

## HISTORY LAB 3 Transcript

### How do historians determine what's true when working with primary sources?

Ask a  
Historian



**Emily Tran:** From the University of Wisconsin–Madison, this is *Ask a Historian's* History Lab, a mini-series about how to do history for Wisconsin students and teachers as they prepare for National History Day. I'm Emily Tran.

Today on the show: How do historians verify primary sources and account for biases in archival documents?

My guest is Professor Francine Hirsch.

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**Fran Hirsch:** My name is Fran Hirsch, and I'm a historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, and I teach classes on Russian and Soviet history and on the history of human rights as well, and, and modern Europe in the History Department at UW–Madison.

**Emily Tran:** Professor Hirsch, Welcome to *Ask a Historian*.

**Fran Hirsch:** Thank you. Nice to be here, Emily.

**Emily Tran:** Our question today is about primary sources, which are the sources that come from the time and place that you're studying or that you're interested in, and they're typically produced by actors that were involved in that event or topic.

**Reed Trueblood:** I'm Reed Trueblood. I'm a senior at UW–Madison; I'm an undergrad. I'm from Howard's Grove, Wisconsin. And my question to historians is: How do they verify primary source documents? How do you like edit for bias and determine what's true and what's not?

**Emily Tran:** I'm bringing this question to you, Professor Hirsch, because you recently released a new book called *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg: A New History of International Military Tribunal after World War II*, and you have lots and lots of experience in the Soviet archives.

So, I really like Reed's question because it emphasizes how primary sources don't always tell us the truth. So, when you're working in the Soviet archives, what kinds of things did you consider when you were deciding whether a primary source was truthful?

**Fran Hirsch:** Well, that's such an interesting question. And this is something that I talk a lot about when I'm teaching as well, because primary sources all give us a sense of a perspective, right?

**Emily Tran:** Right.

**Fran Hirsch:** So, it's hard to— like, truth, like, what is the truth, the truth of the matter? We can be very philosophical about that, right, or we can talk about it in terms of, you know, what events happened.

So, in terms of the basics, like what events happened at a given time on a given day, who was there, that's when we always want to look at multiple sources, right? As many sources as we can of the same event. And we talk about triangulating sources, reading sources against one another in order to try to see if those details, indeed, are the same, right, or not the same.

If one source says that, you know, on, on such and such a day, like, Andrey Vyshinsky—in my work, who was the head of a secret commission for the Nuremberg trials—that on such and such a day Andrey Vyshinsky was in town. And then I look through photos and I find a photo with a certain date in which Andrey Vyshinsky was in town, then that helps to confirm that yes, Andrey Vyshinsky was in town that day.

But sometimes you run into a situation where the dates are different, or some of the details are different about who was at an event or who was absent. Or you'll see a list of the participants of an event and someone won't be there and so you wonder, well, were they just left off of it, right? Or were they really not there that day?

And so then, you want to look and see, well, are there other sources confirming that kind of truth? So, that's the kind of nitty gritty of the who, what, when, where and how.

But then of course there's the other question of making meaning, right? When we talk about the truth of sources, that also can get into the perspective of how did people feel on that day? What was the significance of that day? And then it's, the sources are going to have, they're gonna be really different because they're going to tell different types of stories depending on whose voice we're hearing, right?

So, if we talk about some of the days in revolutionary Russia, someone from the nobility is going to have a different perspective, most likely, than a worker who's participating in an anti-state, in a demonstration.

So, that's also really interesting, though, and to me, those are some of the most interesting kinds of sources because when, again, when you put together different sources of different perspectives and you see how different people felt in a particular moment, that's when you start to really get an interesting story, in reading those kinds of sources against each other.

Now, in the Soviet archives, I should say, and researching for my own book, there's other issues, too, in that there were some instances in which sources were fabricated.

