

The Benefits of Studying History: How to Uncover the Historical Truth?

Dr Ana-Maria Cătănuș

Sources

Source A

History should be studied because it is essential to individuals and to society, and because it harbors beauty. There are many ways to discuss the real functions of the subject—as there are many different historical talents and many different paths to historical meaning. All definitions of history's utility, however, rely on two fundamental facts.

[...]

In the first place, history offers a storehouse of information about how people and societies behave. [...] How can we evaluate war if the nation is at peace—unless we use historical materials? How can we understand genius, the influence of technological innovation, or the role that beliefs play in shaping family life, if we don't use what we know about experiences in the past? [...] Consequently, history must serve, however imperfectly, as our laboratory, and data from the past must serve as our most vital evidence in the unavoidable quest to figure out why our complex species behaves as it does in societal settings. [...]

The second reason history is inescapable as a subject of serious study follows closely on the first. The past causes the present, and so the future. Any time we try to know why something happened [...] we have to look for factors that took shape earlier. Sometimes fairly recent history will suffice to explain a major development, but often we need to look further back to identify the causes of change. Only through studying history can we grasp how things change; only through history can we begin to comprehend the factors that cause change; and only through history can we understand what elements of an institution or a society persist despite change.

Peter N. Stearns, 'Why Study History?', 1998 [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on American Historical Association: [https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-(1998)).

Source B

Dictatorships and authoritarian regimes of different kinds have a variety of means at their disposal to control what historians research, write and present to the public. Most obviously there is censorship, the banning of uncomfortable books and articles, the prior vetting of publications of all kinds. In extreme cases, books are centrally commissioned, checked for ideological correctness and changed where it is felt that the author has gone astray. State-controlled radio and television are easy to manipulate in such a situation. With school textbooks, control can be exercised by ordering one book rather than another for educational use, though in practice many regimes have committees that oversee the production of textbooks and the construction of a compulsory national curriculum.

[...] History is more vulnerable to such pressures than many other branches of learning. It is rare for a political regime to impose its ideology on science, for instance, though Stalin tried to boost a kind of socialist biology associated with the dubious figure of Lysenko, and the Nazis attempted to develop a 'German physics', though without much success. [...] History, however, except in its most technical aspects (such as the editing of medieval manuscripts or the statistical analysis of economic and demographic data) is more immediately comprehensible and to many political regimes appears to have a more obvious political relevance. Even democratic governments see in it a means of strengthening national identity, and in the hands of an authoritarian state it can become a tool of political indoctrination. [...]

Richard J. Evans, 'Introduction. Redesigning the Past: History in Political Transitions, *Journal of Contemporary History*', Copyright 2003 SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, Vol. 38(1), 5–12.

Source C

Show trials are predetermined judgments which are widely publicized and have propagandistic goals. The core of the victim's character is falsely smeared, and the victim is publicly shamed. Assassination of character is often finalized by [the] victim's

physical execution. Show trials are symptomatic of totalitarian societies – political or religious. They are the ultimate in cruelty and also by their impact on the whole nation as conformists' and bystanders' characters tend to be also mutilated (even 'assassinated') in the process.

Martina Klicperová-Baker, 'Show Trials in Communist Countries: Psychology of the Ultimate Cases of Character Assassination', in *Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management*, Routledge, London, 2019.

Source D

After the split between Stalin and Yugoslav leader Tito (Josip Broz) in the spring of 1948, however, the Soviets, fearful that other satellites might follow Yugoslavia's lead, pressured East European communist regimes to seek out traitors within their own ranks. Leading figures used the opportunity to rid themselves of rivals, who were accused of being "Titoists" and Western spies. In Poland, the general secretary of the Communist Party, Władysław Gomułka, was purged. In Hungary, Interior Minister László Rajk was tried and executed. In Bulgaria the same fate was meted out to Traicho Kostov, secretary of the Central Committee. [...]

At 1 a.m. on 24 November 1951 [Czechoslovak Communist leader] R. Slánský was arrested as he returned to his house from a dinner at the home of the country's premier, Antonín Zápotocký. After six months of torture and a failed suicide attempt, Slánský confessed. He admitted to being a Titoist, to working with the Freemasons, and to supporting Zionism. In the months before and after the secretary general's arrest, dozens of other leading communist officials were detained, tortured, and forced to confess to made-up crimes against the party and state.

