

UNIT NINE

HISTORY

Contents

The Lost Franklin Expedition Ship

What is History?

Knowledge Questions

Why History Matters

Writing History (Methodology)

Is History a Science?

Can History Predict the Future?

The Problem of Objectivity

The Problem of Causation

Cleopatra's Nose

Hindsight

Bias

The Postmodernist Challenge

Theories of History

Real-Life Situation IV: Nationalism Bias and History

In George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, the Party seeks to control memory in order to create a false history that will enable it to make the citizens of Oceania psychologically dependent.

The Party creates a false narrative of a time when people were ostensibly living in miserable slave-like conditions. It then defines itself as the instrument of the people's liberation. Not wishing to return to a depraved past that they believe really happened, the citizens strive desperately to help the Party realize its goals.

The Party has written all of the history books that the citizens read. Citizens are not permitted to keep diaries, photographs or documents of the past. As a result, they have unreliable memories easily manipulated by the Party to forward its agenda.

O'Brien—a member of the Inner Party who pretends to be a member of an illegal anti-Party group—at one point tells Winston, who is the protagonist of the novel, that the past has no real, independent existence. It is only something that exists in people's minds. The false past that the Party has created has become the only truth available to citizens.

Since citizens cannot remember the time before the Party took power, they lack any standard against which to judge the Party's claims to have improved the condition of their lives. In fact, the citizens are hungry and live in squalid circumstances.

The Party's psychological control is so thorough that citizens engage in "double-think", believing what the Party tells them despite encountering evidence undermining its claims.

This ability of citizens to accommodate contradictory thoughts is highlighted by an incident that occurs during Hate Week. The Party announces suddenly during a political rally that a certain country that was once its enemy is now its important ally. The citizens, who have come specifically to express their hatred for this country, immediately accept the Party's declaration and then feel embarrassed that they have brought the wrong protest signs to the rally.

Though Winston is desperately curious to discover how and why the Party has achieved absolute power in Oceania, he has no real clues to guide him to the truth. He befriends O'Brien, but discovers in the end that this man is simply one more instrument of a Party whose overwhelming power he cannot resist. Winston's psychological dependence and his intense fatalism permit him no escape. In the end, he traces $2 + 2 = 5$ in the sand, a "truth" that the Party has indoctrinated him to believe and that he had refused to accept throughout the novel. This poignant writing in the sand symbolizes Winston's complete defeat and transformation into a loyal subject of Big Brother.

The Lost Franklin Expedition Ship

Unlike the scenario that Orwell imagines in *1984*, where the Party is so devastatingly powerful that it can completely erase the past and substitute its own false version of it, in real life few things vanish without a trace.

Consider the following mystery that has been solved by following just a couple of clues, although it did take nearly one hundred and seventy years to find some answers.

In 1845, the British explorer Sir John Franklin sailed from England to the north of Canada in search of the fabled Northwest Passage. The famous expedition involved two ships with 129 men aboard and generated considerable newspaper coverage in London at the time of its departure.

After arriving in the poorly chartered and dangerous Arctic Sea near Canada, the entire expedition simply vanished. For many years, no one knew what happened. The British government dispatched multiple search parties but they found nothing. It seemed that the puzzle would never be solved.



Man Proposes, God Disposes by Edwin Henry Landseer (1884) Inspired by the Loss of the Franklin Expedition

In time, however, a number of provocative clues emerged. Members of a rescue mission in 1859, for instance, found two notes under a stack of rocks on King William Island. The first indicated that the Franklin crew had survived and were spending the winter on the island. The second, written in the margins of the first note at a later date, suggested that about one fifth of the crew had perished.

Inuit hunters had witnessed the crew abandoning their ships and setting out towards land on rafts. The hunters speculated that the white men had resorted to cannibalism. Bones belonging to members of the crew were later discovered and identified as belonging to members of the Franklin crew. They were scarred with the marks of metal saws. Forensic experts many years later speculated that the men had suffered from lead poisoning, possibly from the containers in which they carried food or from pipes in the ship's plumbing system.

In late 2014, Prime Minister Harper of Canada announced that a government marine search team had found one of the two Franklin expedition ships and that the ship would likely

contain a trove of valuable information. Some have described the find as one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the past century.

What is History?

History is an area of knowledge that focuses on a careful study of the recorded past and how it relates to human beings. It is a “thick” term that refers not only to independent events in the past, but also to the memory, discovery, analysis, interpretation and presentation of evidence connected with these events.

Historians often present their interpretations of the past in the form of narratives in the course of which they examine sequences of past events in light of the causes that brought them about and the effects that ensued.

The invention of writing marks the traditional border between pre-history and history. It is only when people started keeping records for the sake of future generations that they began in earnest to create a common heritage or sense of community and national identity encompassing the past, present and future. However, historians also consult oral traditions and the monuments, inscriptions, pictures and other artifacts that remain from prehistoric times, since these have served a similar purpose.

The 5th century BC Greek writers Herodotus and Thucydides gave form to the modern study of human history and thus deserve some brief mention here at the outset.

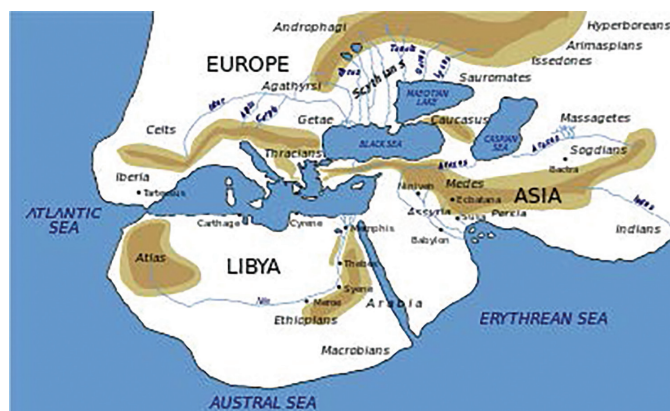
Herodotus wrote *The Histories*. The Greek title of this work means “inquiries”, and this word subsequently passed into Latin and then into English. The word has been used to describe the effort to collect materials related to the past in a systematic and critical fashion and to arrange them into a narrative for public consumption. *The Histories* focused on the origins of the wars between the Greeks and the Persians and included a wealth of geographical information and descriptions of different cultural practices and beliefs.

Herodotus’ inquiries were directed to discovering the causes of the wars of liberation that the Greeks fought against the Persians. *The Histories* helped to create a larger Greek identity by means of a grand narrative that transcended the local and family oral traditions that Herodotus used as his primary source material.

Many historians over the years have questioned the reliability of *The Histories*. However, modern historians have praised the work as generally trustworthy, particularly given the fact that Herodotus had to work with inadequate and conflicting sources of information. To be sure, he was not above repeating mythical tales or far-fetched stories if they were provocative or

had some entertainment value. However, he was very careful to distinguish what he had heard from what he had seen.

He traveled widely. He was born in Asia Minor, lived on the island of Samos, lived in Athens and still later lived in a Greek colony in southern Italy. He may have visited Egypt, since he gives a credible first-hand account of the regular flooding of the Nile River.



The “Inhabited World” according to Herodotus (c. 450 B.C.)

His contemporary Thucydides, sometimes called the father of “scientific history”, wrote the influential *History of the Peloponnesian War*, a narrative focused on the civil war between Athens and Sparta and concerned principally with military and diplomatic events.

His work introduced strict standards for gathering and evaluating evidence. Thucydides also analyzed cause and effect without resorting to divine explanations. He felt that crises such as plagues, massacres and civil wars provided valuable opportunities to study and acquire an understanding of human nature.

Knowledge Questions

Before discussing the methodology of history, the nature of evidence, objectivity, causation, whether history is a science, the problem of bias, the reasons for studying history and some of the more influential theories of history, let us begin by posing some of the many knowledge questions that history as an area of knowledge raises.

How does history differ from the human sciences? Can history help us to manage or make sense of the present? What happens when historical facts and cultural heritage come into conflict? Should critical historians feel free to “correct” popular memories that are valuable to our national identity?

How reliable are first-hand accounts of events in the past? Can one write meaningful history about events while they are still fresh in everyone’s minds? Is history a set of events in the past or the examination and interpretation of those

events by historians? Does distance from the events one describes confer a degree of objectivity? Is there such a thing as a purely objective historian? Does emotion have a role to play in history? Should it? Should historians seek to cultivate empathy in their readers by inviting them to “step into the shoes” of actors in the past who faced unique challenges and limitations?

To what extent can a historian rely on imagination and intuition as sources of knowledge? Can history ever aspire to be scientific and offer predictions about the future? Do historians by necessity assume a theory of human action?

Does history have to have a meaning and a purpose, or is the statement of facts sufficient? Do historians have an obligation to concentrate their accounts on actors—kings, villains, creators, thinkers and heroes—who have become famous? Do historians also have a responsibility to give a voice to those who have been silenced by traditional historical accounts?

Is there a meaningful distinction between history and fiction? If there is a distinction, when does the former become the latter? What criteria do historians cite when deciding what is or is not historically significant? Can the study of history allow us to consider alternative futures? Can we ever hold people morally accountable for the consequences of their actions in the past, even if they could not have foreseen these consequences? Is there a moral dimension to the historian’s craft? Can we apply modern notions of morality to times when such notions were not widely accepted?

How does the historian combine objectivity and subjectivity in the process of identifying and selecting evidence and arriving at an interpretation of the past? Can more than one version of the past, even versions that contradict one another, be true to the evidence? How do we judge one work of history to be superior to another? Can we safely conclude that some histories are badly conceived and misbegotten?

Is history linear and upward in progress? Are we moving to a better place as we move forward in time? Should historians focus on social groups with conflicting interests and differential power instead of focusing on noteworthy individuals?

What role has religion played in the creation of our shared past? Is it possible to describe historical events in neutral language? What common fallacies arise in the writing of history? What role does statistical analysis play in the writing of history?

