Introduction

Many years ago, as an undergraduate student, I struck up a conversation with a classmate about our plans for the summer, which was then fast approaching. He told me about a science project he intended to work on with his chemistry professor. I, in turn, shared my plans for a week-long trip to an out-of-state history conference, at which I expected to hear various individuals and panels discuss their current research. What my classmate said next has stuck in my mind ever since. He asked me if this would not be a rather boring affair—after all, history is not like science, where there are always new things to be discovered and shared. History, he said, is already well known; and so the work of uncovering it and writing about it is essentially "finished." This being so, what could the researchers I had mentioned be working on? Surely they could only restate what others had already said?

This turns out to be a very common misperception. Although we do indeed know quite a bit about the past, there is much that remains unclear, controversial, or even unknown. This is especially so when we move beyond the well-worn narratives and facts (the treaties, battles, great leaders, and so on) and toward engagement with the more interesting questions of intention, interpretation, experience, and memory. In many ways, the field of history is more dynamic and eventful now than at any time in the past—characterized by lively debates and disagreements, reinterpretations of old ideas, many new questions, the constant production of new knowledge, and, yes, even discoveries. There are several reasons this is so, not all of which can be discussed here. The most important ones, however, concern the role played by primary source materials in the writing of history—and by extension, the very nature of history itself.

Despite what many people think, history is not simply a record of the past, accepted and agreed upon by all and never to be altered. Our knowledge of previous times is instead an ongoing work of *construction*—something put together (and occasionally taken apart) painstakingly and bit by bit over a long period of time by a large and multigenerational pool of scholars and researchers. Most of these people work on small and specific questions, although they are always mindful of larger contexts. Usually, they present their findings first to colleagues at symposia and conferences and then to wider audiences through refereed journals, books, Web sites, and so on. Eventually their research, if successful, may become part of the general historical pictures presented in textbooks and curricula and in the popular media.

If history is constructed, then an important question arises: What is it constructed from? The main answer is *primary source materials*—including exactly the kinds of original historical texts presented in this collection. These are the raw materials, if you like, from which historians craft their narratives and analyses, which we call *secondary sources*. This being so, the purpose of an education in history should not be simply to memorize facts about the past (though this is certainly important) but also to engage frequently and meaningfully with primary sources. This engagement includes learning what they are (both their advantages and limitations), how to select ones suitable to a given study, and, above all, how to use them skillfully and appropriately in order to create viable new knowledge about the past. Let us look a little more closely at these questions.

What is a primary source? The simple answer is that a primary source is a piece of evidence that is from the place and time under study. It could be a written document (as in this collection), an artifact such as a picture or piece of clothing, or something else entirely. Types of written documents include items ranging from laws and legal codes to letters, from royal proclamations to treaties. The single subject of trade with Asia can be elucidated using such a variety of primary sources, including Lin Zexu's letter "Moral Advice to Queen Victoria," asking the monarch for a peaceful resolution to the problem of the opium trade; the Treaty of Nanjing, ending the Opium War; and Queen Victoria's Proclamation concerning India, assuming control of Britain's Indian colonies and removing them from the administration of the British East India Company. The legal structure of medieval times across the globe is revealed through such sources as II Aethelstan, or the Grately Code; Al-Māwardī's treatise "On Qāḍīs"; and the Russkaia Pravda, or Justice of the Rus.

Another basic definition is that a primary source is not a secondary source. Secondary sources are works that result from the use of primary sources. A secondary source would be, for example, a book about the rise and spread of Communism written by a historian living and writing today. That historian might base his book on such diverse primary sources as political treatises (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's *Communist Manifesto* or Vladimir Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*), the speeches of politicians (Winston Churchill's "The Sinews of Peace"), and even newspaper articles and editorials ("Mao Tse-tung's Thought Is the Telescope and Microscope of Our Revolutionary Cause"). Secondary sources do not come directly from the events described but from consideration and interpretation of them afterward. This leads us to an alternative, and slightly more sophisticated, definition of a primary source—namely, that it is a piece of evidence that has not yet been interpreted by a historian. It is still in its raw state, waiting for someone to make it speak. Precisely for this reason, primary sources allow a unique and particularly authentic glimpse into the past. They provide an unequalled opportunity to really “get inside” historical events and to directly encounter other times, places, and persons. The work and the challenge of the historian are then to question, interpret, and communicate those experiences.