In the story that I tell there was an event—the Katyn massacre it's talked about as—and we now know for certain that this was a massacre that was carried out by the Soviets. But the Soviets had insisted in including it in the indictment for the Nuremberg trials as a crime that was carried out by the Nazis. And the Soviets had actually— Soviet secret police had fabricated and planted some evidence in order to convince people that in fact this had been perpetrated by the Nazis. And then that evidence was presented.

And so, for that kind of thing, that's why really, like, digging in sometimes, right, is really important. It depends on what you're studying, whether something is controversial enough that someone might fabricate something, but that, that presents, then, a whole other set of issues and questions.

But it's still— even fabricated evidence is really interesting from the historian's perspective because we're not always interested in getting just at the facts of what happened but how people want to make meaning out of what happened and how people wanted to even, like, spin the truth of what happened.

And so, looking at the fabricated evidence and analyzing it against other kinds of evidence, including witness testimony, again, that's, that's— for the historian, that's how you can put together a really interesting story.

**Emily Tran:** Can you talk a little bit more about that that kind of reading against the grain? If there is something like the Soviet records—or the Soviet portrayal—of the massacre where they accused, essentially, the Nazis of carrying it out, what can lies reveal about the people who wrote those lies?

**Fran Hirsch:** Yeah. So, so lies in general can reveal the story that people want to have told about an event, right? And that's really important, too. So, you know, what, what is the lie? How is the lie been framed and, and what's at stake? Because people usually lie about something because something is at stake.

**Emily Tran:** Right, it's important.

**Fran Hirsch:** Is it, is it a country's international reputation that's at stake? Is it a criminal offense? And then, like, what that means. Is that what's at stake? Is that someone's personal reputation that's at stake? Does someone want to tell a particular story so that an event is remembered a particular way? Like, we see that a lot in histories of the Russian Revolution. And so, you know, sometimes it's even more complicated.

There's a great book by one of my colleagues, Frederick Corney, about the making of the narrative of the Russian Revolution. And part of what he looks at is how the archive of the Russian Revolution of October 1917, how that was put together, right? And in certain cases, people are encouraged to remember themselves into particular historical events and particular historical moments. And in some cases, the people really were there and in some cases they weren't there.

But then, I mean, I think that gets— It's messier than just truth versus lies, right, because people are really involving themselves in this re-imagining of what had happened because it's meaningful, then, for them to tell a story of having participated in a particular event. I always find that really interesting as well.

**Emily Tran:** Reed also brings up this concept of bias, which I think is something that hangs over the way that many people understand history. Is bias necessarily a bad thing when studying the past and looking at primary sources? And how does the idea of bias shape the way that you use primary sources?

**Fran Hirsch:** So, I think that's also really interesting because—this is something that I was talking about in my Historian's Craft class this year—when we read, again, different sources against each

other, is our narrator reliable, right? And what do we even mean by reliability? What is the difference between a source being biased and the source having a particular perspective, right?

Just about all sources have a particular perspective. They're written either by an individual or put out by an institution. They all have a particular purpose. There's always information that's included and there's always information that's not included. That doesn't mean that those sources aren't telling, like, *a* truth, right? But they're telling a truth that whoever's producing that document sees as being the information that's necessary to share, right, in a particular moment.

And so, again, we want to— If you're studying, like, any event in history, if we're studying— Oh, let's just imagine something in Soviet history like the Great Terror. You can read the memoirs of people who had been imprisoned wrongfully, right, during the Great Terror. Are those sources biased? I wouldn't say that they're biased in a negative way, but they have a certain perspective based on the experience of those people, right?

You could also read official party documents from the Communist Party saying that there were saboteurs, right, when in fact this was a big lie in many cases. Are those documents biased? They have a particular perspective and they're telling an untruth, right, but they're still useful documents for the historian, in terms of understanding the story, again, that institutions tell, that the Communist Party was telling, that the way, the lenses that people were looking at a situation through.

So, you need both of those kinds of documents in order to understand an official narrative of events—even if that official narrative is a lie—and then, to also understand how people experience those events. The more different kinds of sources that we're able to look at and read against each other, the more interesting a work we're going to have, and the better story we're going to be able to tell as well.

