awoke to an eerie silence on that Sunday morning, 9 January 1905. Soon after dawn the workers and their families congregated in churches to pray for a peaceful end to the day...Singing hymns and carrying icons and crosses, they formed something more like a religious procession than a workers' demonstration. Bystanders took off their hats and crossed themselves as they passed. And yet there was no doubt that the marchers' lives were in danger...Church bells rang and their golden domes sparkled in the sun on that Sunday morning as the long columns marched across the ice towards the centre of the city. In the front ranks were the women and children, dressed in their Sunday best, who had been placed there to deter the soldiers from shooting. At the head of the largest column was the bearded figure of Father Gapon in a long white cassock carrying a crucifix. Behind him was a portrait of the Tsar and a large white banner with the words: 'Soldiers do not shoot at the people!' Red flags had been banned... Suddenly, a bugle sounded and the soldiers fired into the crowd. A young girl, who had climbed up on to an iron fence to get a better view, was crucified to it by the hail of bullets. A small boy, who had mounted the equestrian statue of Prince Przewalski, was hurled into the air by a volley of artillery. Other children were hit and fell from the trees where they had been perching... When the firing finally stopped and the survivors looked around at the dead and wounded bodies on the ground there was one vital moment, the turning-point of the whole revolution, *when their mood suddenly changed from disbelief to anger...*[16]

Strip back this account to its factual essentials – a list of events in chronological order – and what are we left with? Other than the chronologically determined facts that make up the raw material of history, everything else – selective emphasis, anecdote, poetic scene setting, dramatic structure of the story, figurative language, moral judgement and significance 'the turning point of the whole revolution'– all come from the imagination of the historian.

This third epistemological weakness is therefore perhaps the most profound of all. History is a largely imaginative text that cannot be verified against absolute reality, but only against other imaginative texts. Chronology and factual accuracy do not in themselves constitute history. These raw materials must be shaped and given meaning by the historian. As Hayden White, the most influential commentator on the problem has argued: 'The events must be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence but narrated as well, that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence'. [17]

Glossary – Correspondence theory- A theory of truth that states that the truth or falsity of a statement is determined only by how it relates to the world, and whether it accurately describes (i.e., corresponds with) the world.

'In battling against people who would subject historical studies to the dictates of literary critics we historians are, in a way fighting for our lives. Certainly, we are fighting for the lives of innocent young people beset by devilish tempters who claim to offer higher forms of thought and deeper truths and insights – the intellectual equivalent of crack'[18].

This section on the three epistemological weaknesses of history above, have relied heavily on the 'post-modern' critique of history that has emerged over the last thirty years or so. Post-modernism is a general intellectual movement that has influenced most academic disciplines, but of particular relevance to history is the view that language is not simply an objective reflection of reality (the 'linguistic turn'). For some historians, like Elton quoted above, the post-modern contention that historian's create meaning as much as discover it, is a dangerous threat to a subject that aspires to Ranke's (Glossary of Ranke?) ideal of finding out 'what really happened' from the sources of the past themselves.

Should we bother? – The value of history: its uses and abuses.

[15] Claude Levi-Strauss '... historical fact has no objective reality; it only exists as ... retrospective reconstruction'. (1965) quoted in David Lowenthal – The Past is a Foreign Country (1985) Cambridge, p.215

[16] Orlando Figes – A People's Tragedy: the Russian Revolution, 1891-1924 (1998) Penguin pp. 173-179

[17] Hayden V. White – The Content of the Form, JHU Press (1990) p. 5

[18] English historian Sir Geoffrey Elton. quoted in Richard J Evans – In Defence of History Granta Books (1997) p.7

‘I used to think that the profession of history, unlike that of, say, nuclear physics, could at least do no harm. Now I know it can. Our studies can turn into bomb factories... We have a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticizing the politico-ideological abuse of history in particular.[19]’ Eric Hobsbawm

Having reviewed the main aspects of history’s difficulties in finding out and explaining what happened in the past, it is important to conclude with a review of why despite these epistemological difficulties, the academic study of the past and the profession of the historian remain so very important.

Good history is not heritage

‘The past can be used for almost anything you want to do in the present. We abuse it when we create lies about the past or write histories that show only one perspective’[20] Margaret Macmillan

The goal of the good historian is to find out and explain what really happened in the past. But not everyone who uses the past has such noble ambitions. What makes historians special users of the past is that they alone are concerned with making sense of the past, simply for the sake of making sense of the past. History is the study of the past in itself, for itself. David Lowenthal makes a useful distinction in this respect in that, if the user of the past is using the past for present day purposes – whether positive, benign or harmful – then what they are doing is not history, but rather ‘heritage[21]’.

‘...heritage is not history at all; while it borrows from and enlivens historical study, heritage is not an inquiry into past but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what actually happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present day purposes.’

