

# History and What-Really-Happened

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## I. Introduction: What-Really-Happened: What is History?

"All photographs are accurate, but none of them is the truth. . . .  
The camera lies all the time." (Richard Avedon, photographer)

Most people's definition of **history** is fairly simple. It's "what-really-happened-in-the-past." But professional historians know that the reality of history is hardly so unproblematical. As many a policeman will assert who has tried to determine from several eyewitnesses' reports exactly what happened in an accident, it's often difficult to piece together different people's versions of the "truth" and construct one coherent narrative on which everyone agrees. In fact, it's impossible. The same is true for history which is a very messy business and, like all human enterprises, particularly susceptible to bias, self-righteousness, pride, vanity and, if not outright and intentional perversion of the truth, at least the subconscious obfuscation of some grimmer and grimmer reality.

Nor is history something that can be easily defined or restricted. People import too much emotional baggage into the formulation of their histories to leave much room for impartiality. One brief event can take on thousands of different meanings when all sorts of people impose their own variations of the truth upon it. We need look no further than the crucifixion of Jesus to see how many different ways people can treat and interpret a past event. From that alone it should be clear that determining the truth about history, the elusive and illusive "what-really-happened," is hardly likely to be a smooth or simple exercise.

But because it's hard to come by doesn't mean we should give up pursuing historical truth, only that we must approach it with realistic expectations of what history can deliver. If it is a glorious goal, securing a full and uncontradictory picture of what-really-happened-in-the-past is something no one will probably ever achieve. Yet as with so many human endeavors, the struggle itself has great merit and delivers all sorts of rewards, if not the full and unvarnished truth.

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## II. The Good News and the Bad News

"There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false."  
(Harold Pinter, playwright)

For historians, this is both good news and bad news. It's bad—all too bad, really!—that we will probably never fully understand what-really-happened-in-the-past, certainly not in such a way that sensible people will agree about historical reality. Moreover, to kill the debate would not necessarily be a good thing. Dissension is a natural and even beneficial feature of human

life, and many would say that compelling people to agree on one vision of anything is tyrannical and just a bad idea. Certainly, imposing a uniform vision of history is a notion notoriously poisonous to democracy and an ingredient found in many a dictatorship. Not that that has stopped people from trying, and all too often with disastrous results. Hitler, for instance, attempted to impose his stilted, one-dimensional vision of the past on the Germans of his day. The Inquisition tried much the same in Medieval Europe, as did the socialists in Russia. Today, creationists and scientists are locked in battle over one aspect of what-really-happened-in-the-past, the origin of humanity.

Such disputes about the past are not altogether bad, I assure you, nor are they at heart even really about history in the sense of "the study of the past." They concern most often some immediate and imposing present. Most, if not all, conflicts centered on interpretations of the past revolve around what one group of people think other people should think about some past they share.

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### III. The Best Approach to History

"Nothing that has actually happened matters in the slightest."  
(Oscar Wilde, playwright)

So then, how should we best approach the pocked and patchy minefield of the past? Something so central, so meaningful to our lives, *should* be able to be pursued with some degree of certainty, shouldn't it? Is there any hope of recovering an unblemished and tutelary past that can operate as a reliable guide to the future? If not the full and unbiased truth about history, the exploration of the past must reveal something of value to our lives, yes? Cannot the study of the events leading up to our times contain at least some "historical truth," even though there is little reasonable chance of actually achieving a complete and undistorted picture of the past? Or should we just throw our hands in the air and sign up for classes in the "hard" sciences where the perception exists there is no debate about facts or interpretations of truth? Ten minutes in any reputable science class will show the fallacy of that common mistaken assumption.

The answer to all these questions is that history, both as the unfolding and as the recording of the past, must proceed—and it will whether or not anyone wishes it to!—and if it cannot proceed under ideal circumstances, then too bad for those who insist on perfection! Given the natural human inclination toward bias, egotism, sloth and sensationalism, we can and must make something of the so-called "facts of history" and the data we're left with, whatever their condition, something that at least approaches the truth even if it does not accomplish our aim of discovering the whole of what-really-happened.