How does one find and select primary sources? One of the first issues to consider is the relationship between the sources to be used and the question to be asked. For example, can the chosen sources actually answer the intended question? What other questions might they answer? The constitutions of Sparta and Athens tell us about the ways in which these city-states of ancient Greece were organized. At the same time, they allow us a glimpse into the everyday lives of the people of the time. Often a skilled historian or an imaginative student can use sources in more creative ways. The same constitutions, for example, provide the basics for a discussion of the evolution of democracy from ancient Greece to the modern world.

When beginning a research project, the question of where to start usually arises. Does one start with the research question or with the sources? Each has it advantages and disadvantages. Historians often like to begin with a particular question—perhaps because this is what fascinates them or perhaps because the question is fundamentally important and needs answering. However, beginning with the question can often make the search for sources more arduous and fraught. What kind of sources might be needed? Do they exist? If so, where are they? In what language are they? How accessible are they? Might expensive travel, transcription, or copying services be necessary? Students may sometimes prefer to work the other way around, starting with quality source materials and then choosing a question that the materials can be made to answer. Either route can produce excellent results. A typical study may well involve both methods.

There are numerous places to find primary sources. Many are published in readers or sourcebooks that can be found with relative ease in libraries or online. Often, however, these references present very short excerpts rather than the fuller selections offered here. Further materials may be found in newspapers, magazines, and periodicals from the time and place in question; these, too, are usually accessible in libraries or online. As the historian delves ever more deeply into a topic, however, he or she will likely need to make use of *unpublished* sources, typically stored in archives. Archives range from the small and informal, such as a box of unsorted items in a family home, to the very large and well-funded, such as a country’s national archives. Depending on the historian’s interests, the search for primary sources may lead well beyond these places. I recently encountered a colleague who, in his search for information about public health in early-modern Europe had been excavating and testing samples from five-hundred-year-old latrines!

How are primary sources used? This is the most important part of the process. Once sources have been chosen, the historian must interrogate them and probe them for meaning and answers. In a few cases, depending on the question to be asked, this may be relatively straightforward. Someone reading a medieval law code, for example, may simply wish to know what it said on a given subject. The more interesting questions, however, usually require greater effort and skill. What might the same law code tell us about medieval views on childrearing or family life? What does it suggest about attitudes toward foreigners or toward the poor? What does it say about religion? Here, one will have to read between the lines, teasing out clues and making reasonable inferences. It will be necessary also to consult other primary sources and to compare them, to consult secondary sources on the same or a related topic, and then to make judgments about the applicability or validity of others’ findings. In this manner, the historian’s endeavor becomes a sort of detective work, involving and requiring skills of analysis, interpretation, and critical thinking. This is what makes historical writing a creative act rather than just one involving memorization and communication. It is also what makes history an endlessly fascinating and busy field of study, one in which there are many opportunities to ask and to say something new.

All this, of course, places upon the historian a substantial burden of responsibility—one that must be properly shouldered. Like any type of raw material, primary historical sources can be made into different things to serve different purposes, depending on the will and skill of the historian wielding them. In order to be history, rather than fantasy or mere polemics, historical accounts must remain grounded in the evidence contained in the primary sources. They must not ignore or suppress evidence or select or twist it to fit preconceived notions or agendas. In many cases, this may mean abandoning a cherished theory or assumption that the primary sources do not support. Or it may mean reworking the original question, if the sources do not provide real answers. Sometimes the study of history will challenge previously held notions and foster new thoughts and questions. Indeed, this is one of the most important functions of the study of history, at any level.

The historian must also apply the same critical thinking standards to the primary sources themselves and to their authors. Just because someone was an eyewitness to or a participant in a historical event does not mean that his or her account is objectively true or that it is the only possible interpretation. To one degree or another, all primary sources reflect the biases, assumptions, perspectives, and circumstances of their authors and of their time and place of origin. The modern historian, working with this in mind, will always want to begin by asking preliminary questions of every primary source, including these: Who wrote this? For what purpose? From what perspective? With the answers to these questions established, the process of engagement with the primary source—of constructing and writing history—can begin in earnest.

Far from being essentially complete and finished, then, history remains more than ever an active field of important research—one where the thrill of discovery awaits. And it is not always a question of finding obscure new primary sources. Many historians have done their most interesting and important work instead by returning to key, well-known sources and rereading them in novel ways, asking fresh questions, and bringing new methods and perspectives to bear. In this spirit, the present collection offers two things: a guided selection of some of the most important documents in world history and an opportunity for engagement and discovery relating to some of the most critical events and turning points in the human story so far. Happy reading!

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