

# How Historians Verify Information

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**It is impossible not to connect to the past one way or another, both individually and collectively, in all aspects of life. This connection might appear in numerous forms, from cursory suggestions to deeply analytical, structured narratives. That is why we have to be alert all the time: can we trust the information on history we get?**

What would happen if all historians of the world and all their works fell victim to a peculiar type of epidemic? Narratives of the past would certainly survive and, sad as it might be, most people would probably hardly notice that a craft, a profession had disappeared. History would still be taught at all levels and politicians would continue using history-based metaphors. Monuments dedicated to historical events and personalities with political messages would be erected; families would keep talking about their memories; artists and writers would continue painting, sculpting and writing about the past; and the media would go on delivering lots of news about the past, especially around the time of anniversaries. Whatever the form, the power of the past is omnipresent; whenever decisions are made, strategies are developed concerning current affairs and/or the future. That is why educators should try to find the best means of filtering and interpreting information on history for the sake of their students.

## Building houses: constructing historical narratives

How do you examine the credibility of pieces of information on past events? Professional historians have developed an extensive arsenal of source criticism. If we think of a historical narrative as a house, sources could be compared to bricks. Bricks have to be carefully selected and prepared for the construction; they are cut, polished and ground in the course of preparing them for the desired plan – the layout of the building. You also have to consider carefully the peculiarities of the environment

of the building's plot location. The very same bricks can be perfect for some places but would not work for others. Once you have made the decision about the bricks, you have to find the proper mortar or some other material to keep the bricks together and give solidity to the house. In historical narratives, this is the function of theory and methodology. The same bricks can certainly be incorporated into numerous different types of buildings. In the same way, the same sources can be the basis of very different, even conflicting narratives. Furthermore, no house can be built and no historical narrative can be created without a motivation. In the case of constructing buildings, this can obviously be the practical need for housing, but practicality is frequently neglected for the sake of a representative function: that is, representing wealth or power or both. That is the same with historical narratives: they can be motivated by the curiosity of the researcher but can also be driven by policies, politics and ideologies. So **historical narratives can be used as elements of propaganda.**

**How can you tell the difference between trustworthy information and pure propaganda? I think that the best way to separate the grain from the chaff is to try to deconstruct the narratives.** That means investigating the conception and making of a piece of historical or current information or a longer narrative. Lots of useful online aids can help. I have found two of them especially useful:

- online virtual classroom Checkology: [get.checkology.org](https://get.checkology.org)
- NewseumED's online resources: [www.newseumed.org](https://www.newseumed.org)

## Do not get caught up with the chaff

As well as making use of the recommendations of these sites, I suggest taking the following steps in this process of deconstruction:

- Examine the evidence you are dealing with. Can you find other sources that support the point made by the one you are examining?
- Look into the source's making. Can you find out who originally created the information? What do you know about the context of its creation? Is the source directly relevant to the issue you are dealing with? Was it taken from someone else without any direct access to the original information?
- Explore the broader context. Do you have reliable, double-checked information on any events that support the information in the source? If the information

is part of a longer narrative, or part of a manual or a narrative that you know well and have found to be reliable on previous occasions, you might then be willing to accept it as trustworthy.

- Try to find out if the source is aiming at a certain audience. Does it reflect an effort to mobilize the targeted audience for some purpose?
- Check the structure, style and language. Is there anything that strikes you as too fancy, too complicated or too simplified, or is in some other way out of place in the given context?

Let me illustrate this method of comparing reliable information to disinformation using one simple and one complex example.

## Show trials and laws on history

In May 1949, following the order of the top-level leaders of a Soviet satellite country, Hungary, a senior member of the political leadership, László Rajk, was arrested and, in turn, tried and executed. The whole process took less than five months. Rajk admitted that he had been an accomplice of the interwar Hungarian anti-communist regime and after the Second World War had helped the capitalist powers in their anti-communist struggles. Denying everything during the court hearings, in public he pleaded guilty of high treason against the party. Stalin at this point had initiated a powerful propaganda attack against Yugoslavia, so accusations had to involve a collaboration with Yugoslav leaders as well. **For independent observers, it was clear that the trial was a political show and was built on fabricated evidence. No independent sources confirmed any of the accusations and the trial had nothing to do with real jurisdiction. Its huge publicity served the interests of the Soviet Union.** Namely, it was to show the possible consequences of any attempt to slightly deviate from the Soviet line, both in terms of the evaluation of historical events and contemporary policies. The flip side, however, was that the enforced confessions of the defendants created a temporary alternative reality for many people who unreservedly believed in communist ideas and policies.



Hungary, 1948 [accessed 07 April 2021]. Available on Fortepan: <https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=Rajk&201.%C3%A1szl%3%B3-%C3%A1b%3%A1z%3%A1s>

↑ Hungary, 1948. The portraits of Joseph Stalin and László Rajk are hanging on the wall.

My other example is much more complex. It concerns passing laws relating to the past. Is a legally enforced view of a historical event information or disinformation? Perhaps the most complex and interesting examples of this problem are found in France. When France became the first European country to make Holocaust denial a crime on 13 July 1990, the decision caused a considerable stir the world over. A law that was passed on 29 January 2001 defined the massacre of Armenians in Turkey in 1915 as genocide, and in 2006 another law was passed making the denial of the Armenian genocide a crime. A law was passed on 21 May 2001 that recognized slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity. However, on 23 February 2005, a law was passed recognizing the allegedly positive consequences of French colonial practices. Indeed, the fourth paragraph of the law specifies that French educational institutions must offer positive assessments of colonial practices when teaching the subject. Impassioned debates broke out in France concerning these laws. In January 2005, the Constitutional Council recommended that the laws only specify rights and obligations, instead of offering these kinds of judgements. During a debate that took

place in 2006, the contention was made that if the French legislature could judge and condemn an event in Turkish history, then the Turkish legislature could do the same in relation to events in French history, for instance the brutalities that were committed over the course of the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62). In late 2005, in the tense atmosphere created by these debates, 19 very prominent historians initiated a civil organization, the Liberté pour l'Histoire Association.

#### The association summarized its basic principles:

- **History is not religion;**
- **History is not ethics;**
- **History is not in the service of the present;**
- **History is not memory;**
- **History cannot be subjected to the dispensation of justice.**

In 2008 the association issued a manifesto (the so-called 'Appel de Blois') in which it appealed to the sense of professional responsibility among historians and prudence among politicians. The manifesto specifically emphasized that history cannot serve current affairs and politics, and it cannot be the battleground for competing and conflicting memories. **No single political power can decide what constitutes historical truth, and history cannot be written in legislative form, as this would have serious consequences both for the discipline and for freedom of thought.**

We can thus conclude that both in education and in any sphere of public life, we have to make every effort to separate information from disinformation. At the same time, however, no one has control over an absolute, unquestionable truth. **Scholarship and education help us develop skills for defining criteria for reliable, trustworthy historical information. This is a continuous process and can never achieve perfect results.**

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