

HISTORY VS. HISTORY

Understanding Historical Thinking and Historiography

U.S. HISTORY / 1830–1877

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HISTORIOGRAPHY?

Historiography is the study of how history has been written, studied, researched, and analyzed over time. When historians look at specific historical documents, they want not only to learn what it says about an event or person, but also to understand who wrote it, where they wrote it, and when. Historians want to know this information because they are trying to figure out what may have influenced the author(s) perspective, biases, and interpretation of the specific person or event detailed in the source.

Every historian knows that when authors write something they are not doing so in a perfect vacuum or even being completely objective about their topic. Rather, each document (or source) was produced at a time when certain cultural, political, religious, geographic, economic, and/or social events were swirling around them. Therefore, historians would argue that the time period in which the source was written affected how its author(s) saw the world around them.

It is also important to note that very few historical figures lived their lives with the thought they were living “in history.” Rather, most people live day-to-day without considering that in the future their daily actions might be analyzed, researched, written about, and debated. For example, the immigrants who came to the United States in the late 1800s did not sit around saying to one another, “Isn’t it great living in this historical time period known as the Gilded Age?” They were much more concerned about surviving and getting set up in their new home and were probably not considering how people in the future would view them either individually or as a larger group. Therefore, when they wrote letters home, kept journals, or communicated with people in their own community, they wrote what they felt and knew at that moment. Now, because of historical research, we know that there were certain political, economic, geographic, religious, social, and cultural things going on at that time, all of which may have had a direct impact on how these new immigrants viewed the world.

What does all this mean for the study of history today? Consider the following scenario. Today, two historians end up researching the same historical event. For arguments sake, let’s say they are interested in why the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and which world leader should get credit for this event. They are researching the same topic and reading many of the same documents, but when they write up their final report they have two very different perspectives on this same event. One discussed how it was U.S. President Ronald Reagan who was the key player in ending the Cold War by forcing Germany to tear down the Berlin Wall, while the other argues that it was obviously Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and his policies in the former Soviet Union that ended the Cold War.

These two historians came to completely different interpretations of what caused this major historical event probably because their sources emphasized different perspectives. These historians then based their arguments on what individuals from the past had written about the event at the time the event occurred. Some of the sources could have

been an East German who had just left his country to get into West Germany, a Soviet soldier who was stationed in East Berlin at the end of the 1980s, or even an American diplomat working in the U.S. Embassy in East Berlin at this time. Each participated in the exact same event but may have seen and remembered it differently from the others.

After considering all of this, think about one more thing. You have been assigned to read articles about who should get credit for the Berlin Wall coming down in your history class. And, as any good history student does, you check out the sources and footnotes for the articles in front of you and you notice that one has been written by an American historian, and the other by a Russian historian. This forces you to ask another historiographical question: “Does their nationality impact how they researched and perceived this event?”

This is historiography. It allows the reader to think about history from a larger perspective by forcing them to consider not only what was happening at the time of the historical event, but also what is happening in our own time which might affect how we learn about this event.

This perspective is what makes history so interesting, useful, and significant. Studying history is not just about names, dates, and places; applying historiography forces students and teachers to engage with the material, to consider why sources were written the way they were and when they were, and to ask how they relate to our world today. Because, in the end, students must remember that they too will become a part of history, and that current geography, economics, politics, society, culture, and religion may all affect how they view historical events as well.

This workbook will use eight historiographical time periods from American history to examine the external societal impacts that may have influenced how each textbook was written. As you read the following pages of this workbook, use this handout as a reference to help you understand how historians have categorized the different historiographical periods of American history. This will help you get a better sense of some of the major social, political, economic, religious, and cultural issues that may have influenced how these history textbooks were written. It can also help shed some light on the author(s) own interpretation, bias, and perspectives concerning the historical events they were writing about at these specific times in American history.

CAUSES OF THE WAR

One of the main things that historians do is help explain the concept of cause and effect. These textbook excerpts look at what caused the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) and show how students in the United States have been taught about this subject for generations. Although an American victory, what brought these two nations into conflict has been debated for decades.

1859

Marcus Willson, *History of the United States: From the Earliest Discoveries to the Present Time*

Scarcely had Mr. Polk taken his seat as president of the United States, when decided indications of a rupture with Mexico became apparent. Mexico had long viewed the conduct of the American government, in relation to the acquisition of Texas, with exceeding jealousy and distrust; still claiming that country as a part of her own territory, she had declared that she would regard annexation as a hostile act, and that she was resolved to declare war as soon as she received intimation of the completion of the project. In accordance with this policy, immediately after the resolution of annexation had passed the American Congress, and received the sanction of the President, Mr. Almonte, the Mexican Minister at Washington, protesting against the measure as an act of warlike aggression, which he declared Mexico would resist with all the means in her power, demanded his passports and returned home.

On the fourth of July following, Texas assented to the terms of the resolution of annexation, and two days later, fearing that Mexico would carry her threats of war into execution, requested the President of the United States to occupy the ports of Texas, and send an army to the defence [sic] of her territory. Accordingly, an American squadron was sent into the Gulf of Mexico, and General Taylor, then in command at Camp Jessup, was ordered by the American government to move with such of the regular forces as could be gathered from the western posts, to the southern frontier of Texas, to act as circumstances might require. By the advice of the Texan authorities he was induced to select for the concentration of his troops the post of Corpus Christi, a Texan settlement on the bay of the same name, where, by the beginning of August, 1845, he had taken his position, and at which place he had assembled, in the November following, an army of little more than four thousand men.

On the 13th of January, 1846, when it was believed that the Mexicans were assembling troops on their northern frontiers with the avowed object of reconquering Texas, and when such information had been received from Mexico as rendered it probable, if