We will undertake to address some of these questions in the course of this unit. However, keep in mind always that these knowledge questions have no “right” or “wrong” answers, only answers that are more or less persuasive to the

people who formulate them. Indeed, posing and answering knowledge questions goes to the very heart of the historian’s task and will continue to do so for as long as human beings create a “useable” past for their posterity to contemplate and interrogate.

Why History Matters

From a purely utilitarian perspective, it might seem at first somewhat difficult to justify the study of history in a school curriculum or to recommend it as a general preparation for life in the twenty-first century. The study of medicine, urban planning, structural engineering, software design, law or business and commerce seems to us obviously useful. Including these subjects in any general course of required studies needs no elaborate justification.

Educated people throughout the ages have turned to a careful study of history for a number of important reasons, even though these reasons may not seem obvious at first. Let us consider some of these reasons.

1. History Helps Us to Understand Individuals and Societies

In the first place, history offers a wealth of information about how individuals have changed the course of events and how collections of individuals that we call societies have developed, flourished and declined.

If we accept the proposition that the past causes the present in some fashion, then it will be worth our while to examine current events in light of the factors that contributed to bringing them about.

Historians are interested in why things happen the way they have. However, as we will suggest later in this unit, they do not seek to discover laws of human action or patterns that will permit us to forecast the future.

The natural sciences and human sciences such as sociology seek to move from particular data to the articulation of general principles. Historians cannot do this for the simple reason that history is about human beings and humans do not behave logically and predictably. History is governed by accidents and by the unknown human variable more than by irresistible forces that we can predict and that are inevitable.

Because chance and particular and unpredictable factors play such a large role in the unfolding of history, we probably cannot expect history to teach us lessons in the way that it could if the subject permitted us to discover immutable scientific laws.

We can certainly learn from past mistakes. However, this does not mean that things will necessarily turn out better next time or that we can anticipate the future. Studying history does not, as George Santayana suggests in his famous dictum, spare us the pain of repeating our follies. History teaches only one very big lesson: “that nothing ever works out quite the way its managers intended or expected” (Gordon Wood).

2. History Helps Us to Widen Our Experience through Imaginative Immersion in the Past

History is a vast museum and library that allows us to investigate the questions of how and why human beings behave as they do in different social settings. Many of us have not had the opportunity to live in contexts that are thoroughly unlike the ones that are familiar to us. Reading history allows us to achieve that experience vicariously and imaginatively.

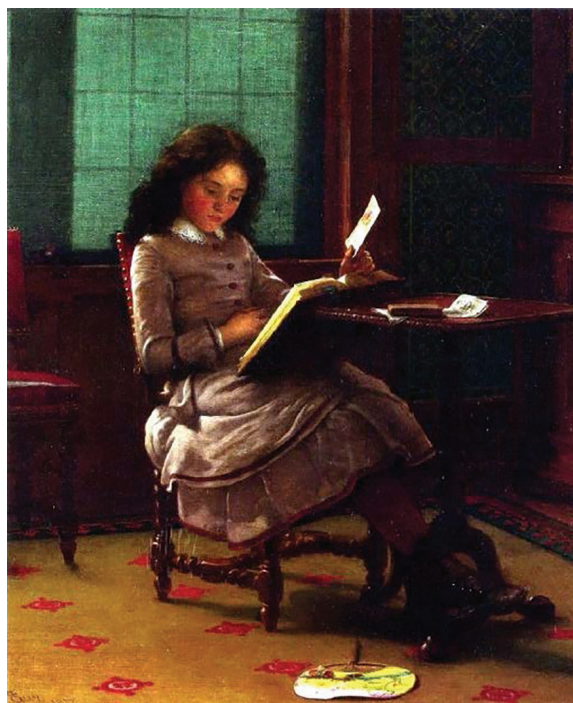
Well-written fiction can encourage us to develop our sense of empathy by imagining how human beings in different circumstances than ours have functioned. In the same way, beautifully written history can encourage us to immerse ourselves in remote pasts that are quite removed from our familiar world. This journey satisfies aesthetic and humanistic longings that we all share. Ultimately, the study of history allows us to develop a richer understanding of what it means to be human.

3. History Encourages the Development of Personal Knowledge

Written history is a form of shared knowledge that can lead to the development of personal knowledge and insights.

Imagine that your father is a history buff who keeps a few shelves of books that have particularly moved him. He keeps them in a small room where he also has a desk where he writes letters and stories. He has taught you to read and to be curious. He once said to you: “cultivate personal astonishments”.

Now that you are getting old enough to appreciate some of the books that mean so much to him, he encourages you to spend as much free time in his study as you wish, reading what interests you. You read about one book a week and keep a reflective journal about your reading, vowing to share your personal astonishments with your father sometime in the future.



Young Girl Reading by Seymour Joseph Guy (1877)

You later leave home to attend university in another city and forget about the diary. You discover it years later in a box of your childhood possessions that your parents have kept in a closet for you. You find it and read through some of the entries when you visit your parents.

The Discoverers (Daniel Boorstin) “The author discusses the discovery of the concept of time, something that I always took for granted. He describes the inventions of the compass and the telescope and discusses the great European explorers. From this book, I have learned that what we believe to be fact may be an illusion and that this realization can be the beginning of discovering something new and valuable.”

The Diary of a Young Girl (Anne Frank) “Anne starts writing this diary when she is thirteen years old. The Jews have to wear yellow stars in Amsterdam after the Germans came during World War II. She lives in a hidden attic with her family. They all fear for their lives. Still, they try to live normal lives. I know from classes that I have taken that the beautiful girl who wrote this diary was caught and taken to a concentration camp. She died there. Despite all of the heartbreak of having to hide and the terror of a world turned upside down, Anne can still write in her diary that she believes that people are basically good. This breaks my heart.”

Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution (Simon Schama) “This was a fascinating book that gave me a sense that I was in the middle of great tumult as my country moved from a tyranny of royalty and aristocrats to a utopian democracy. I was amazed at the violence to people and property encouraged

in the name of liberty. The descriptions of the power struggles among the revolutionaries was thrilling and terrifying. The hero of the moment could become a public enemy overnight and might even end up murdered or executed. Is it possible to win freedom without shedding a lot of blood?"

Hiroshima (John Hersey) "This is, quite simply, the most moving book that I have ever read. The author gives first-hand accounts of people who survived the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The author tells the stories of these six survivors in an amazingly detached, neutral style. He does not judge. What amazed me was how everyone who lived through the devastation came together as a community to dig people out of the rubble and help the wounded. The delay in the arrival of help, the tenacity and courage of the victims, the description of the strange rains that fell in the days after the bombing and the return to everyday life are what I will take from away from my experience of reading this important book."

Collapse (Jared Diamond) "This is an incredibly interesting but worrisome book. The author invites us to examine the demise of various flourishing cultures from different times and places that all fell apart because they could not contend with environmental change, unsustainable population growth and bad political decisions. He examines catastrophes faced by the people of Easter Island, Pitcairn Island and Norse Greenland. He gives us some reasons that may explain why the Anasazi people of the American Southwest disappeared. Can we learn from the mistakes that the history of failed cultures presents us with in this book? That is very much an open question."

There are dozens more entries in your diary. Fascinated, you read the whole document and suddenly realize how much this uncorrelated reading of history you did in your father's study when you were younger has informed the way that you look at the world. At long last, you share with your father your private astonishments, handing him the journal just before you return to university to prepare for your last term before graduating.

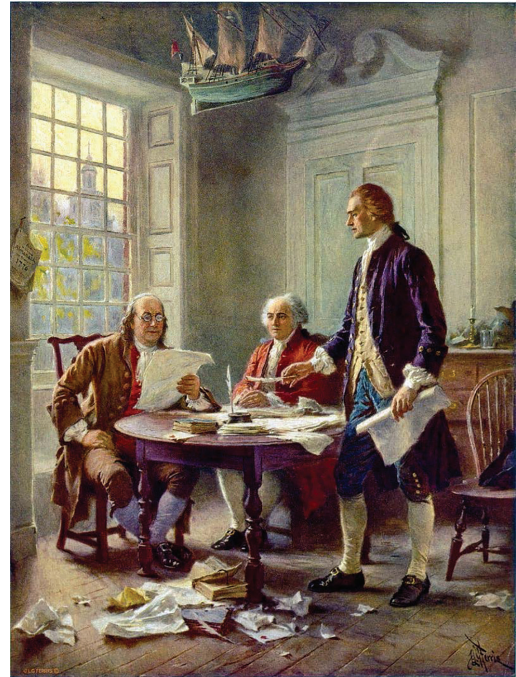
4. History Provides a Sense of Identity

Communities develop a shared story about what they have endured in the past, what they have learned and what they stand for. Sometimes these communities are relatively small. But nations also develop an almost religious-like creed explaining what they believe, where they have been and what future they wish to embrace.

As our world grows increasingly connected, it becomes important for all of us to understand history as heritage—the lessons and beliefs that we seek to preserve from our historical experience and hand over to our posterity. To

understand another person, we need to know not only that person's individual history but also his or her heritage.

As an example, consider what most Americans consider to be the most important secular document of their civic religion—*The Declaration of Independence* (1776). If you wish to see this "sacred" document, you can visit the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where the document is suitably placed for viewing on what resembles an altar at the top of a flight of three stairs. Every day, thousands of visitors reverently file past this relic.



Franklin, Adams and Jefferson Working on the Declaration
by Jean Leon Ferris (1900)

What is it about this document that gives it pride of place in the American pantheon? The words of the preamble are, for most Americans, the most succinct words available to describe what it means to be a citizen of that nation. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Throughout American history, workers, women, opponents of slavery and oppressed people of all stripes have called on these words to justify their quest for equality and freedom from tyranny.

This sacred document throws some interesting light on two of the knowledge questions that we raised earlier in this unit. What happens when historical fact and cultural heritage come into conflict? Should critical historians feel free to "correct" popular memories that are valuable to our national identity?

Many historians have demonstrated that the phrase “all men are created equal” as used by Thomas Jefferson in the *Declaration* did not refer to slaves or to Indians. Indeed, the practice of slavery and the marginalization of the Indians continued in the United States for almost ninety years beyond the signing of that document.

