FROM RELIABLE SOURCES

An Introduction to Historical Methods

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Introduction

All cultures, all peoples, tell stories about themselves, and it is these stories that help provide the meanings that make a culture. In its most basic sense, this is what history is: the stories we tell about our prior selves or that others tell about us. In writing these stories, however, historians do not discover a past as much as they create it; they choose the events and people that they think constitute the past, and they decide what about them is important to know. Sometimes historians think they need to know about an event because it seems to have had a direct role in making the present; sometimes historians choose their object of study simply because it seems central to a past that is important today. But historians always create a past by writing it. History is not just there, awaiting the researcher's discovery. Unlike a forgotten poem, the ruins of a cathedral, or a lost law code that might be uncovered, history has no existence before it is written.

Yet it is exactly these kinds of artifacts that historians use to interpret the past, exactly such materials that constitute the *sources* with which historians build meanings. It is no wonder then that at least since the nineteenth century, when history writing in the West was firmly located in the academy and professionalized, when it became what some still call "scientific," historians have paid careful attention to how sources are chosen and interpreted. They have developed sophisticated techniques for judging a source's authenticity, its representativeness, and its relevance. They have constructed typologies of sources, dividing them into genres that lend themselves to systematic comparative analyses, and they have in-

vented ingenious strategies for decoding and interpreting sources. This technical work has long been considered the backbone of history writing in the West, and historians have traditionally judged the quality of their own or their colleagues' work in terms of its mastery of these skills. Seen from this point of view, the historian's basic task is to choose *reliable* sources, to read them *reliably*, and to put them together in ways that provide *reliable* narratives about the past.

One purpose of this book is to introduce beginning researchers to the techniques historians deploy in that task. Although readers will soon discover that reliability is a stubbornly elusive goal, our text is nevertheless based on the premise that critical analysis of sources is the basis of good historical scholarship. Thus, the body of this book begins at the beginning, with sources. Chapter 1 first asks what materials count as sources and then considers such questions as how sources can be categorized according to their forms, the kinds of information they can provide, and the ways historians have typically used them. Chapter 2 opens the historian's tool box, introducing and cataloging techniques that have been developed for decoding particular kinds of sources, marshaling their strengths and exposing their weaknesses.

