

HISTORY VS. HISTORY

Understanding Historical Thinking and Historiography

U.S. HISTORY / 1914–1991

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Kyle Ward

MindSparks®

CULVER CITY, CALIFORNIA

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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 When historians look at specific historical documents, they want not only to learn what it says about an event or person, but also to understand who wrote it, where they wrote it, and when.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. 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.

AMERICA ENTERS THE WAR

World War I started in 1914, but the United States did not enter until 1917. The textbook below discusses the reasons why the U.S. might have entered this war and explains the impact this decision may have had on the war.

Italy

Giuliano Alberton and Luisa Benucci, *Incontro con la storia: L'età contemporanea il novecento*

1917–18: The Outcome of War

The year 1917 is when all of the countries involved in the war entered in one way or another into this profound crisis.

“The useless struggle,” as it was called by Pope Benedict XV, had gone on for too long, and the suffering that was spread equally between the military and civilians seemed like it would continue indefinitely. . . .

A Decisive Turn: The U.S. Enters the War

The event destined to cause a decisive turn of events on the conflict was the decision of the U.S. to enter the war. Until then the Americans were limited to helping the Allies with material and financial support, but the terroristic strategy put into action by the German commanders at the beginning of 1917 forced them to abandon their neutrality.

The Germans had begun an underwater battle, attacking with their submarines all mercantile ships—even of neutral nations like the U.S.—who brought reinforcements to England. The German offensive, which put the Allies in grave danger, also hurt the interests of the Americans.

President Woodrow Wilson therefore decided to send the U.S. to war against the Axis powers, because their victory would have made it impossible for the Americans to recuperate the money they had loaned to their European friends; the decision was supported by industrialists and businessmen.

On April 6, 1917, the U.S. entered the war, and with the enormous potential of its men and machines at its disposal, it tipped the balance of power between the opposing sides, and contributed in a substantial way to helping change the fate of the Allies.

Source: Giuliano Alberton and Luisa Benucci, *Incontro con la storia: L'età contemporanea il novecento* (Milan, Italy: Principato, 2010), 112, 120. Paraphrased and trans. from the Italian by Sarah Bevelli.

Items for Analysis

1. Using the graphic organizer below, give examples from the selections above and your current U.S. history textbook as to what the authors think caused the Stock Market Crash in 1929.

Stock Market Crash	Causes
1933	
1944	
1974	
Current U.S. Textbook	

2. The first textbook in this section comes from the year 1933, which was just a few years after the start of the Great Depression. Compare the tone of this textbook to the others.