By the 1850s, as the United States drew closer to a bloody Civil War, anti-slave politicians such as Abraham Lincoln claimed that the phrase “all men are created equal” was the supreme moral principle that should guide the Republic and that it applies, as its words suggest, to “all men” without exception.

Some historians have claimed that Lincoln forced a new interpretation of this important phrase on the American people. However, there is considerable evidence that Americans had changed the meaning of the phrase gradually and holistically in the process of regularly calling upon it to make demands for their causes. In other words, the meaning of the words evolved as the Republic matured.

Thus, it might be historically accurate to say that the Southern defenders of slavery were right when they argued that Jefferson and the Continental Congress that ratified the *Declaration* did not intend to extend the right of equal treatment to the slaves and the Indians.

But Americans came to realize that this historical understanding was not correct. Some historians have even claimed that the American Civil War was in essence a Constitutional Convention that legitimately amended the Constitution and changed the meaning of the word “equal” in the American scheme.

Do historians have a responsibility to emphasize the “facts” and point out that Thomas Jefferson did not have the slaves and Indians in mind when he wrote the words “all men are created equal”?

Perhaps the question is moot. A consensus has emerged that the rights enumerated in the preamble to the *Declaration of Independence* apply to all human beings. Indeed, the very spirit of the preamble to Jefferson’s *Declaration* has a prominent role in the more recent United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) that has been regarded as customary and binding international law since 1976 when the required number of member states became signatories.

5. Studying History Encourages Acquisition of Valuable Skills

Students of history learn valuable skills that will benefit them in all the subjects that they learn at school and will serve them faithfully throughout their lives. These skills include the ability to evaluate evidence; to assess and, where possible,

to reconcile conflicting interpretations; to identify the continuities that accompany even dramatic changes; to think critically; to recognize the dangers of neglecting to discharge one’s obligations as a citizen; and to understand complexity by imaginatively reconstructing the past.

Niall Ferguson has pointed out that 93% of the people who have ever lived on this planet are now dead. The historian has the ability to study these people and therefore to imagine a greater number of “plausible futures” than people coming from other disciplines, since this skill “requires a certain amount of thinking by analogy, and if all you’ve got to go on is your own lifetime experience plus some model, I think you’re likely to get it wrong, whereas with historical understanding of past scenarios, you’re probably going to be better at visualizing the future than the competition”.

6. The Study of History is an Antidote to Deterministic Thinking and Past Oppression

The passage of time is inevitable, but history is determined only as it unfolds. People always have choices. Sometimes people in the past felt hemmed in and robbed of any meaningful choices, but historians can and do investigate roads not taken along with explaining those that were.

The leaders of the American civil rights movement, turning to history, became familiar with the work of W. E. B. Du Bois on slavery and then on the imperfect nature of Reconstruction after the Civil War. They had a keen sense that a vision of an equal society had derailed but that present circumstances were not inevitable. The work of C. Vann Woodward demonstrating that the South was not always segregated by race heightened this sense that race relations did not have to be as they were.

The leaders of the feminist movement, beginning in the 1970s, have turned to history to demonstrate that oppression of women is the result of oppressions stemming from earlier and contestable constructions of the past.

Historians have a great deal to offer in this respect. By showing that unjust social arrangements are embedded in a particular time and place and are not universal, they encourage thoughtful people in the present to seek liberation from those arrangements.

7. History Teaches Wisdom

When human beings are born, we are notoriously self-centered. The process of growing up really comes down to the realization that the world does not revolve around us. In order to arrive at personal knowledge, we have to achieve an understanding that we are not at the center of the universe, that we are, in fact, relatively insignificant when we take a

larger view.

“Even a superficial acquaintance with the existence, through millennia of time, of numberless human beings helps to correct the normal adolescent inclination to relate the world to oneself instead of relating oneself to the world” (Geoffrey Elton).

At the same time, by studying the past, by contemplating our very insignificance, we come to realize that we are responsible for our own destinies. By finding patterns of meaning in the past and how they can be useful to us, we can regain some of the authority and significance that we feared we had lost.

This delicate tension between recognizing one’s insignificance as well as one’s ability to grow and to find meaning in all that has happened—in one’s life as well as in the world in general—is the essence of human wisdom.

Writing History (Methodology)

The principal duty of the historian is to explain and to interpret the past on behalf of a reader. Who the reader is will depend upon the language and concepts that historians use to produce their work. Some historians write highly technical monographs intended for an audience of academic historians. Other historians, even highly regarded academic historians, write for an educated general public. Finally, some highly regarded historians have never sought an academic appointment.

In most cases, historians try to distill the available evidence, selecting what is relevant, discarding what is irrelevant, and artfully placing what remains into a narrative that keeps the reader interested and engaged.

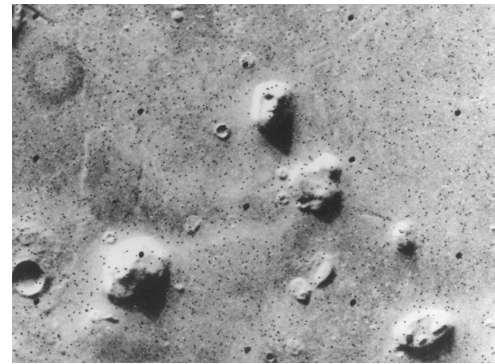
Historians must write about a past that they have not generally witnessed or lived through. Attaining perfect certainty about what happened in the past is never possible. However, historians have an obligation to the reader to accommodate all of the evidence—inventing none of it and leaving none of it out where it has a real bearing on the interpretation of what happened.

Depending on the topic, place, persons or period of time the historian decides to address, the amount and the quality of the evidence she marshals in support of her claims will greatly vary.

In some cases, there is simply too little evidence to support any credible conclusions or theories about artifacts that we have discovered. Consider, for example, the infamous case of the “Martian face”.

In 1976, the Viking I spacecraft acquired images from the surface of Mars. Several of these images revealed what appeared at first sight to be a “face” made of stone. This led to undisciplined speculation that the surrounding features were the ruins of a great city—pyramids and other works of non-natural engineering. Some even claimed that the “face” was a non-natural monument, possibly built by intelligent beings. A few went so far as to suggest that the face was searching the skies for God.

In fact, multiple probes returned to the same place on Mars twenty years later with cameras of much higher resolution. These images demonstrated that the “face” originally observed was an optical illusion resulting from a fortuitous combination of low image resolution, angle of illumination, viewpoint and the human brain’s penchant for seeing and identifying faces.



The Mars “Face” Discovered by Viking I

The black dots represent data lost in transmission to Earth.

In general, historians on Earth do not have to contend with such an extreme paucity of evidence. For most of human history, considerable evidence survives.

As we approach the modern era, in fact, the opposite problem surfaces. Historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had access to abundant documentation.

Beginning in the twentieth century, however, “evidence” has become so copious that the historian struggles to avoid becoming overwhelmed by it. This tendency has only grown more pronounced with the arrival of cameras, televisions, copy machines and the Internet.

Barbara Tuchman describes her struggle with an oversupply of documents when writing her book *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*. “It was as if I had been a cartographer trying to draw a map on a scale of 100 miles to the inch while working from surveys detailed to a scale of one mile to the inch.”

Some historians, faced with this dilemma, choose to write enormous books that include everything that is remotely

connected to the topic or events that they describe. Such books, while inclusive, make exceptionally unfair demands on the reader and represent an abdication of the historian's duty to exclude all that is repetitious or insignificant and to include only what is significant.

This raises an important question, of course. How do we judge something to be significant from a historical point of view?

Consider, for example, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. This event certainly qualifies as significant since it was one of a series of events leading to the outbreak of World War I.

On the other hand, the fact that the Archduke had killed over 300,000 wild animals (including kangaroo and emu) during his lifetime and kept thousands of stuffed animal heads on the walls of his castle, was a womanizer, loved to travel and was considered for a time the wealthiest man in the world is probably not significant to any historian of the war, even if these facts might be highly significant to a biographer of the Archduke.

Inventions, speeches, incidents and actions that have influenced the direction of evolution for an entire community, nation or the whole world certainly count as significant. Significant events of the modern era must include, among many other events not mentioned here, the European settlement of the New World; Martin Luther's posting of the 95 theses and the beginning of the Protestant Revolution; the French Revolution; the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*; the development of repeating guns, submarines and ironclad warships during the American Civil War; the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in the United States; the first successful flight of an airplane at Kitty Hawk; the landing of men on the moon and their safe return to Earth; the extermination of nearly 6 million Jews and other minorities in the Nazi concentration camps; the victory of the Communists in China after World War II; and the digital revolution of the 1980s until the present time.

Beyond identifying and selecting for the reader all the evidence that is relevant and significant, the historian seeks to explain and to interpret what has happened in the past. Many historians disagree about how to go about this task responsibly.

On the one hand, some historians believe that it is their duty to arrange history into a system or in a manner designed to reveal patterns. The danger, of course, is that historians will be tempted to discard otherwise significant facts that will not fit into their system or will not provide support for the patterns that they have pre-selected.

Barbara Tuchman, on the other hand, claims that the historian should arrange significant facts chronologically without worrying too much about "why" things happened as they did, trusting that the "process of transforming a collection of personalities, dates, gun calibers, letters, and speeches into a narrative eventually forces the 'why' to the surface." The explanations and interpretations—both for the writer and for the reader—must arise in the material itself.

Writing narrative is not just a matter of setting significant facts in chronological order, of course. The historian makes constant decisions about the materials at hand. What should he place in the foreground? What should he place in the background? What should he emphasize through repetition? In this sense, the task of the historian can be compared to that of the painter.



The Night Watch by Rembrandt (1642)

The portrait above is a famous painting from the Dutch Golden Age. It features a captain (the tall man with the red sash), his lieutenant (wearing a white sash) and a young girl in yellow who carries the symbols of the militia to which the two men belong (chicken claws in her belt and a golden goblet). The painting is notable for its colossal size, its unusual use of light and shadow and the fact that it is a portrait of people in motion rather than sitting down or standing still.