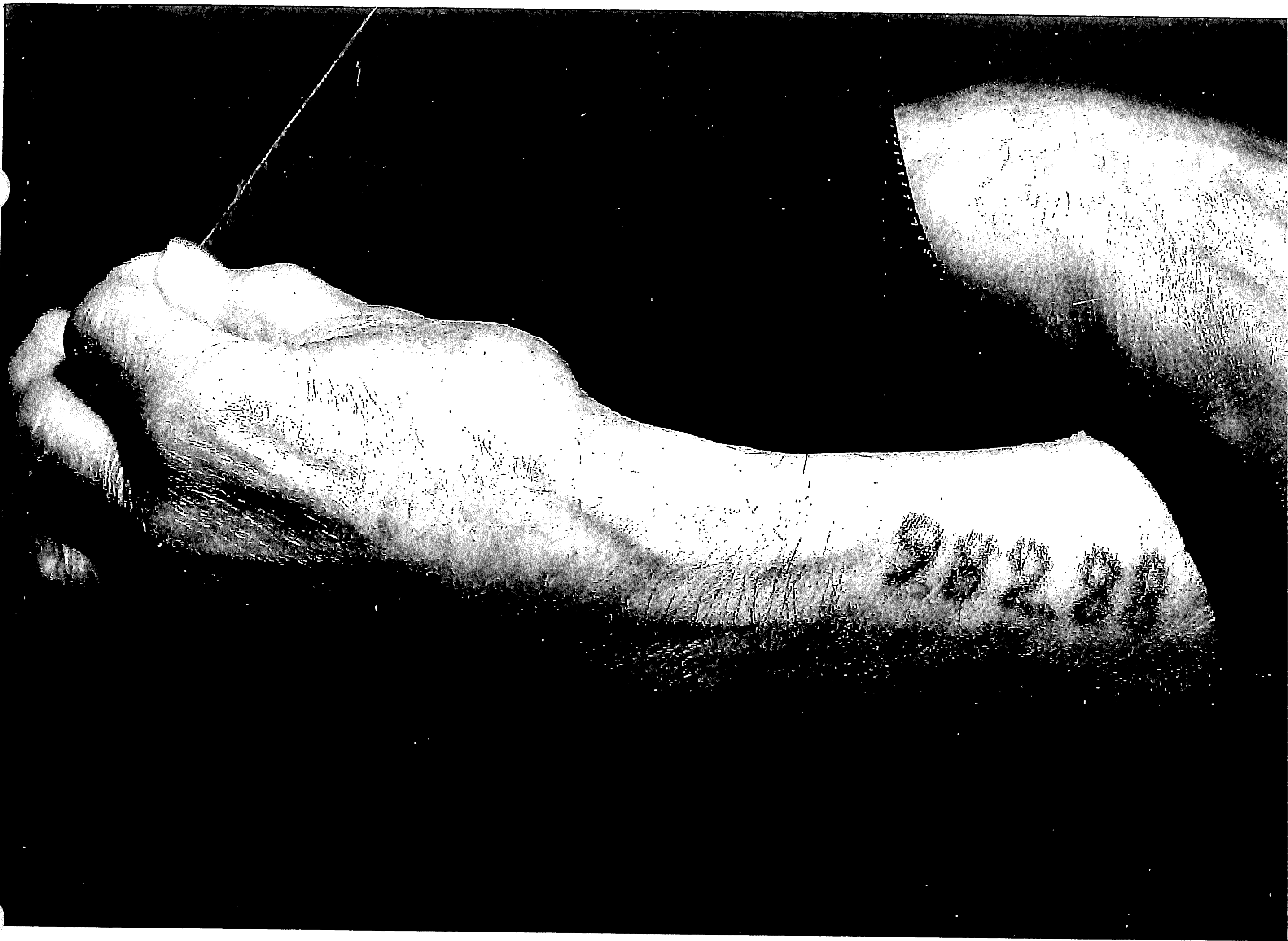
It will have become apparent, however, that no source, and no interpretation of it, is perfectly *reliable*, if by that one means that it provides certain knowledge about the past. The remainder of our book works to demonstrate the limitations of a historical method aiming at such certainty and discusses the strategies historians have devised to cope with these limitations. It does so in two ways. First, in chapter 3, we consider the fallibility of sources themselves, that is, their inherent inability to provide anything but a partial, incomplete, and necessarily biased view of the events they ostensibly report, and the difficulties any historian faces in trying to adjust for that partiality. We also discuss how the historian's distance from the culture under study makes full appreciation of a source's limitations impossible. Second, in chapter 4, we consider how historians come to mine sources for certain kinds of information at the expense of others, how they come to ask the questions they ask and select the issues on which they concentrate. Here, too, we examine the historiographical theory and practice that has particularly influenced the last two generations of historians in the West. Chapter 5 considers the way historians in the past and those of today have thought about change and causality—once considered the central questions of historical inquiry and still today on every historian's agenda, if only implicitly. The book ends with a discussion of history's uses, both in a past that was less skeptical about the

possibilities for absolute knowledge and in a present where such matters seem considerably less certain.

From Reliable Sources is not, then, intended as a handbook explaining how to research and write history correctly.[1] To be sure, it offers a guide to the most useful of the techniques historians in the West have devised for analyzing sources, and it preserves the profession's central tenet that a critical engagement with the records of the past can produce useful knowledge about that past. But it also attempts to unseat easy assumptions about the certainty of our knowledge about the past, and to make clear that the uncertainty lies not just in the stubborn opacity of sources but in our inherent inability to get beyond sources themselves. Thus it exposes the central paradox of our profession: historians are prisoners of sources that can never be made fully reliable, but if they are skilled readers of sources and always mindful of their captivity, they can make their sources yield meaningful stories about a past and our relationship to it.

1. How can we create reliable knowledge of the past?

2. What are some limits to our knowledge of the past?



Apologising for history: what is it good for?

Do we carry responsibility for the sins of our forebears? **Rab Houston** examines attempts to make good historical wrongs – and asks if the effort is worthwhile

SIMON WIESENTHAL'S *The Sunflower* is a true story of an encounter in 1943 between the author – a concentration-camp Jew – and a Nazi soldier on his deathbed. The soldier, Karl Seidl, asked for the forgiveness of a Jew for having destroyed a house containing 150 people. Neither man knew the other. Wiesenthal walked away without answering, but later asked other prisoners what he should have done. The point of the book is to explore whether some wrongs are so awful as to be unforgivable, asking the reader to pose the question 'What would I have done?' But it also raises an important point about the value of apologising for what is done, for neither soldier nor inmate was able to achieve any closure from the encounter. For Seidl the guilt remained; for Wiesenthal there was lingering uncertainty about his moral stance before God, people and man.