And, indeed, history is not simply an exercise in futility and despair, because there are some significant pluses working in behalf of those who seek to create an honest record of the past. The fact is, even the biggest historical lies almost always contain some facsimile of truth, in spite of the liars who spawned them. And especially the most egregious perpetrators of such prevarications—those bigots, divas, cheats, and laggards who are responsible for bringing us many of our worst perversions of history—even *they* rarely exhibit motivations so complex that it's impossible to shed some light on them somehow. In fact, quite often we can see through

their tainted "histories" and easily distinguish what they wish we would believe from what is the more probable reality they're distorting. Indeed, bad history is quite frequently transparent, and usually the worse it is, the clearer it is. That's the good news.

## A. Tacitus

"What is history but a fable agreed-upon?" (Napoleon Bonaparte, French general)

The bad news is, history's most flagrant spin-*meisters* are hardly the only villains roaming the library. Many good and seemingly reasonable historians blur the past, too, usually under the spell of some blinding self-delusion which makes them press a point they feel must be true, something they think and hope and believe *ought* to be true. And if the historical data don't support their point completely, they change the past to what it *should* have been.

**Tacitus**, for instance, the greatest historian of early Imperial Rome, was a true blue-blooded Roman who watched his world, as he saw it, crumbling around him. Although he spent his life in one of the finest ages of human history, the so-called ***Pax Romana*** ("the Roman peace" lasting from 31 BCE to 180 CE), a period which saw fewer wars, social unrest and economic burdens than the vast majority of times, Tacitus was, at least to judge from his writings, a fairly unhappy fellow. In his mind, the Romans—and especially traditional aristocrats like himself—had sold away their basic human rights, their liberty and free speech, to men who called themselves **Emperors** (literally, in Latin "commanders"). These emperors, instead of leading the Romans, had for the most part enslaved them, according to Tacitus, in exchange for providing the peace of a sheltered life.

That is, in allowing emperors into Rome, Tacitus' peers, in his opinion, had purchased for themselves a gilded cage where they had locked themselves into a comfortable but restricted lifestyle with fewer personal freedoms than their noble, independent-minded forefathers had. To him, they had thrown away their greatest heritage, their liberty, for a few generations of comfortable living. One need not mention, of course, that the pursuit of those personal freedoms by unscrupulous, greedy aristocrats in the century before the *Pax Romana* had led to unprecedented waves of carnage and mayhem all around the Mediterranean basin. Indeed, liberty and the pursuit of personal happiness had spelled death for millions in the late Republic, so while the onset of Empire had ended Roman independence, there is little doubt that it also saved countless lives. Cages work two ways: they keep things both in and out.

Tacitus was well aware of this, as his histories show, but his knowledge of the dangers which accompany unbridled liberty didn't hinder him in the least from sitting at his desk and scrawling out line after line recounting the abominations he saw being perpetrated on his fellow Romans enslaved to an increasingly debauched succession of emperors, most of them in Tacitus' view incompetent perverts! And much of what he says is true, confirmed by external sources, but the spin he put on events, in particular, his failure to include certain details which did not conform with his pessimistic vision of the times, makes his history less a calm and reasoned account of the early Empire and more a call-to-arms for all liberty-loving Romans. To put it simply—albeit *over*-simply!—Tacitus, as a historian, is a brilliantly articulate, often quite humorous, trenchantly insightful observer of human nature, but also a crusader and a propagandist, and a bit of a whiner.