Rembrandt no doubt created many sketches, either in his mind or on paper, before arriving at this particular composition. In the same way, the historian as artist must create an optimum arrangement of the elements of the historical narrative in order to engage and inspire the reader. This arrangement is, of course, a form of interpretation. Without it, the narrative would lack cogency and interest.

Is History a Science?

The historian has before him certain structures or residual materials that have survived from the past, and he must make inferences about the processes that led to the surviving materials. He then writes a narrative account describing these processes for his readers.

What distinguishes science from other modes of inquiry is that it has generated widespread consensus concerning the validity of its results. But is it reasonable to expect that historians, who are dealing with unpredictable human beings rather than molecules, gravity, gases and the movement of celestial objects, should attempt to achieve this sort of widespread consensus?

Perhaps the better question to ask at the outset is not whether history is a science or whether its methods are “scientific” but rather which of the sciences are most “historical”.

Sciences such as evolutionary biology and geology operate from the assumption that the structures that exist in the present have survived in their current shape as the result of certain processes that scientists in these fields seek to recover. This is a task not at all unlike the task that the historian undertakes.

In physics and chemistry, scientists can reproduce laboratory experiments in different places and at different times and still reach identical results. Verification is made possible by the act of repeating the process in a controlled setting. But events in the past happened only once. Historians cannot play reruns of these events.

However, historians can use their imagination to perform procedures similar to what natural scientists do in the laboratory. They can revisit the past and imagine how things would be different if this or that variable were altered. In other words, they can pose counterfactuals.

If history is not predetermined and things might have turned out differently, then a responsible historian must consider in his own mind these different paths. John Gaddis has suggested two rules that should apply to such thought experiments.

First, historians must focus on a single variable, not a witches’ brew of sundry variables. Second, they must not change a variable if, at the time under investigation, such a change was impossible. The historian cannot usefully explain World War I, for example, by wondering what would have happened if nuclear bombs had been available to one or more of the countries involved.

In evolutionary biology, geology, astronomy and paleontology, too, scientists cannot rely on laboratory experiments to

play reruns of the processes leading to the evidence that survives and which they can observe and contemplate. Like historians, scientists in these fields must rely on imaginative reconstruction and interpretation of the evidence in order to figure out the processes in the past that likely led to what they can observe in the here and now.

Of course, historians and geologists cannot give free rein to their imagination in the way that artists can. They must always stay within the evidence. At the same time, they cannot accomplish a meaningful reconstruction of the past without empathy. They must have the ability to “get inside of the heads” of the people who made history. “History cannot be scientifically written unless the historian can re-enact in his own mind the experience of the people whose actions he is narrating” (R.G. Collingwood).

In the end, scholars and general readers who consider historians’ reconstructions and interpretations of the processes of the past will either find them credible and persuasive or not. The ultimate question is one of fit. Does the reconstruction fit the available evidence?

If historians can—while staying within the evidence and calling forth empathy—produce an interpretation that fits reality and that achieves consensus among scholars and the educated public, then we can plausibly assert that what they do is scientific.

Can History Predict the Future?

Social scientists (sociologists, economists, political scientists) have often attempted to distinguish their methods from those of historians. They often attempt to analyze data into their component parts, seeking to simplify the data so that they can isolate variables and create models that will allow them to forecast the future.

Historians, on the other hand, take a more holistic view, believing that one cannot break up past processes into parts for the simple reason that everything is interdependent. They do not generally concede the existence of the independent variables that social scientists seek to identify.

For historians, past events are often highly complex. People act for a combination of reasons. People’s behavior often evolves over time. And people in the same situations may not respond in the same way, so that it becomes difficult if not impossible to generalize some “law of human behavior” through the study of history.

For all of these reasons, historians do not claim to be in the business of prognosticating the future. “The historian’s business is to know the past, not to know the future, and whenever historians claim to be able to determine the future

in advance of its happening, we may know with certainty that something has gone wrong with their fundamental conception of history” (R.G. Collingwood).

Historians believe that the past is something that we can know in a way that we cannot know the future. Not feeling any particular need to create models that will predict future occurrences, they are free to illustrate the complexity of the past by incorporating as many variables as may be required to get at what really happened. They are comfortable with complexity, and they mistrust accounts that simplify the data of history in the interest of creating rules that can predict the future.

Because their thinking is holistic and conceives the past in terms of webs of interconnections, historians are sensitive to the fact that a small shift in the web at any point in the past could have produced a radically different pathway that would have led to the survival of different residues or evidence in the present. At any point in the past, in other words, numerous alternate futures were possible. That is why historians choose not to predict the future and do not claim to have this gift.

The Problem of Objectivity

Historians have in general believed that it is possible to speak of the past as an objective reality and to say something true about this past, however incomplete this truth might be. We must remember, as always, that the historian generally did not witness what he describes and, even staying within the evidence, cannot be absolutely sure that his reconstruction is accurate.

In other words, even if the past is objectively real, our knowledge of the past is certainly not perfect. People’s memories are not entirely reliable, evidence is not always clear and many people, even trained historians, have agendas and preconceptions.

Still, historians for the most part aim for objectivity. Most will, for this reason, make themselves familiar with all of the primary sources available. In general, historians follow a “time and place” rule—the closer a source is in time and place to the event they wish to reconstruct, the more valuable the source will be. Witnesses to or participants in the events in question generate these primary sources.

Primary sources take many forms—journals, diaries, letters, photographs, fiction, autobiographies, works of art, ledger books, factory time cards, census records, cartoons, newspaper articles, songs, ships’ logs, arrest records, recordings, documentary films, television and radio interviews, advertisements, broadsides, articles of clothing and so forth. This is the “real stuff” of history and every good historian starts with these contemporary artifacts.

Historians expect to find a certain amount of bias in primary sources. That is why they must place each source in its context by asking who wrote or created it, when and for whom. They must evaluate the purpose of the source, identify the key arguments, points and observations, determine whether the source is typical of the period in question, and search for additional evidence to corroborate their preliminary conclusions.

Secondary sources are those that are written after the events in question and rely upon a selection of evidence from the primary sources. The author selects for the reader the material from the primary sources that he deems to be relevant. The reader who does not consult the primary sources herself must submit to this pre-selection at her peril.

Niall Ferguson admits that there is no such thing as historical objectivity “but there ought to be”. He goes on to explain that a historian takes all of the evidence that he can acquire and tries to interpret it in a meaningful way. However, he can never truthfully declare: “I found it. Here it is.”

Writing history, Ferguson suggests, is “a kind of confidence trick”. Historians write narratives that appear to reveal the truth, but in fact this is only a persuasive account supported by what the historian in question deems to be the strongest available evidence.

The problem is that historians must constantly engage in inference and interpretation about an event that occurred only once and can never be repeated in a laboratory under controlled circumstances.

The Problem of Causation

According to E. H. Carr, “The study of history is the study of causes”. Identifying causes would seem to be a relatively straightforward task. After all, we are all familiar with causation in our daily lives. The weatherman says that it’s going to rain, so we take our umbrella when we leave the house. The clock strikes twelve, and our mechanical cuckoo makes an appearance to cry twelve times before returning to his hole in the base of the clock.

In the same way, we suppose, the historian must tell us not only what has happened in the past but also why and how it happened. This leads to a search for causes.

However, the historian does not have the faith that social scientists maintain in claiming that there are laws of human nature. Historians believe that all things are connected like Indra’s web. For them, variables are always dependent or **contingent**—occurring only in particular situations or only if something else happens. They “reject, however, the doctrine of immaculate causation, which seems to be implied in

the idea that one can identify, without reference to all that preceded it, such a thing as an independent variable” (John Gaddis).

Consider, for example, the causes of World War I in 1914. What were the motives and the circumstances (or conditions) that led to the outbreak of this war?

Conditions favoring war included exceptional levels of distrust among governments and a general race to stockpile armaments. Conditions not favoring war included a deep desire to avoid conflict and a fear of the expense and loss of life war would entail.

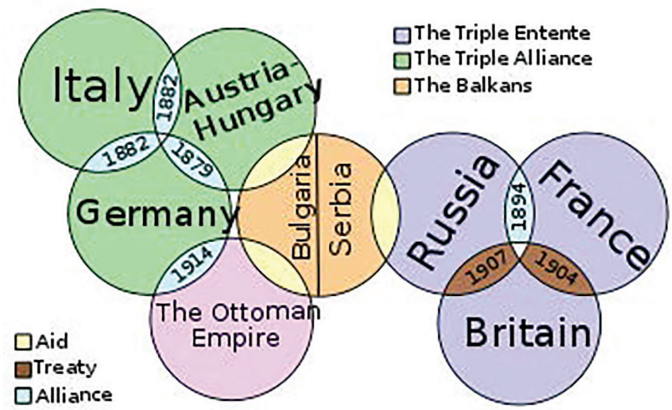
Historians can agree that there was a **proximate cause** of the war—the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. This is a case in which a particular action had larger consequences than anyone could have imagined at the time. If we point to this as a cause of the war, though, we immediately encounter a philosophical problem. A cause is something without which a course of events would not have occurred. This requires us to entertain a possibility that is contrary to fact. We have to convince ourselves that if Archduke Ferdinand had not been assassinated, World War I would not have started, at least not at that particular time.

Generally, we proceed from an abundance of particular examples to identify a particular cause. For example, we might say that “wind shear” caused a certain airplane to crash upon landing. Wind shear is defined as a sudden and dangerous reversal in the direction and speed of the wind. If a thousand airplanes of a certain model have landed on a certain landing field without incident and the only time an airplane crashed was when sensors detected dangerous wind shear, then we might plausibly conclude that dangerous wind shear caused the crash.

The problem with history is that nothing happens a second time. For this reason, our assertion of a cause is contestable. We can never have any evidence of what would have happened if the assassination had not taken place.

The human variable is not replicable in a lab. This is why historians tend to focus not on human motives but focus instead on relevant circumstances to suggest historical causation. In the case of World War I, historians have identified a number of circumstantial causes.

