

HISTORY VS. HISTORY

Understanding Historical Thinking and Historiography

U.S. HISTORY / 1991–2015

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 When historians look at specific historical documents, they want not only to learn what it says about an event or person, but also to understand who wrote it, where they wrote it, and when.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

THE UNITED STATES AS GLOBAL SUPERPOWER

In the 1990s, after the Cold War had ended, there was a belief by some that there would be no more wars since the two global superpowers were no longer in a state of constant struggle with one another. There was also a question about what the world would look like with just the United States left as the lone superpower. While some nations welcomed this idea, of America serving as “world policeman,” others seemed to be more concerned over this possibility.

Italy

Fabio Vicari, *Capire la storia: Il mondo contemporaneo, Con 10 lezioni di Cittadinanza e Costituzione*

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States seemed to be the only major world power left, destined to maintain peace in the world and to sustain the development of democracy. This new international role was put to the test during the first Gulf War (1990–91). The invasion of Kuwait, a small country rich in petroleum, by the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, could have caused a global crisis. The U.S. decided to intervene: along with other European and Arab allies, and with permission of the U.N., they quickly liberated Kuwait. They decided, however, to not overthrow the Iraqi regime.

The Americans then intervened in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, and in other nations where there were civil wars: restoring peace, however, often revealed itself to be difficult to accomplish.

South Africa

Jean Bottaro, Pippa Visser, and Nigel Worden, *In Search of History: Grade 12 Learner’s Book*

Were there any rivals to US domination?

There were no significant rivals to US world domination after the collapse of the USSR. The CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] was ineffectual and Russia (its largest member) was weakened by internal problems. The former colonial powers, Britain and France, had never regained their strength after the Second World War. Reunification in Germany caused severe economic problems, including high unemployment. Germans also had to deal with the growth of racism and neo-Nazism, directed especially against Turkish and other immigrant workers. . . .

Source: Fabio Vicari, *Capire la storia: Il mondo contemporaneo, Con 10 lezioni di Cittadinanza e Costituzione* (Bologna, Italy: Zanichelli, 2011), 308. Paraphrased and trans. from the Italian by Sarah Bevelli.

How has the USA used its dominance?

Some analysts believe that American foreign policy since 1990 has been inconsistent and that American intervention has at times been inappropriate. They cite the American-led invasions of Kuwait (1991), Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) as examples of this, along with American-led sanctions against Libya and Iraq. They also think that continued American support for Israel is inhibiting peace in the Middle East. All of these actions have resulted in growing anti-American feeling in many Arab states in the region.

Other analysts think that the US has not used the opportunity for world leadership as it should. For example, it is giving less support to the United Nations than it did and has reduced its contribution to the costs of UN peacekeeping efforts and its subscriptions to the normal budget of the UN.

Ireland

Gerard Brockie and Raymond Walsh, *Modern Ireland*

By the first anniversary of the IRA [Irish Republican Army] ceasefire in August 1995, republicans were furious that they had not been invited to participate in talks. In an effort to advance the peace progress, President Bill Clinton visited Belfast in November 1995 and endorsed American Senator George Mitchell, who had been appointed to head an international body to resolve the decommissioning issue. Mitchell recommended that decommissioning and all-party talks should proceed at the same time. However, progress was slow until the Conservative Government in Great Britain was succeeded by a new Labour Government in May 1997 under the leadership of Tony Blair. In the following month, a new Taoiseach [prime minister, chief executive, and head of government of Ireland], Bertie Ahern, was elected in the Irish Republic. Both leaders were to personally invest huge amounts of time and energy in advancing the peace process.

In April 1998 an historic agreement was signed in Belfast. Known as the Good Friday Agreement, it established a power-sharing executive and Assembly in Northern Ireland. It also set up a decommissioning body to oversee the decommissioning of weapons and provided for a referendum north and south of the border in the order to ratify the agreement. David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, became First Minister and Seamus Mallon, deputy leader of the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party], was appointed Deputy First Minister. While this agreement was supported by the Ulster Unionists, the Alliance Party, the SDLP and Sinn Fein [Irish republican political party], it was opposed by the Democratic Unionists Party under the leadership of Ian Paisley.

While obstacles still remained in the peace process, the Good Friday Agreement was to provide the basis for a lasting settlement in Northern Ireland.

Source: Jean Bottaro, Pippa Visser, and Nigel Worden, *In Search of History: Grade 12 Learner's Book* (Cape Town, South Africa: Oxford University Press, 2011), 189, 191

Source: Gerard Brockie and Raymond Walsh, *Modern Ireland*, 2nd Edition (Dublin, Ireland: Gill & MacMillan, 2008), 420.

Venezuela

Antonio E. Gomez, *Historia de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*

[While reading this selection it is important to remember that Hugo Chavez was the president of Venezuela when this textbook was published. In the U.S., Chavez is mostly remembered for his strong anti-American stance and for strongly criticizing America's role around the world. In fact, on a number of occasions, Chavez was quoted as referring to President George W. Bush as the "devil."]

Worldwide dynamics force nations to continuously revise their international relationships constantly striving to keep these relationships on friendly footing if they want to maintain the possibility of cooperative movement towards paths of development.

Venezuela is not immune to the attraction towards international relationships; and its governments, at all times, have fought to keep the country within the bounds of friendship and mutual respect. This is due to the simple reason that our country has achieved high levels of leadership within the so-called Third World, and the success of our continued leadership is based on the demonstrated success of our relationships with other Hispano-American peoples and with the nations of other persuasions, powerful or not.

The leadership of Venezuela as an example nation does not come from the choice of a particular powerful country to affirm our relations, but rather arises from the mutual cooperation of even the least developed nations.

China

Hanguo Zhu and Shili Ma, *History: Ninth Grade*

“World Police”

The strong economy and military power have encouraged the United States' wild ambition of taking over the world. After the war [World War II], the United States expanded its arms and prepared for wars through its ever growing economic power. It served as the “world police,” intervened in the internal affairs, and tried to establish and maintain an international order according to its own will.

In 1989, the U.S. government used “to protect people's lives and properties of the United States” as an excuse, to call out an army of 26,000 soldiers, sailors, and airmen and attacked Panama during the night under the title of “Operation Just Cause.” This led to the military occupation of Panama, Colon, and other important places, and destroyed the Ministry of National Defense in Panama.

Source: Antonio E. Gomez, *Historia de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela* (Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Salesiana, 2004), 202. Paraphrased and trans. from the Spanish by Amanda DeBoer.

Source: Hanguo Zhu and Shili Ma, *History: Ninth Grade*, vol. 2 (Beijing, China: Beijing Normal University Press, 2002), 66–67. Paraphrased and trans. from the Chinese by Michelle Yu & Mengmei Ying.

Items for Analysis

- Using the excerpts, cite examples from each in which the United States is portrayed as a positive or negative force in the world.

Country of Excerpt	Examples of the U.S. as a Positive Influence	Examples of the U.S. as a Negative Influence	U.S. Not Mentioned
Italy			
South Africa			
Ireland			
Venezuela			
China			