Seidl sought absolution for a recent wrong from a representative of those he had wronged. The relevance to both

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Auschwitz survivor Leon Greenman displays his prison number tattoo on 9 December 2004 at the Jewish Museum in London

was utterly immediate, even if they were only individual figures in a much bigger and more awful picture of persecution and fear.

More pertinent to recent debate has been the penchant for demanding and offering expressions of regret or admissions of guilt for events that happened long ago. Some regard apology as a necessary way of drawing a line under unpleasant aspects of the past, arguing that without the ability to make and enforce moral judgements there can be no code of civilised behaviour to underpin a culture. Others see giving in to the demand as a knee-jerk reaction to political correctness, creating a never-ending cycle of imprecise guilt or even dishonest attempts at atonement. They argue that a dynamic and robust group or society will have moved on, dealing with yesterday's wrongs in their own way as they forge a better tomorrow.

Apologising seems particularly acceptable among left-leaning governments and liberal, self-reflexive individuals, most famously Bill Clinton; it fits with other trends in western society such as quasi-religious public displays of emotion: the 'new confessionalism'. Indeed, discussion of historical apology has focused principally on the motive and sincerity of the person or group apologising. Some apologies appear empty, rhetorical and self-serving gestures, which are easily derided, but whose validity is difficult to test. Fortunately, gauging usefulness is much easier.

On its own an apology needs explicitly to own responsibility for a specified offence, injury or injustice, to express regret, and to promise reparation and/or reformation. But it has also to be received. Apologies are valuable if they help to reconcile and they can only do that if donor and recipient can give freely and then engage in a dialogue. For example, in 1997, Helmut Kohl and Vaclav Klaus, the leaders of Germany and the Czech Republic, jointly acknowledged mutual wrongs between 1938 and 1946. Forgiving and being forgiven was structured into this exchange.

Japan's apology of 1998 for the suffering caused by invasion and occupation of South East Asia during the Second World War may have had an ulterior motive, in view of Japan's involvement in the region's burgeoning economies, yet its success suggests that it was accepted as a genuine resolution.

This apology was convincing and it lightened relations between Japan and part of Asia, but it was selective. Japan offered a written apology for military aggression to South Korea because its president Kim Dae Jung adopted a conciliatory approach and because Japan saw South Korea as a partner, not a threat or rival. A comparable 'heartfelt apology' by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama in 1995 was less effective, notably with China, thanks to a lack of trust between the countries and the concern that a written apology could be used to compel Japan both to offer material compensation and to support China's stance on Taiwan. The weight of grievance remained.

We inherit obligations from the past and transmit to our successors both these and any baggage acquired anew

Successful apologies tend to be from one head of state to another, partly because there is parity of status and clarity of meaning, but more because of the possibility of reconciliation through an expression of forgiveness. To refuse an apology implies that condescension, discrimination or exploitation is an appropriate way to approach an individual or group. Apology for past wrongs matters here precisely because those injuries and injustices are not dead. History may be all about the dead, but absolution can only come from those still living who feel aggrieved. It is a process that requires giving as well as taking.

Apologising for history is not only possible, but necessary because people are constituted by their history. To be alive is to have a sense of history, good and bad. We inherit obligations from the past and transmit to our successors both these and any baggage acquired anew. The value of apology and forgiveness lies in creating constructive and continuing dialogue for the future rather than in drawing up a final reckoning with the past. H

Rab Houston's *Scotland: a Very Short Introduction* is published by Oxford University Press

Prague, 1997: German chancellor Helmut Kohl and Czech prime minister Vaclav Klaus attend the historic reconciliation declaration ceremony

The New York Times

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Arguing That Historians Can Be Scientists, Too

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

It's been nearly 50 years since the French historian Marc Bloch laid out the purpose, the scope and th methods of writing history in "The Historian's Craft," demonstrating, among much else, how it is tha the historian can understand the tapestry of the past more fully than someone who lived in it. But Bloch was executed by the Nazis in 1944, and his posthumously published classic, as the Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis puts it, "breaks off, like Thucydides, in midsentence."