First, countries throughout Europe and in Asia as well had entered into mutual defense agreements requiring allied countries to provide military assistance if one of the allies should be attacked. These alliances were complicated, as the Venn diagrams below indicate. Not included in this diagram is a separate alliance made between Britain and Japan.



After the assassination of the Archduke, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, which caused Russia to enter the fray. Germany declared war on Russia. France then opposed Germany and Austria-Hungary. Germany attacked Belgium, so Britain got involved. Japan, Italy and the United States subsequently joined the allies.

The defensive alliances led to a chain reaction. Other factors contributed to the tensions making this possible. Diplomatic clashes over imperialist actions arose among the several European powers and upset a delicate balance of power. Serbia and Russia were embroiled in territorial disputes with Austria-Hungary. Britain was building its navy, Russia was expanding its military forces and Germany was militarizing across the board.

Nationalism, especially in the Balkans, was another contributing factor. Franco-German tensions ran high as a result of German occupation of French land after the Franco-Prussian War. Smaller events such as the Pig War and the May Coup in Serbia also heightened tensions. The First and Second Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 played a role as well.

Some historians have even suggested that the philosophy of Social Darwinism—the idea that the fittest nation would win the competition among nations—led to a pernicious disdain for diplomacy as a way of settling arguments.

In light of the complex array of factors at work here, it should come as no surprise that historians continue to debate the causes of this monumental “war to end all wars.” Some historians regard the conflict as having been inevitable. Others believe that it could have been avoided with more competent leadership and diplomacy.

Complicating matters is the fact that World War I was probably the first event in modern history where historians had to contend with a truly overwhelming amount of source material. Some of the material was reliable. Much of it was not. Some governments, for example, released incomplete or censored documents. In addition, some documents—including important diplomatic cables between some of the

allied governments—were deliberately altered.

Cleopatra's Nose

Historians and non-historians alike often engage in a game of “what if”. What would have happened if Abraham Lincoln had not been assassinated? What would have happened if the Soviet Union had won the Cold War? Niall Ferguson's compilation *Virtual History* (2011) explores such questions.

Historians and philosophers have always wondered about the role of chance in history. Pascal famously asked whether the world would have been different if Cleopatra's nose had been longer. If that had been the case, perhaps Marc Antony would not have found her beautiful and would not have fallen in love with her. In that case, perhaps he would not have fallen out of favor with Octavian, Octavian would not have become the first Emperor (Augustus) and the Roman Republic would have survived and have been strong enough to withstand the barbarians and escape collapse in the West.

Of course, the fall of Rome was a series of events that were overdetermined. In other words, there were many interdependent causes and it is highly unlikely that Cleopatra's nose really had much to do with it, though it makes for a “what-if” question that is superficially provocative.

The residues or evidence in the present that historians must use to induce past processes are also subject to chance. Consider what would have happened had a French soldier not discovered the Rosetta Stone in Egypt in 1799. It may be that we could never have succeeded in deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics. An entire history that we have recovered would have been unavailable to us.

How would our understanding of Restoration London been different if Samuel Pepys had not written a diary over the period 1660-1669 that somehow survived and gave us critical insights into, among other subjects, the Great Fire of London, the Great Plague of London and the Second Dutch War?

Hindsight

Many historians believe that history must be written in terms of what their subjects knew and understood at the time in question and should not be written from the perspective of hindsight. Barbara Tuchman believed that this was the only valid way to write history.

She also believed that by rigorously writing from the perspective of the time being treated, the historian can solve the problem of keeping the reader's interest when the outcome (of a battle or a war or a controversy) is well known. “I wrote as if I did not know who would win, and I can only tell you that the method worked. I used to become tense with anxiety

myself, as the moments of crisis approached.”

Not all historians agree that it is necessary to view the past only as their subjects did and to adhere to a rule that every historical act is entitled to be read in the light of the circumstances that brought it about. Some historians believe that they have an obligation to view events in terms of their consequences and in terms of present knowledge and values.

The question is really a philosophical one and is not likely to be resolved one way or the other. At one extreme one can identify what has been called **antiquarian** history. This is not a term that most historians view as positive. It implies work that is narrow in focus, is too concerned with insignificant details and disregards the “big picture”. Most historians reject this extreme since they believe that they have a duty to interpret, analyze and explain the past.

At the other extreme, one can find historians who assert, like Benedetto Croce, that all history is contemporary and that we cannot help but seeing all of the past in terms of current problems and perspectives.

Most historians take a middle road between these two extremes and engage in what E. H. Carr called “an unending dialogue between the present and the past”. These historians believe that readers need to identify in the past some of the familiar features of the present and to extract from the past some sort of light to shine on the darkness around us here and now.

Without careful control, however, this need can give rise to the fallacy of **presentism**—the conscious use of the past to validate present political beliefs and to uphold present values. The classic instance of this approach has been called Whig History, a view of the past as progressing inexorably toward greater liberty and enlightenment and culminating in liberal democracy as opposed to monarchy. The term is a pejorative one that has been applied to certain British historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many later historians accused the Whig historians of anachronism.

Historians do not always consciously engage in such tendentious readings of the past. Even those who seek to avoid any distorted depiction of the past can find themselves committing this fallacy. Consider, for example, the compromise reached between delegates from the southern states and the northern states to the convention that drafted the United States Constitution in 1787. An impasse was reached on the question whether slaves should be counted when determining how many representatives a state could send to Congress. Counting the slaves would give the southern states, where most of the slaves were, an unfair advantage in terms of numbers in the new House of Representatives. The compromise counted each slave as three-fifths of a person for

purposes of representation in the House. Of course, slaves could not vote. There were no disagreements at the time about that policy.

Many contemporary historians, when writing about the drafting of the Constitution, focus on the slavery question as the one that was of greatest concern to the delegates. These historians assert that the delegates must have seen that a dramatic and possibly devastating confrontation over the slavery question would erupt in the near future.

However, this may be an example of the fallacy of anachronism just described. “Slavery was undoubtedly important in the making of the Constitution, but unfortunately it was not as important to most of the delegates as we today think it ought to have been” (Gordon Wood).



Mid-19th Century Daguerreotype of New Orleans

Woman with Enslaved Female Servant

Wood can reach this conclusion because evidence suggests that most delegates to the Convention believed that slavery would soon die a natural death. A growing anti-slavery movement, thousands of cases of slaves being freed in some of the southern states and other developments led delegates to a very serious misreading in this respect.

By 1820, when the crisis over whether or not to admit Missouri as a slave state arose, politicians and citizens of both the northern and southern states could see quite clearly that a catastrophic collision was at hand. But to claim that the delegates in 1787 should have seen this coming is perhaps anachronistic.

One recurring question related to the notion of hindsight has a tremendously polarizing potential. “To what extent is the current generation responsible for the malfeasances of earlier generations?” Should people whose ancestors practiced human slavery apologize to the descendants of those slaves

or even pay reparations? Should the leaders of nations that committed war crimes and atrocities apologize for the sins of their fathers?

This is an ongoing controversy in many countries. Since the end of World War II, Japanese government officials, for instance, have issued dozens of carefully worded apologies and expressions of remorse for the “suffering” that Japan inflicted during that conflict. Visits—either official or private—by Japanese government officials to Yasukuni Shrine, where over one thousand war criminals (14 of them Class A) have been enshrined, continue to upset the people of China, Taiwan, Korea and other Asian countries that were victims of aggression during World War II.



Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo

Bias

One cannot discuss history as a source of knowledge without thinking clearly about the issues of fairness. Sometimes historians provide misleading accounts of the past because of bias, a preference for one interpretation over another because it accords with their interests or values.

We should note at the outset that bias is not inherently a defect in the historian. Bias can be the result of the historian’s judgment and can lead to meaningful insights. The question is whether the bias is deliberately hidden or misleading. Many great historians have had clear sympathies for their subjects. One thinks, for instance, of Theodore Mommsen’s admiration of Julius Caesar or G.M. Trevelyan’s tremendous passion for Garibaldi and his cause. Historians can have a clear interest in choosing a given subject and yet still adhere to rigorous standards when writing a history based on that subject.

A few theorists such as Hayden White have suggested that historical objectivity and rational standards are impossible goals and that, for this reason, it would be ridiculous to accuse any historian of bias. All historical accounts are, according to their view, inescapably biased.

Despite these claims, most historians agree that historical

accounts must meet certain standards and that works that fail to meet these standards must be regarded as invalid and untrustworthy.

There are several ways in which historians can write in a misleading fashion. They may highlight some evidence while ignoring other evidence that has a bearing on the interpretation. They may mention some causes of an event in the past while neglecting to mention others. Or they may imply the existence of facts that do not exist.

Historians can create misleading accounts unconsciously. Bias, on the other hand, can be a conscious motivation that leads the historian to produce an outcome that he desires for reasons that are entirely personal. Although complete objectivity is elusive, historians can reduce bias in their accounts by committing themselves to strict standards of inquiry.

Sometimes the matter is not so cut-and-dry. Many historians, for example, have a theory about why human beings act as they do. Liberals believe that reason guides people in choosing their actions. Marxists believe that people act out of social and economic self-interest. Historians who have an explicit theory about why humans act as they do may tend to interpret people's motives according to their theory. This can constitute a form of personal bias.



If dinosaurs had written an account of the great asteroid impact...

Cultural bias can also operate to influence how history is written. In the West, for instance, most works of history in the past have been written by educated white men about other white men and have minimized the role of others such as wives, slaves, servants, workers and so forth. Historians are far more sensitive to the presence of this sort of bias than previously. Cultural bias is much more difficult to overcome than personal bias, but it is certainly possible to do so. Writing history from “below”—from the point of view of the losers rather than from the point of the view of the winners in the events of history—can be an effective antidote to history from “above”.

National history has been an area that has given rise to a great deal of unacceptable bias. Scholars who have studied national bias in historical accounts have detailed some of the ways in which many historians rely on stereotypes to describe both other nations and their own.

Historians on the lookout for culture-wide bias have discovered that foreigners are often more able to detect bias in a historian's account of his own nation. The indigenous historian often fails to identify culture-wide bias in his own account.