On 20 November 1952 Slánský finally went on trial along with thirteen others. [...] According to the indictment: "The accused, as Trotskyite, Titoite, Zionist, and bourgeois-nationalist traitors created, in the service of the U.S. imperialists and under the direction of Western espionage agencies, an anti-state Conspiratorial Center, undermined the people's democratic regime, frustrated the building of socialism, damaged the national economy, carried out espionage activities, and weakened the unity of the Czechoslovak people and the Republic's defensive capability in order to tear it away from its close alliance and friendship with the Soviet Union, to liquidate

the people's regime in Czechoslovakia, to restore capitalism, and to drag the Republic into the imperialist camp once again and destroy its national sovereignty and independence." [...]

The trial was a rehearsed show, with hand-picked participants and a captive national audience. The defense attorneys were chosen by the secret police only one week before the trial began and had to submit their closing arguments for approval. All but three of the thirty-five witnesses were held in prison prior to the trial. As for the defendants, they were instructed that their fates depended on their performance. In the weeks before the trial interrogators repeatedly rehearsed the cross-examination with the defendants. These practice sessions were taped so that if one of the accused deviated from the script, state radio could immediately cut off the live broadcast and play the prerecorded version to the country. Ultimately, the beaten-down actors learned the script too well: twice the prosecutors skipped a question by mistake and a defendant gave the correct answer to the missing query.

After seven days, according to plan, the court sentenced eleven of the defendants to death and handed down life sentences to Hajdů, Löbl, and London. In response to this surprising "lenience," the public sent thousands of letters demanding capital punishment for all. After President Gottwald rejected their pleas for clemency, the eleven were executed by hanging before dawn on 3 December 1952.

Slánský Trial [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on Encyclopedia.com:
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/slansky-trial>.

Source E

Excerpt from the transcript of a video: *How to Fact-Check History* by Joseph Hogan

NARRATOR: But what exactly is fact-checking? How does it work? How do you fact-check something that happened decades, or even centuries ago? And why does it matter?

JOSEPH HOGAN: To describe it simply, fact-checking is making sure that a claim is true. You take whatever sentence you're checking or whatever claim you're checking and you try to determine the best way to verify each fact. What you really have to do

as a fact-checker is approach each claim as a prosecutor would, you're putting the claim on trial and you want to get to a position where a judge and jury would, say, "Yes, that claim is true." So let's say I have to fact-check the following sentence. Donald Trump took the oath of office on Thursday, January 17th, 2017, wearing a fantastic blue tie.

I would have to verify that Donald Trump did indeed take the oath of office, that he did it on January 17th, 2017, that January 17th, 2017 was a Thursday. That he was wearing a blue tie when he took the oath of office. The one claim that I wouldn't have to check is that the blue tie was fantastic because that's a statement of opinion. And just for the record, Trump took the oath of office on January 20th, that was a Friday and he was wearing a red tie.

NARRATOR: That's a more recent example, but here's how you go about fact-checking something historical.

JOSEPH HOGAN: You want to get as close to the event as possible. So you don't necessarily want to use articles written recently about the event because those haven't necessarily been fact-checked and they're far away from the event. Try to find newspaper accounts from the time. Talk to people who were there and try to verify what they say and what they remember as best you can with archival material, newspaper reports, things like that, images, video or footage, film from the event. The best way to fact-check historical events that happened not 40 years ago, but 400 years ago, look to the work of historians. What sources do they cite? Often it'll be letters. It would be hard for me just working on my computer to find a newspaper in the 1700s. But they exist in archives and historians have used them. So if at Retro Report I check a claim about something that happened in a political convention in the 1800s, I do go to the work of historians and I check their peer reviewed work. And I look at the footnotes they use because they footnote their books and I talk to them.

NARRATOR: Fact-checking is important to the work of historians, but also to Retro Report because the first draft of history isn't always right – so we aim to correct the record and be the second draft of history.

JOSEPH HOGAN: And fact-checking is very important to that, because in order to find out what really happened in history, we have to make sure we get the facts straight. A lot of what we focus on is how certain media narratives say 20, 30 years ago, the first

draft of history, how those were covered at the time, how people expected those issues to play out and how they actually played out. [...]

Joseph Hogan, *How to Fact-Check History*, 2 November 2020 [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on *Retro Report in the Classroom*: <https://www.retroreport.org/education/video/how-to-fact-check-history/>.