And, from such a man so full of genius and wit and contempt, the view of this age is necessarily slanted. For instance, in his *Annals of Imperial Rome* he scorches Nero with reproach, painting this emperor as one of the most inept leaders imaginable. In doing so, he gives us our picture of the madman who "fiddled while Rome burned." However, any trained historian can readily see that Tacitus' depiction of Nero as an insane despot is not an entirely neutral portrait of the emperor and may have less to do with the absolute truth than Tacitus' political agenda. Thus, Tacitus who is often called—and rightly so!—our single best historical source for early Imperial Rome was also instrumental in leaving behind the picture of debauchery and violence we now have of that impressively glorious age, the early *Pax Romana*, the very pinnacle of Roman greatness and arguably of all Western Civilization.

## B. Procopius

Tacitus hardly stands alone among historians in his failure to be objective or unbiased. All writers of history have a vantage point, something to prove—why else would they be writing?—and some have more than one.

**Procopius**, who lived in the days of the Byzantine emperor **Justinian** (r. 535-565 CE), was the official historian of the court. Several of the books he wrote which are preserved among the historical records of the Byzantine Empire recount the glories and triumphs of Justinian's wars and his noble efforts to help his people socially, economically and architecturally. To judge from these alone, Procopius was a fawning sycophant, a propagandist who was paid to praise and justify Justinian's rule and, by all appearances, earned his salary in fulsome full.

But several centuries after his lifetime, another work by Procopius was unexpectedly discovered. It was called *Anecdota*, literally in Greek "unpublished," i.e. the "unofficial" history of Justinian's reign. We don't know how or where it came to light, but the reason for its concealment is amply clear. The *Anecdota* entails a very different approach to the history of the period. In it, Justinian is portrayed not as a benevolent ruler but a monster, quite literally a demon sent by the Devil to plague the Earth and kill as many people as possible. In one modern edition of the *Anecdota*, one of the chapters is entitled, "How Justinian killed a billion people." This other Procopius, by all appearances the polar opposite of the propagandist, supports his assertions of Justinian's demonic nature by citing that the maids of the palace claim to have seen the Emperor's decapitated spirit walking about the palace late at night carrying its head in its hands.

Whether this is true or not—and, frankly, it doesn't seem very likely—there is a greater truth behind the tale. Evidently, the powerful and prideful emperor could at times rub those near him, even his well-paid employees, the wrong way, and these discontented underlings found a way to avenge themselves, through gossip and libel. So, we can see that Procopius could live with a broad dichotomy in his professional life, to say the least. An unkind critic might call it full-blown schizophrenia. Press secretary by day and character assassin by night, Procopius, it appears, was two entirely different historians rolled into one, a single body embracing two personas and widely divergent visions of the world around him.

From this, it seems safe to say that even one individual alone can function as two different historians, incompatible eye-witnesses, and all by himself create dissension about what-really-happened-in-the-past. Thus we must conclude that the only thing we may rule out definitely as a factor in the evaluation of historical sources is the serene dispassion of its

authors. History shows all sorts of people are capable of recording a vision of the past—even people with multiple personalities!—everyone except the calm and unconcerned. *They* don't write history because they don't care enough about the past to do it. An indisputable fact of history, perhaps the only one, is that it takes a certain amount of anxiety to put words on a page.

#### IV. Remembered, Recovered and Invented History

"(History) is the set of questions we in the present ask of the past . . . It is informed by our anxieties, by our failures, by our successes, by our hopes, by our wishes, by all the questions we have." (Ken Burns, documentary film-maker)

In studying the records of the past, then, one is, in fact, examining propaganda of various sorts, distortions based on someone's perception of truth but angled so as to make a better case for something than an unorganized compilation of facts might do all by themselves. In other words, all writers have a purpose in writing, or else why write? Histories are no different in that regard from novels—and sometimes in other ways as well, such as in their disdain for reality—but that's no reason to despair of the truth. There are times we can come very close to seeing what-really-happened-in-the-past, or at least certain historical truths, if we address the data intelligently and in full awareness of the processes that guide the creation of history.