One can find bias not only in the accounts that historians write but also in the sources that they consult. Most historians expect to find such bias and correct for it by consulting as many sources as possible. However, government officials do sometimes shred records, alter important documents and destroy other incriminating evidence. Husbands burn letters from their lovers. Even a well-meaning and fair-minded historian may end up writing a biased account if he does not remain alert to the possibility of bias in the sources.

A commitment to rational standards of inquiry will encourage historians to transcend personal bias. In addition, colleagues in the profession have a duty to point out accounts that are inadequate or biased. The dialogue among historians engaged in a cooperative search for the truth of the past is the sine qua non for arriving at descriptions of the past that are as objective as the limitations of the discipline will permit.

The Postmodernist Challenge

In recent decades, postmodernists—thinkers who reject modern assumptions about culture, identity, history and language—have asserted that facts are illusions and that historians can offer only interpretations and never the truth.

In the first place, these thinkers argue that language is incapable of describing truth. For this reason alone, they claim, history is based on a false premise. They also claim that values are relative and that it is not possible to achieve certainty in any field.

Keith Windschuttle recently defended the historian's craft in a book called *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists*. He believes that “those who insist that all historic evidence is inherently subjective are wrong”. He points to the fact that historians routinely change their minds when confronted by new and contrary evidence and that they can call upon much more evidence to support their conclusions than their postmodern critics can. He also points out that the postmodernist philosophy is liable to its own criticisms. By its own terms, postmodern philosophy is incapable of arriving at any truths.

Historians represent the past in the way that cartographers make maps. Of course, the representation is not the same thing as the reality. However, this should in no way lead us to deny that there is no reality at all, just because our methods cannot create a one-to-one correspondence.

John Gaddis emphasizes the point that no one knows the actual length of the British coastline since the answer will change in accordance with the units of measurement that we employ. This may be so. Still, “we’d be most unwise to conclude from this, as a postmodernist might, that Britain is not actually there; that we might safely sail a supertanker—let us call it the *Paul de Man*, perhaps, or the *Jacques Derrida*—right through it.”

Theories of History

Historians search for patterns in the evidence that they uncover in the course of their various inquiries into the past. We mentioned earlier that having a theory of history might tempt historians to interpret facts so that they fit a preconceived system or to ignore significant facts that do not fit.

However, rigorous and honest historians search for their biases and, where they cannot overcome them, at least make them clear to the reader. In addition, open-minded historians will always be willing to modify their preconceptions if the evidence requires them to do so.

Historians who have come to similar conclusions about the patterns that the evidence reveals may come to see themselves as sharing a theory of history. In some cases, historians are clearly associated with a single theory of history. In other cases, historians appear to espouse more than one.

1. History as Cyclical

Many ancient historians and philosophers believed that history regularly repeats itself. This is sometimes referred to as the cyclical theory of history. The regular changing of the seasons and other natural cycles may have suggested this approach. Many ancient cultures and religious traditions explained history as recurring in self-similar form or as otherwise non-linear.

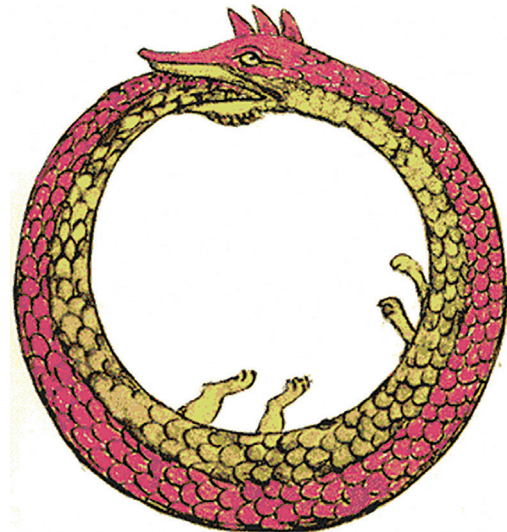
The myth of the “eternal return” and the endless cycle or “wheel” of birth and rebirth (appearing in ancient Greek, Egyptian and Indian philosophy and religion) are examples of this cyclical theory of history.

In addition, some Chinese and Egyptian historians viewed history in terms of cycles—enlightened rule giving way to increasingly more corrupt rulers, leading to an age of corruption and friction and culminating in a golden age of

enlightened rule once again.

The fourteenth century Muslim philosopher Ibn Khaldun proposed that history is a cyclical confrontation of nomads and townspeople. Edward Gibbon’s famous *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) suggested that any empire has a period of ascendancy followed by a period of degeneration.

More recently, Arnold Toynbee’s massive *A Study of History* (1934-1961) examined the rise and fall of twenty-six civilizations, finding that most rose to prominence as the result of effective leaders of minorities. And Paul Kennedy’s extremely popular *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) has suggested that great powers inevitably increase military expenditures and strategic commitments, that these overburden the economy and that this process leads to an inevitable decline and the rise of new powers.



The Snake Devouring its Tail—a Symbol of Eternal Recurrence

2. History as Linear and Progressive

Some historians and philosophers have concluded that history is a linear process and is always moving forward toward a final goal. The Christian religious tradition, with its emphasis on the arrival of a Messiah to save mankind and the movement of history toward an Apocalypse and a mystical union with God, contributed to the refinement of this particular theory of history. Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas embraced a linear theory of history unfolding according to God’s plan.

In the modern era, classical liberals (such as the Whig historians in England during the eighteenth century) viewed history as an inevitable progression toward liberty and democracy. This “Whig history” has encountered considerable criticism, however, since it regarded British parliamentary democracy as the summit of man’s history so far and presented those who worked toward this goal as heroes and those who hindered this effort as villains. Indeed,

an overriding concern with viewing the past in terms of the present has exposed the Whig historians to the charge of the fallacy of presentism that we described earlier in this unit.

Proponents of Marxism, a theory of history based on the writings of the nineteenth century philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, believe that class struggle will eventually lead to a classless and egalitarian society that is the final goal of the Communist conception of the historical process.

In most linear theories of history, there is a strong hint of determinism—the belief that all events are the inevitable consequence of preceding causes. This applies to both the classical liberal theory of progress and to the Marxist theory of history leading to a classless and egalitarian society.

In 1992, Francis Fukuyama published a book entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*. He announced that Western liberal democracy had triumphed and that there are no longer any political beliefs that can represent a different or better form of human society. We have come to the end of history. All that we are concerned about now is solving technical and environmental problems and enjoying material comfort and access to consumer goods.

Fukuyama himself recognizes that this is in some respects a sad state to have reached. Perhaps the lack of commitment to ideological struggle will result in a rekindling of idealism. “Perhaps this very prospect of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again.”

3. History as Linear but (More or Less) Regressive

The Ancient Greek poet Hesiod, in *Works and Days*, and the Ancient Roman poet Ovid, in *The Metamorphoses*, described successive but generally deteriorating ages of man. Both poets suggested that humans lived a divine-like existence during the Golden Age, when they did not need to work. They enjoyed an abundance of food and lived peacefully. In the Silver Age, humans began to experience strife, lived short lives and (in Hesiod’s account) failed to worship the gods. In the Bronze Age, men wore armor and were perpetually at war. In the Iron Age, the present era, the gods have forsaken humans, who are given to ignoble actions and thoughts and who live lives of toil bereft of meaning.

Hesiod, though not followed in this by Ovid, suggested that a Heroic Age followed the Bronze Age. During this era, a race of heroes fought magnificently at Thebes and Troy, and there was a flicker of hope that the downward tendency could be overcome. However, the heroes all perished, and the descent to the Iron Age followed, extinguishing all hopes of redemption and progress.

Later writers such as Plato associated the various ages with

certain types of government—democracy or monarchy for the Golden Age, for instance, or oligarchy or mob rule for more decadent ages.

4. Great Man Theory

The Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle popularized the so-called “great man theory of history” in the nineteenth century. He proposed that historians should focus their attention on exceptional individuals who, through their intellect, political skills, character, wisdom and charisma were able to influence the course of events in the past. Carlyle identified a number of such great men—Muhammad, Shakespeare, Rousseau and Napoleon, for instance.

The well-known twentieth century historian A.J.P. Taylor is sometimes mistakenly viewed as an advocate of the great man theory because he once suggested that the history of modern Europe could be written with reference to Napoleon, Otto von Bismarck and Vladimir Lenin. However, he never undertook to write such a history, and in many of his writings he viewed the so-called great men as incompetent leaders who were out of their element. He also endorsed Bismarck’s own assessment: “Man cannot create the current of events. He can only float with it and steer.”

Herbert Spencer, one of Carlyle’s contemporaries, criticized this theory, claiming that great men are not the authors but the products of their times and that they could not have made the contributions that we attribute to them if social conditions over which they had no control had not made them possible. This line of criticism remains influential among modern historians.



Otto von Bismarck, First Chancellor of Germany (1871-1890)

5. People's History

People's history is a phrase given to narratives of mass movements composed of ordinary people who are usually excluded from traditional histories. The historians of this school reject the great man theory and focus on the disenfranchised and the oppressed.

Perhaps the most famous and popular example of this genre is Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980). Zinn wrote: "The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest... between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex." The job of the people's historian, to put it succinctly, is "not to be on the side of the executioners".

In recent decades, a similar movement called "microhistory" has become popular. This type of history examines small events in the past involving unknown people and a limited number of primary sources to tell stories that shed light on the larger society in which these inconspicuous people lived.

Perhaps the best-known example of this type of history is Carlo Ginzberg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976). This book is a study of the popular culture of the sixteenth century seen through the eyes of an Italian miller who was arrested for "heresy" against the Catholic Church and was burned at the stake.

This miller had read the Bible and some philosophical works and had interpreted them in terms familiar to him. At his trial, it was discovered that he believed that the world was formed when fire, water, and air came together "just as cheese is made out of milk—and there were worms—and these were the angels."

6. Geographic or Geopolitical Theory of History

Historians have frequently pointed out that geographical circumstances such as access to a warm water port and rich natural resources can exercise a favorable influence on the history of civilizations. Landlocked countries with poor natural resources have typically fared less well than countries with geographical advantages.