In recent decades new challenges have been mounted to the supposedly objective study of the past. Most conspicuously, perhaps, postmodernist theory has raised its ultra-skeptical head to allege that objectivity being impossible, there is no truth. Or to apply the Heisenberg uncertainty principle to this matter, history is like a rabbit in the garden at night, running away as soon as it is caught in a beam of light. If that is the case, isn't the task of trying to determine objectively, scientifically even, what happened in the past an act of arrogant futility?

In "The Landscape of History," Mr. Gaddis, the author of several distinguished books on the cold war, both pays homage to Bloch (and with more conditional admiration, to the British historian E. H. Carr) and addresses the challenge of postmodernism. He does all of this in an urbane and eloquent little volume that, in its way, might even be what Bloch himself would have written had he lived.

Mr. Gaddis's book actually began as a series of lectures he gave at Oxford during some visiting terms there, which would explain why many of the references have a clearly British ring. His overall finding is both unsurprising and reassuring. It is that contrary to what you may have gleaned from the literary deconstructionists, there is a truth, and if it can't be ascertained with total assurance, it can certainly be closely approached, like the calculus approaching the curve.

But it is the components of "The Landscape of History," rather than its overall finding, that provide the book's greatest rewards. I'd even say that the guidelines Mr. Gaddis lays down for the writing of history end up, despite some fairly technical language, being so commonsensical that you think you would follow them anyway, even without benefit of his reflections. But what Mr. Gaddis does is make you aware of the inner workings of that common sense, turning your knowledge from passive and intuitive to active and practical. And in his gentle demolition of the counter-commonsensical theory of the deconstructionists, who are very influential in the academy, Mr. Gaddis's work is not only timely but important as well.

His slender volume, in this sense, becomes quietly moving as he discusses the ways history can either imprison us in false dogma or awaken us to the possibility of freedom.

"The historian must be, in this sense, a social critic; for it's by means of such criticism that the past liberates even as it oppresses the present and future — very much as the historian, however paradoxically, simultaneously performs both acts upon the past itself," Mr. Gaddis writes. And then a

bit later, in a passage about the necessity for the historian to make moral judgments, he adds, "If there's to be an acceptable bias in the writing and teaching of history, let it tilt toward liberation."

In answering the central question, "Is there a historical truth?," Mr. Gaddis covers, chapter by chapter, the historiographical issues: competing views of reality and how historians approach it. In one of several useful (and often playful) metaphors, Mr. Gaddis likens historians to cartographers. Both simulate reality, he says, without duplicating it, which in the cartographic case would have to be a map the same size as the terrain it represents. But representation is the essential concept, and it is the process of fitting representation to reality that, eventually, leads to consensus, acceptance of a version of the past as true.

KEY

Is history science? Mr. Gaddis draws on recent theories of chaos and complexity to substantiate the argument that contrary to the common conception, it is, or at least it uses the same methods as the natural sciences. It isn't that history has changed over the years, become more scientific, but that science has become more historical.

Science has abandoned the linear, predictable Newtonian world of the past in favor of a new world defined by Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Scientists like Einstein couldn't do laboratory experiments. They relied on thought experiments, and a thought experiment is like a historical narrative. And a narrative is an investigative tool. It uses the mind to isolate variables in the effort to simulate how something happened, in science and in history, and to determine the causes.

"Without our having had to do anything different — indeed without even realizing, for the most part, what's happened — we find ourselves, at least in metaphorical terms, practicing the new sciences of chaos, complexity and even criticality," Mr. Gaddis writes.

His elaboration of this point is elegant but not simple. His argument is replete with discussions of concepts like fractals, phase transitions ("those points of criticality at which stability becomes unstable"), and what he calls the "integration of induction and deduction."

His book is not always easy reading. Indeed, I found myself benefiting a great deal by reading some of Mr. Gaddis's chapters two and even three times. But for those who make the effort, the presentation will prove both accessible and instructive.

Moreover, Mr. Gaddis's learned and graceful reflections on all of these questions are deeply humane, propelled by the conviction that only by sustaining a historical consciousness can we know where we should want to go. They will also never allow either the reader of history or the writer of it to think about the past in quite the same way as before.

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