For instance, if confirmation of a certain historical event comes from several different sources whose reports appear not to have influenced one another—these are called **external sources**—*that* to many historians constitutes compelling evidence about the existence and nature of an event. In other words, if a soldier who fought in a battle, a general who oversaw the battle and a doctor who treated those wounded during the battle all record the same basic facts, then we can feel fairly certain things proceeded along those general lines in the course of the battle. It's highly unlikely all these people had the same propagandist agenda. This is the sort of thing one must look for in tracking down what-really-happened.

The first thing to do, then, is to learn as much as possible about the data handed down to us as "history." We must ask about the author—or artist, if the information comes from a work of art—and the time when that information was set down. Next, we have to ask how this information came down to us. Was it distorted, or could it have been distorted, in some way during its transmission from the time it happened to our age? These questions usually end up putting the data into one or more of three general categories: remembered history, recovered history and/or invented history. All of these come with certain advantages and drawbacks.

##### A. Remembered History

All history is, in one way or another, **remembered history** which is, at its core, the personal recollection of an individual who witnessed an event. This type of history is based on the recollections of the elderly, the living traditions that constitute the **oral history** of a culture. On a wider scale, remembered history is also the collective memory of a living society, all the things which that group agrees some part of their community saw and experienced, the way a grandparent tells their grandchildren about a war that took place long before the children were

born. When those who did not witness an event for themselves but allow that it must have happened, pass on information about the past, memories become history, remembered history.

The greatest apparent advantage of this sort of recollection is that it comes "from the horse's mouth"—historians call this type of source "**primary evidence**," meaning it relies on eyewitnesses—and its accuracy would thus seem indisputable. Unfortunately, it is not. People tend to remember selectively and to disseminate their memories with even greater selectivity. If, as young man in battle, a grandfather became frightened and ran away, he's not likely to tell that detail to his grandchildren or, if he does, he will probably reshape the story and make his actions seem justified. In other words, he will distort history to serve his personal interests. So, remembered history is all too often what a person chooses to "remember."

Besides that, one grandfather's recollection of an event often contrasts strongly with another's, because their perspectives were different, or simply because different things catch different people's eyes. Which grandfather's version, then, is the real historical truth? Can we even say that one is truer than the other? And when one thinks how many grandparents there are out there all remembering their pasts and all doing it selectively, the process of creating a coherent oral history replicates itself exponentially into a seemingly hopeless pursuit of what-really-happened. So, the major drawback of remembered history, a dauntingly immense task in and of itself, is that, even if we were to collect and assemble all the data, the rememberers on whom remembered history depends, whether they mean to or not, don't always bestow on us a full and unalloyed truth.

## B. Recovered History

"We don't see things as they are; we see them as *we* are." (Anais Nin, diarist)

**Recovered History**, the next type of historical information, will then seem at first glance a more accurate genus of data. Recovered history encompasses all information about a past that was once known but for some reason that information was lost and forgotten. Later, however, it was reclaimed, usually through a lucky accident or some sort of investigation. Today, the most familiar type of recovered history is that which comes from **archaeology** and the excavation of historical sites.

But it is not through archaeological work alone that history is recovered. Librarians also find forgotten manuscripts in book collections, another sort of "archaeology." Indeed, history can be recovered from any artifacts set aside and forgotten. Moreover, if we don't know the script or language used in a text that has been discovered, a decipherer must assist in recovering the data by decoding it. Thus, there are many places, ways and means to recover history.

Information gathered in this way seems to many less tainted with bias than remembered history, because recovered history is often based on concrete things found by chance or dug up. These data haven't been passed down through subsequent generations which may have distorted the information even further by omitting details the copiers neglected, found uninteresting or wished to suppress. Instead, it's usually assumed that archaeological artifacts are historically intact—that is, found just as they were in the past—which means they're free at

least of intermediate human contact. All this makes recovered history appear to reflect historical reality better than remembered history, and in many cases it does.

The *actual* reality is a bit more complicated, however, because there's as much room for bias in recovered history as in remembered history. While data recovered are usually not in and of themselves biased, their interpretation very much can be. Indeed, how to place a piece of recovered history in the larger context of a civilization's progress is often a matter of partisan debate.