Perhaps the most famous instance of the "geographic" approach to history was that of Halford Mackinder in the early twentieth century. His "Heartland Theory", based on an influential article that he wrote, proposed that those who rule Eastern Europe would rule the Heartland (the vast area of Asia from the Yangtze to the Volga and from the Himalayas to the Arctic Sea), that those who rule the Heartland would rule the World Island (Europe, Asia and Africa) and that those who rule the World Island would rule the world.

Mackinder's theory may have influenced the Nazi program of taking control of Eastern Europe and the Ukraine and of initiating the "drive East".

More recently, Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997) concludes that, while most societies were roughly equal in prehistoric times, east-west movements (particularly in Europe and Asia) along roughly the same latitude allowed interchange of people, economies, technologies and germs that could build up immunities in those exposed to them. Geographic circumstances hindered the development of a similar north-south corridor. As a result of these accidents of geography, Diamond concludes, the Eurasians came to dominate the known world.

Conclusion

George Orwell warned of the dangers of political powers having absolute control over people's memories and the ability to create a false history. Fortunately, in real life, nothing disappears without a trace, and it is generally possible to reconstruct to some degree what has happened in the past.

History is a thick term that refers not only to independent events in the past, but also to the memory, discovery, analysis, interpretation and presentation of evidence connected with these events.

Historians often present their interpretations of the past in the form of narratives in the course of which they examine sequences of past events in light of the causes that brought them about and the effects that ensued.

In most cases, historians try to distill the available evidence, selecting what is relevant, discarding what is irrelevant, and artfully placing what remains from this process into a narrative that keeps the reader interested and engaged. Attaining perfect certainty about what happened in the past is never possible. However, historians have an obligation to the reader to accommodate all of the evidence—inventing none of it and leaving none of it out where it has a real bearing on the interpretation of what happened.

If historians can, while staying within the evidence, produce an interpretation that fits reality and that achieves consensus among scholars and the educated public, then we can plausibly assert that what they do is scientific. They cannot, however, predict the future because they do not believe it is possible to isolate independent variables and discern laws of human behavior.

History helps us to understand individuals and societies, widens our experience by allowing us to participate imaginatively in the past, encourages the development of personal knowledge, provides a sense of identity, is an antidote

to deterministic thinking and helps us to achieve wisdom.

Historians have in general believed that it is possible to speak of the past as an objective reality and to say something true about this past, however incomplete this truth might be. We must remember, as always, that the historian generally did not witness what he describes and, even staying within the evidence, cannot be absolutely sure that his reconstruction is accurate.

Identifying causes is problematic for historians because nothing happens in history a second time and because causation in historical situations is exceptionally complex, not least because of the unknown human variable. Historians tend to view causation as contingent. Causes depend on particular historical circumstances and are dependent upon other causes and conditions.

Not all historians agree that it is necessary to view the past only as their subjects did and to adhere to a rule that every historical act is entitled to be read in the light of the circumstances that brought it about. Some historians believe that they have an obligation to view events in terms of their consequences and in terms of present knowledge and values. The danger of presentism, however, can lead to the error of using the past to validate present political beliefs and values. In extreme cases, this can lead to indoctrination.

Bias is an ongoing concern of historians. There are several ways in which historians can write in a misleading fashion. They may highlight some evidence while ignoring other evidence that supports conclusions that they are not comfortable embracing. They may mention some causes of an event in the past while neglecting to mention others. Or they may imply the existence of facts that do not exist. In general, by confronting and revealing their own biases, conforming to rational standards and inviting comment from colleagues, historians can at least get closer to what really happened.

There are many theories of history. These include the idea that history is cyclical; that history is linear; that great men have had inordinate influence on the course of history; that history should focus on mass movements of people who have been oppressed; that history should focus on small-scale accounts of individuals; that geographic and geopolitical factors influence history; that random chance has a role in history (“Cleopatra’s nose”); and that history is not, in fact, a possible discipline at all (postmodernism).

Real-Life Situation IV: Nationalism Bias and History

In Southeastern Europe, on the Balkan Peninsula, the small country of Bosnia and Herzegovina officially declared its independence from Yugoslavia in April of 1992 and was admitted to the United Nations later in that same year.

Despite the recent recognition of its independence, this region has a rich and complex history dating back to the arrival of Slavs in the region in the 6th through the 9th centuries, the formation of the Kingdom of Bosnia in the 14th century, membership in the Ottoman Empire from the 15th through 19th centuries and annexation into the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1908.

On June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip, a Serb nationalist, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, as he was riding in a carriage in Sarajevo. This event led to the outbreak of World War I at the end of that same summer and to four years of unprecedented slaughter in which over ten million soldiers died.



After World War I, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were joined in the new Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1941). This kingdom in turn emerged after World War II as the Soviet Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992). Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged from its breakup in 1992. Sarajevo is the capital. The country is bordered by Croatia to the north, Serbia to the east and Montenegro to the southeast. The country has a single 20-kilometer beach on the Adriatic Sea.

Forty-six percent of the people of the country are Bosniaks (Muslim), thirty-seven percent are Croats (Catholic) and seventeen percent are Serbs (Orthodox). Three co-Presidents, one from each of these three distinct ethnic/religious groups, currently lead the country.

The Bosnian War broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 and lasted until 1995. On one side were the Bosniaks. On the other were the Croat and Serb minorities, supported by elements of the governments of neighboring Croatia and Serbia.

The war was mainly about territory, though ethnic and religious tensions ran deep. There was bitter fighting and bombing on all sides and charges of mass rape and genocide, leveled mainly at some of the Serb forces.

Some politicians and many nationalists on all sides argued at the time that Bosnia and Herzegovina should be organized into separate ethnic territories. The problem was that the entire region was ethnically mixed and had been throughout history. Ethnic cleansing seemed to be the only solution to the most extreme nationalists. They expressed a desire for nothing less than “pure” ethnic divisions marked by clear territories for each of the major ethnic groups.

In 1995, the world’s attention was focused on the horror of reports of ethnic cleansing and genocide, especially in the area of Srebrenica. This cleansing and genocide involved the forced expulsion and killing of tens of thousands of members of unwanted ethnic groups, particularly Muslims, as well as the destruction of cultural properties and places of worship associated with these same groups.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) later convicted a number of Serb leaders of genocide and a number of Croat leaders of crimes against humanity. High-profile trials of other leaders are ongoing.

Unveiling a Statue

On June 14, 2014, the Serbian co-President of Bosnia and Herzegovina unveiled in Sarajevo a statue honoring Gavrilo Princip, the Serb nationalist who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. The co-President said, “These fighters for freedom 100 years ago have given us the direction to follow for the next 100 years.”

The Serbs held a special memorial for Princip in the city of Visegrad, a place in the Serbian region of Bosnia associated with ethnic cleansing and Serbian nationalism. Many Serbs regard Princip as a patriot and freedom fighter. Many non-Serbs regard him as a terrorist.

Many citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and concerned people around the world immediately condemned the unveiling of the statue and the Serbian co-President’s words as provocative. Memories of the recent Bosnian War (1992-1995) in which over 100,000 persons perished are still fresh, and the words by the Serbian co-President on the occasion of the unveiling of the statue for Princip appeared to link the assassination of one hundred years ago to the Bosnian War of 1992-1995 and to the “road ahead”, as though they were three stages in the struggle for a Serbian state whose territory would include all ethnic Serbians and, by definition, exclude non-Serbians.

Knowledge Question

Is it possible to construct an objective history of events uninfluenced by nationalism bias?

Discussion and Analysis

This is a very complicated question. We will need to begin by defining what we mean by nationalism. Then we should examine the different types of nationalism that have emerged over the past few centuries and ask to what degree each requires a commitment to a version of history that is clearly false or is hopelessly subjective. Finally, we should ask whether historians who are nationalists or at least nationalist sympathizers are able to put aside their biases and succeed in constructing a history that has a claim to objectivity.

1. Nation and State

Nationalism has been defined as the belief that the “nation” is one and the same thing as the “state”. We think of the state as an independent country. It has borders. It has a single government. It has a capital city, borders, its own flag, an anthem and so forth. Most modern states belong to the United Nations, an organization whose very name suggests the equivalence of a “nation” and a recognized modern state or independent country.

This is a somewhat modern way to define the “nation”. Before the modern era, a “nation” was conceived as a community of people who shared a common territory, language, history, culture, ethnicity or religion. The ideas of “nation” and “state” were not the same. In fact, they rarely converged.

Prior to the late eighteenth century, kingdoms, multicultural empires (the Habsburg, the Russian and the Ottoman Empires to take three examples) and multi-ethnic and multi-lingual smaller states were the norm. Rulers often did not share the culture, history or even the religion of their subjects.

Modern states came into existence as a result of political revolutions (starting in the late eighteenth century) that

transferred political power to the “people” from monarchs, aristocracies and military governments. The concepts of the “people” (holding political power), the “nation” and the “state” were fused into a new and powerful political idea.

In order to move to this new idea of the political nation, different population groups had to find a way to forge a common identity, often despite their obvious differences in terms of culture, history, genetic makeup, religion and so forth. The challenge was to unite peoples of disparate origins and affiliations, not to separate them or to define one group negatively by comparison with those not members of that same group.

2. Sovereignty of the People and a National Sentiment

The explicit connection made between the people, the nation and the state is, as we have said, a modern development. The old meaning of “nation” had suggested ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious ties.

The new concept stresses the idea of political unity and independence. The nation-state is a body of citizens expressing themselves through political participation in the democratic process. They are held together by a **national sentiment** and a desire to be self-governing. The people held together by this sentiment are independent and occupy a clearly marked territory.

This notion of the nation-state started with the French Revolution and the Declaration of Rights in 1795. The new French nation-state consisted of citizens who had common interests against privileged interests. One did not have to speak French or be “ethnically” French in order to qualify for citizenship, though it was expected later that citizens would learn the language as a condition of membership in the new nation-state.

Nations in the modern era are, in fact, most often the consequence of setting up the modern state, not the reason for its coming into being. The United States and Australia are obvious examples of modern countries that established their national identities after they were formally established as states.

