

CHAPTER 1

What Is History?

HISTORY MEANS two things: the events of the past and the study of the events of the past. Neither aspect of history can be understood without an appreciation for the other. When studying the past, one must have knowledge of events, but one must also understand something about the way to study, the way historians work. This text will give you the opportunity to evaluate past events and to use some of the methods historians use when analyzing history.

Historians look at the past by studying sources. There are two types of sources, primary and secondary. While these terms have somewhat different meanings for different disciplines, to historians primary sources are produced by the culture under examination. **Secondary sources** are the published interpretations of primary sources. You will encounter both types of sources in this world history course, with most of the primary sources printed in the appendix at the back of this book. The text you are reading now is a secondary source.

Primary sources can include anything produced, built, written, painted, carved, narrated, or even left behind as refuse. In the modern world, written sources are very common and of probably the greatest use for historians. Written sources are rich and varied and can include books, poems, prayers, inscriptions, census or other reports, speeches, diaries, or newspapers. People produce other types of sources also useful to historians: art, graves, clothing, oral traditions, architecture, tools, or other technology. To a historian, any and all of these products are potential primary sources that help understand and interpret societies from the past.

Think of your own world. If you were to list artifacts that describe or define your own society, you might include an issue of a local newspaper, an office building, a census report, a car, a high school yearbook, a television show, some CDs, and a prayer book. Collectively, such a set would constitute a nice collection of sources that, when interpreted in context, could provide a reasonable description of your world. A local newspaper could show the types of news people in your world find important. It could show what movies were showing, the value of real estate, what types of crimes and punishments were committed. An office building could show how people work, what types of building materials were used, and other things about architecture and public or private spaces. A census report might show population numbers, the average age of marriage, the attention your society pays to ethnic background. By piecing together information from all these sources, a scholar might reconstruct a picture of modern American society. But there would be many questions left unanswered.

No source provides the complete truth about the past. In fact, historians rarely discuss “truth” or “facts” at all, preferring instead to talk of “interpretations” of history. Any article, report, artifact, or technology can potentially be understood in many different ways. A newspaper article contains bias; it might exclude information; it might have an angle that, if not interpreted in proper context, misleads the reader. For this reason, historians study as many sources as possible on a given subject. It is bad historical practice to ignore or discount a source simply because it is selective or misleading. A biased account is an excellent source on bias.

During the First World War, a war fought in Europe from 1914 until 1918 with Germany and Austria on one side and Great Britain, France, and the United States on the other (and Italy and Russia coming and going in between), daily and weekly newspapers reported on the war’s progress. A regular feature of such reports described incredible atrocities committed by soldiers from enemy countries. French, British, and American papers ran articles describing atrocities of German and Austrian soldiers, while German papers ran articles describing atrocities of the Americans, the French, and the British. “News” articles described soldiers hacking nuns to death with pitchforks or throwing babies into the air, then catching them on the tips of swords, and other horrific things. One suspicious feature of these stories was how similar they were from country to country, regardless of the nationality of soldiers involved. A second suspicious feature was that such stories invariably concluded with declarations that the troops from the other side were “barbarians” who wished to crush the “civilized world.” Such accounts avoided corroborating evidence and rarely mentioned independent sources. The fact is, the great majority of these accounts were simply false or were based on wildly exagger-

ated rumors. In all countries, newspapers ran the stories as **propaganda** to demonize an enemy and thus justify a war that was itself an atrocity and became increasingly awkward for leaders to explain. But historians do not dismiss outrageous newspaper sources simply because articles do not provide accurate accounts. On the contrary, such stories are valuable in showing mentalities of the day, the language of “barbarian” and “civilized” used on all sides, and the popular images of national groups. Historians know that every source has a story to tell but must be considered in light of a range of sources and evidence.

PROJECT 1 DIRECTIONS

Primary Sources and Interpretations

List three primary sources to leave for future historians. The project has two parts; first, to identify specific sources you think are in some way representative of your own culture and society. These would be primary sources to the historian who would eventually examine them. Second, provide an explanation of the sources you list, to advise the scholar of the future how to understand the sources you selected. Your explanation is an interpretation, a secondary source. In the spaces provided below, list three specific primary sources by name, date the source was produced, and, where appropriate, page number. For example, “the Student Union building on the campus of [a specific university in a specific city] in use at least during 2005–2006”; the movie *Iron Man* released in 2008; and the June 17, 2008, edition of a local newspaper (identifying it by name and the particular page). The items you list should be real, traceable documents or artifacts. After each of the three items, write a short interpretation of that source. What information does that source show about the society that produced it? The more interpretive your answer, the better. For example, it would be a stronger statement to write that “the Student Union building” shows the value our society assigns to higher education than to say we know how to make buildings. It is a stronger argument to interpret the use of a building in terms of its social importance, the resources allocated, the way people looked at the building in contrast to other buildings, and so forth. The first source you identify should be a written source such as an article, a story, the lyrics to a song, or something similar.

PROJECT 1

Primary Sources and Interpretations

1. Written primary source (title):

Citation (author, date of publication, publisher, page number if applicable):

Interpretation:

2. Primary source:

Date, location, use:

Interpretation:

3. Primary source:

Date, location, use:

Interpretation:

The most common type of source historians examine is probably written texts. Written texts provide evidence historians use to form historical arguments. It is not always obvious what interpretations a text might support. For example, look at the **Code of Hammurabi** (in the appendix, pages 102–3), one of the world’s oldest surviving written texts. The code outlines laws for ancient Mesopotamia and is interpreted as a legal text. But the code provides insight beyond the legal sphere, into many aspects of life, family, and society in the ancient world.

Historians interpret texts by examining them critically, the same as saying historians use **critical thinking**. This means historians try to interpret sources without prejudice or judging. A historical source can only be understood if the bias of the present is set aside and the historian works objectively. Conventionally this means to consider a text in context and comparison. *Context* means to place the text in its own environment, circumstances, standards, and values. To *compare* means to consider a source in contrast to other sources or texts, to other people, or to other circumstances, similar or dissimilar.

Historians try to set aside personal biases toward sources. *Like, dislike, boring, good, bad*, and similar terms are not useful categories of analysis and can interfere with reasonable interpretations of *significance, consequences, causes*, and so on. Of course historians prefer to work with texts they enjoy or find interesting or beautiful, but personal feelings should not influence interpretations of texts any more than a botanist’s love of butterflies should influence a study of a butterfly’s nervous system.

The Code of Hammurabi is significant in part because it was one of the earliest written (**codified**) laws. A written law is more accountable than an oral law or the personal ruler who governs on whim or inspiration. A written law can be discussed objectively; it has a record and a wording that is constant. This is not to say that written laws are applied uniformly or consistently; they are not. But a codified law has the opportunity for greater accountability. The Code of Hammurabi was engraved in stone and placed in public for all citizens to see.