WWI Recruitment poster

Never has our interest in heritage and our ‘profession of faith in the past’, been as fanatical as it is at the start of the 21st century. The past provides stability and certainly in a time of unprecedented social and cultural change: the past is everywhere: on dedicated television channels and in hundreds of successful Hollywood films, heritage sites, folklore celebrations, glossy magazines, bestselling novels and nostalgic commercial adverts. Heritage may borrow from history and may even be produced by historians, but they share a common non- historical, present orientated purpose: they use the past to entertain, to inspire, to engage, to provide identity and to sell to us, in the here and now.

Because the past is central to our emotional sense of identity, the state has always sought to control how we interpret the past through, for example, national memorials, public holidays and the teaching of history in schools. As Arthur Marwick once explained, ‘As memory is to the individual, so history is to the community’[22]. A shared sense of the past is central to our national identity, because the nation is in Benedict Anderson’s phrase ‘an imagined community’[23].

But it is also an exclusive community; national ‘history’ is our history often defined in terms of opposition to those outside the national group. Only historians stand in the way of those who use the past as part of a patriotic agenda, because historians have the means and interest in exposing partiality and challenging the myths that often constitute the national story.

Good history, therefore, is one in which the historian is ‘open about their closures’; consciously aware of their present orientated

[19] Eric Hobsbawm – On History (1998) Abacus p.7
[20] Margaret Macmillan – The Uses and Abuses of History (2010) Profile Books p.xiii
[21] David Lowenthal – The Heritage Crusade and Spoils of History (2 Edition 1998)
[22] Arthur Marwick – The Nature of History (1989) Macmillan p.14
[23] Benedict Anderson – Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism (1991) Verso

prejudices, both cultural and personal but determined to remove this from all aspects of their work.

What more can we read?

Further Reading on Historical Methods:
Norman F. Cantor & Richard I. Schneider, *How to Study History* (Arlington Heights, Illinois, Harlan Davidson, 1967).
Robert Jones Schafer, ed., *A Guide to Historical Method* (Homewood, Ill., Dorsey Press, 1980).
G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967)
Gertrude Himmelfrab, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987)
Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1963)
Allen Johnson, *The Historian and Historical Evidence* (Washington, N.Y., Kennikat Press, 1965).
John Martin Vincent, *Historical Research: An Outline of Theory and Practice* (New York, Henry Holt, 1911).
Fred Morrow Fling, *Outline of Historical Method* (New York, Burt Franklin, 1971).
David Hackett Fischer, *Historians Fallacies: Towards a Logic of Historical Though* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1970).
Further Reading on the Philosophy of History:
John Cannon, ed., *The Historian at Work* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1980).
Patrick Gardiner, *Theories of History* (New York, The Free Press, 1959).
D.W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian View* (Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 1979).
W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (London, Hutchinson, 1951).

To help you interpret primary sources, you should think about these questions as you examine the source:

A. Place the source in its historical context.

1. Who wrote it? What do you know about the author?
2. Where and when was it written?
3. Why was it written?
4. To what audience is it addressed? What do you know about this audience?

B. Classify the source.

1. What kind of work is it?
2. What was its purpose?
3. What are the important conventions and traditions governing this kind of source? Of what legal, political, religious or philosophical traditions is it a part?

C. Understand the source.

- 1. What are the key words in the source and what do they mean?
- 2. What point is the author trying to make? Summarize the thesis.
- 3. What evidence does the author give to support the thesis?
- 4. What assumptions underlay the argument?
- 5. What values does the source reflect?
- 6. What problems does it address? Can you relate these problems to the historical situation?
- 7. What action does the author expect as a result of this work? Who is to take this action? How does the source motivate that action?

D. Evaluate the source as a source of historical information.

- 1. How typical is this source for this period?
- 2. How widely was this source circulated?
- 3. What problems, assumptions, arguments, ideas and values, if any, does it share with other sources from this period?
- 4. What other evidence can you find to corroborate your conclusions?

III. Evaluating an interpretation.

A. The Argument

- 1. What historical problem is the author addressing?
- 2. What is the thesis?
- 3. How is the thesis arrived at?
  - a. What type of history book is it?
  - b. What historical methods or techniques does the author use?
  - c. What evidence is presented?
  - d. Can you identify a school of interpretation?
  - 4. What sources are used?

B. Evaluation

- 1. Did the author present a convincing argument?
  - a. Does the evidence support the thesis?
  - b. Does the evidence in fact prove what the author claims it proves?

- c. Has the author made any errors of fact?
- 2. Does the author use questionable methods or techniques?
- 3. What questions remain unanswered?
- 4. Does the author have a polemical purpose?
  - a. If so, does it interfere with the argument?
  - b. If not, might there be a hidden agenda?

C. The Debate

- 1. How does this book compare to others written on this or similar topics?
- 2. How do the theses differ?
- 3. Why do the theses differ?
  - a. Do they use the same or different sources?
  - b. Do they use these sources in the same way?
  - c. Do they use the same methods or techniques?
  - d. Do they begin from the same or similar points of view?
  - e. Are these works directed at the same or similar audience?
- 4. When were the works written?
- 5. Do the authors have different backgrounds?

6. Do they differ in their political, philosophical, ethical, cultural, or religious assumptions?