These national identities are based on common interests. In essence, the people engage in what one historian has called a “daily plebiscite” (Ernest Renan) to continue the terms of their association. These modern states do not arise as a result of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious or even historical commonalities, only a desire to be members of a community defined by a common national sentiment and by the opportunity to participate in self-government.

3. Shared Ethnicity and Shared Language

Since the nineteenth century, many nationalists have pursued unification of different populations by appeal to an ancient and common past. This project requires nation-builders to create what one historian has called “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson). In other words, they invite the members of a national community to construct imaginary or mythical relationships with the other members of that community.

The Serbian nationalists, for example, point to a mythological defeat of a brave Serbian army on June 15, 1389 in Kosovo. The Ottoman ruler Murad I defeated the Serbs, who were subjected following that defeat to 400 years of Turkish rule. This medieval battle has become part of the fabric of Serbian consciousness, embedded in ancient literature and dance. In addition, the Serbian Orthodox Church has declared most of Serbia’s historical kings to be saints.

Serb nationalists have, over the years, imagined their community in negative terms according to their uniqueness and their desire for separation from other communities rather than on behalf of unification with these other communities on political and non-ethnic terms. They view themselves as religiously, culturally, socially and linguistically different from both the Muslim Turks and their Christian neighbors such as the Croats and Slovenes.

The problem with imagining communities is that one must appeal to an idea of territorial continuity and tell stories of ancient origins and ethnic or national purity that are in many cases clearly false. Nations are not ancient, unaltered communities surviving intact over the years, separate and different from all other communities. Nations emerge, evolve, change and are not permanent and universal phenomena.

Even the most ardent nationalists these days do not suggest that members of the same ethnic groups are biologically alike and different from other ethnic groups. Scientists agree that genetic differences among different ethnic groups are biologically minor and random.

For this reason, appeals to “common blood” are demonstrably false. As one historian has written, “the genetic approach to ethnicity is plainly irrelevant” since “the crucial base of an ethnic group as a form of social organization is cultural rather than biological” (Eric Hobsbawm).

In order to claim that ethnic ties require us to treat one group as unique, nationalists sometimes must resort to claims that are not objectively true. They have a tendency to exaggerate the idea of ethnic purity.

Take the case of Serbians. What particular mixture of pre-Roman Illyrians, Romans, Greeks, Slavs, Asian invaders and Ottoman Turks make up the ethnicity of the people now living in the Balkan Peninsula? Or consider the British. The history of their islands is one of repeated migration and conquest by Picts, Scots, Britons, Anglo-Saxons, English, Welsh, Irish, Normans, Danes, Vikings and so forth. The idea of an ethnically pure British type is obviously ludicrous.

The fact is that very few modern national movements are based on ethnic consciousness. One might point to Korea, Japan and China as nations whose populations are ethnically homogenous. But even here a certain fusion with the state tradition and ethnic mythmaking has played a role in the development of the idea of ethnic purity.

The danger comes when nationalist leaders invent such an identity—one that is essentially racist and unsupported by the facts. Obviously, nationalists of this persuasion cannot be trusted to write an objective or even credible account of their own national history.

The idea of a common language linking a community has also appealed to some modern nationalists. In most cases, creation of nations came before the creation of a national language that linked the people of the nation.

In eighteenth century Germany, for instance, only the elites could read (much less speak) the literary German that was the common administrative language in use. Most Chinese throughout history could not understand the Mandarin used by the elite administrators. In India, the rulers of the country spoke English after the arrival of the East India Company in 1830, though most residents of the country could not. In Italy, at the moment of unification in 1860, less than three percent of the population used the Italian language for daily communication. Printing, television, the Internet and compulsory education have been the main engines of linguistic coherence in modern nations.

Multilingual countries are the norm, and the emergence of English as a common language of the world has emphasized the tendency for countries to find common ground rather than to separate themselves into isolated and self-contained states.

4. Shared Religion

The ties between nationalism and religion can be close. Modern national struggles in Poland and Ireland are examples. Nationalism in the modern Arab world is another obvious example, though here the matter is complicated by the fact that in many Arab countries—Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, for instance—Christian minorities were instrumental in their nationalist movements.

In recent years, ISIS has tied its Arab nationalism agenda closely to the teachings of Islam. Many non-fundamentalists are skeptical of the ability of ISIS partisans to engage in the sort of dispassionate inquiry and dialogue that leads to the “objective truth” to which professional historians aspire.

Religions are universal in their claims. This runs contrary to the separatist ambitions of most nationalists. World religions, by definition, attempt to create a brotherhood among people who would have nothing else—ethnicity, history, culture or language—in common. On the other hand, the potential to use religious differences to separate rather than to unite different peoples is all too apparent. Creating religious community is not problematic. Using religion to threaten and denigrate communities not sharing the same religion is.

However, the influence of religious ties on nationalists is not small. The Serbians and Croats may share a literary language (Serbo-Croatian) and culture, but they have split into different religions (Orthodox Serbians who use the Cyrillic alphabet and Catholic Croats who use the Roman script). We must take account of the differences.

Preliminary Conclusions

The first question that arises from a detailed examination of this real-life situation involving the unveiling of the statue of the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip last year is straightforward. Can a serious historian of nations and nationalism be a committed nationalist?

The answer seems to be that it depends on the type of nationalism involved and the level of the historian's commitment to the writing of objective history.

In a famous lecture over one hundred years ago, the French historian Ernest Renan said: “Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.”

One might agree with this sentiment and assert that—as a general principle—it is not possible to be a committed nationalist and an objective historian at the same time, particularly because nationalists must create mythical or outright false claims about the origins of their nations in order to distinguish themselves from people who belong to different communities.

On this view, nationalist historians will likely provide misleading accounts of the past because of bias favoring an interpretation of this past that accords with their current political interests.

However, there is a strong counterclaim that we must consider. There are different types of nationalism. Not all forms of nationalism necessarily lead to a willful disregard of the truth.

Suppose, for instance, that disparate groups have come to form a state and are unified by their allegiance to freedom of speech, to a commitment to the marketplace of ideas and to the conviction that such a marketplace will likely produce objective truth.

Many would claim that most modern democracies committed to free expression and free exchange of information and ideas are not hostile to the historian's quest for objectivity. Of course, one can point to examples of "lies" in the historical scholarship of even advanced and open democracies.

American high school students, for instance, until recently did not learn from history textbooks about the American removal of some Japanese-Americans to concentration camps during World War II. Again, some have criticized certain Japanese history textbooks for not being forthright about war crimes that Japanese soldiers perpetrated during that same period of history.

But historians in both countries discuss these issues openly and do not feel that being a patriotic American or a patriotic Japanese requires them to tell lies for political purposes. For these historians, commitment to free and robust discussion in an open venue is intimately connected to the national interest.

On the other hand, many nationalists appeal to what clearly amount to "imagined communities" based on alleged ties of language, ethnicity, religion and historical experience that are not real. On the surface, this might appear to be contrary to the search for truth. However, this is not necessarily the case.

In this era of mass migration and globalization, traditional communities have been under stress. Humans have a fundamental and undeniable desire to live in a familiar world with others and to establish connections and continuity over generations. An imagined community is not always a dangerous or invalid goal to pursue.

It is true, of course, that when people create "national communities" based on ethnicity or religion, nationalism can become exclusionist and poisonous. In Serbia, the record of ethnic cleansing and genocide clearly demonstrates that this is a distinct possibility against which we must always guard.

The recent and unhealed genocide and ethnic cleansing of the war in the Balkans twenty-five years ago naturally leads many to question whether the Serbs are unveiling their statue of Princip in good faith and are committed to a dialogue about the truth about the past. We must make allowance for such perspectives when answering our knowledge question.

However, one may make the argument that a commitment to an imagined community does not override every other

moral duty. When building a sense of community becomes exclusive, aggressive, inhumane and racist, we must pose the question whether nationalists in favor of such an outcome can write credible historical accounts of their nations, and we must answer it in the negative.

Bias is not inherently a defect in the historian who is also a nationalist. Bias can be the result of the historian's judgment and can lead to meaningful insights. The question is whether the bias is deliberately misleading and threatens other communities.

Many great historians have had clear sympathies for their subjects. We've previously mentioned the historian G.M. Trevelyan's tremendous passion for Garibaldi and his nationalist cause in Italy. Historians can have a clear interest in choosing a given subject and yet still adhere to rigorous standards when writing a history based on that subject.

Despite these claims, most historians agree that historical accounts must meet certain standards and that works that fail to meet these standards must be regarded as invalid and untrustworthy.

There are several ways in which nationalist historians can mislead and thus not do their job as professionals. They may highlight some evidence while ignoring other evidence that has a bearing on the interpretation. They may mention some causes of an event in the past while neglecting to mention others. Or they may imply the existence of facts that do not exist.

Historians can create misleading accounts unconsciously. Bias, on the other hand, can be a conscious motivation that leads the historian to produce an outcome that he desires for reasons that are entirely personal. Although complete objectivity is elusive, historians—even nationalists—can reduce bias in their accounts by committing themselves to strict standards of inquiry.

National history has been an area that has given rise to a great deal of unacceptable bias. Scholars who have studied national bias in historical accounts have detailed some of the ways in which many historians rely on stereotypes to describe both other nations and their own. The Serbians have much to answer for in their recent past. Many of those injured by their poisonous nationalism are unsure whether recent Serb nationalists are trying to find community or seek deliberately to threaten and do violence to those whom they consider to be outsiders.

Imagining communities is not necessarily a dangerous or objectionable practice. Such communities can fill the void left by the disintegration of actual communities. Nationalists naturally call upon feelings of belonging that already exist

or are thought to have existed in trying to build these communities.

It is possible to tell the story of this longing in a way that accommodates the idea of community without resorting to falsehood or to denigrating and threatening other communities whose members seek the same foothold.

Still, we must recognize the warning signs that tell us when an attempt to build an imagined community can descend into chauvinism, hatred and the peddling of historical falsehoods.