**Emily Tran:** So, the more actors whose primary sources you can include, or whose perspectives you can include, the fuller the story.

**Fran Hirsch:** Yeah, the more, the more perspectives, the better.

And I'll just say that sometimes that's hard, right? Because we don't always want the perspective of a perpetrator, for example. But sometimes—

**Emily Tran:** Right.

**Fran Hirsch:** —we need to bring that in, at least to a certain extent, just to understand what was going on, what did people think that they were doing, how did they justify their actions. So that becomes also really important.

**Emily Tran:** So, it's important to consider who's writing sources, their intent. What are other questions that students should ask of the primary sources that they come across?

**Fran Hirsch:** So yeah, that's great. So, so who's writing a particular source?

What is the purpose of the particular source? You're absolutely right. Is it trying to convince someone of something? Is it trying to convey certain evidence that the person writing it thinks is incontrovertible or absolutely accurate?

What's the audience, right? What is the audience, are there other sources that are being produced by the same person for different audiences and do they tell the same story, right? Or are different audiences getting different versions of truth?

Also, with the materials that I work with, sometimes if something's been translated from one language into another, what's been lost in that translation? That's really important as well, right, for historians. And for me, like, it's always better to read the sources in the original language. Sometimes we don't have that choice if it's a language we don't know.

So, if I'm working with a student who's doing a project on Russia, there are some wonderful primary source collections that are in English. But it's just as important to be aware that those collections are, they're made up of documents that someone culled from an archive, in some cases, and then translated.

And so, there are lots of questions you want to ask about that as well. Why were these particular documents included and not other documents? Is there a possibility that something was just shifted, the meaning shifted even unintentionally, right, in the translation?

And then the reception, which is I think one of the trickiest questions for the historian to get at, always. It's easier to study how was the document produced, right, and what that intention was. But how was the document received? Or even, you know, other kinds of sources like a film: how was the film received? What did people think of it? Did people get the message that they were supposed to get, especially if it's a propaganda film, for example. That's really difficult to study.

In my very first project I worked on, I had a chapter on museum exhibits and it was a wonderful thing when I found this museum I was studying from the 1920s and '30s actually had these response books that people could write their comments in about exhibits. And that was, I mean, that was just such a great source because normally it's hard to know, like, 80 years later, right, or 90 years later, what someone thought of an exhibit. But if you have those materials—I mean, you still have to ask the same kinds of questions like, what were the circumstances under which they were writing it? If all of the answers are the same, then that should, you know, raise some questions, too. But, but just even have those kinds of sources to look at is, it's really exciting.

**Emily Tran:** This is just reminding me of how complex the task of the historian is. The raw material, even if we are able to access a lot of it, there's so many questions that we have to ask, which is both challenging and exciting.

So, my very last question: what was the first or earliest history research project that you remember working on when you were growing up?

**Fran Hirsch:** Oh, my goodness, that is, um, that's—I mean, that's, that's such an interesting question. I mean, I remember working on . . . I mean, some of it, I remember, like, these crazy projects of building, like, the Parthenon out of sugar cubes. [Laughter] I think that's probably the earliest.

**Emily Tran:** [Laughter] Wow, that's amazing!

**Fran Hirsch:** I don't know, is that, is that a history project?

**Emily Tran:** I think so. I think it counts.

**Fran Hirsch:** Okay. Well, that, that would've been in the sixth grade then.

**Emily Tran:** Wow, that's so memorable.

Well, Professor Hirsch, thank you so much for taking time to talk with me.

**Fran Hirsch:** It's always fun to talk about research, so thanks so much for having me today.

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**Emily Tran**

Students and teachers, do you have a question about how to do history? Record a voice memo, send it in, and we'll take your question to a UW historian. Our email address is [outreach@history.wisc.edu](mailto:outreach@history.wisc.edu).

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Thank you for listening, and we'll be back in January with new episodes of *Ask a Historian*.