For instance, there is no question that the city buried under several feet of volcanic ash in southern Italy near Naples is the Roman town of **Pompeii**. We find its name on the walls of the city, along with an impressive record of the decadent and luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by Romans in and around the first century CE. Life was certainly very good for Romans living there back then, until, of course, the nearby volcano **Mount Vesuvius** erupted violently in 79 CE and exterminated the city along with a good deal of its population. At that point things stopped looking so good. But for historians it was a boon. The eruption of Vesuvius preserved Pompeii better than any other Roman city, which raises an important issue. How representative is Pompeii of Roman life in its day? Does this ritzy beach community present a fair picture of ancient Rome?

Pompeii was, in fact, not typical of Roman cities in its day—indeed, no Roman city is exactly typical of Rome, least of all, Rome itself!—no more so, at least, than any actual modern city represents a "standard" community today. An ancient Santa Barbara of sorts, Pompeii was disproportionately inhabited by rich families who summered along its shores under the cool, vine-rich slopes of Vesuvius. These languid aristocrats supported an industry of gaming, theatre, wineries, prostitution and a wide variety of exotic religious cults. From that perspective, Atlantic City might make a better analogy.

The historian's fundamental duty, then, is to situate this archaeological information within the greater picture of Rome left to us by history. Is Pompeii an aberration, or something typical of its day? To make generalizations about Rome in the first century CE from the information about daily life gathered along with the material evidence found at Pompeii is a difficult enterprise. It all comes down to the specific nature of archaeological data, a situation which is both a blessing and a curse. Recovered history confirms the existence of certain things in certain places at certain moments in the past, but it doesn't tell us how widespread or even how important those things were in the larger concourse of events. To put it differently, how accurately will the remains of today's Key West or Sun Valley inform archaeologists in several millennia about typical American life in the twenty-first century?

So, while the data of recovered history are not in debate, their interpretation and historical context all too often are. Frequently, the way the data are read turns out to fit some vision an interpreter wishes to impose on history, and this unfortunately ends up all too often saying more about the interpreter than the interpreted. The record of abuses of archaeological information in the modern world are legion and hardly restricted to archaeologists themselves. All sorts and factions of people sift the very data they seek from recovered history and make of it what they wish.

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### C. Invented History

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
. . . it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.  
(Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5.19-28)

**Invented History** is a third type of history. It entails the body of myths, often well-known to be untrue but that exist in the public conscience as "history." These are the historical fabrications which, though they are essentially lies, enough people wish to believe they are what-really-happened that they have come to have the force of truth. Invented histories satisfy our collective need to see the past in some particular way and, even when directly challenged with hard evidence of their falsehood, people persist in speaking of them as "historical reality." How does this happen? The answer is quintessentially human. When confronted with historical data that don't uphold our convictions about the past and how we feel it should be, we discard them and make up a more workable "history" that *does* conform to our view of the world. That tale is then widely circulated and, swept along by its popularity, gains the authority of truth through the sheer number of times it's repeated and written down.

Scores of invented histories fill the records of the past, and no society is or has ever been exempt. For instance, even in the face of a blistering vacuum of fact, many ancient Romans believed their nation was originally founded by the descendants of survivors from Homer's Troy, itself a notorious fiction. Likewise, quite a few people believed—many still do—there was once a continent called Atlantis. Others think the ancient Hebrews were once enslaved by the Egyptians and forced to build the Pyramids. For none of these myths is there a shred of credible historical evidence, yet modern sources for one reason or another perpetuate them.

There *was* no Aeneas or Atlantis, and the Pyramids were constructed at least a millennium before the Hebrews existed as a people at all, centuries before even Abraham lived, if *he* lived and was not an invented history, too. There is, in fact, no corroborating evidence at all for ancient Hebrews as a slave collective in Egypt at any time, but the tales of pyramid-building and the Egyptian Captivity linger on because in our time, an age ruled by questioning and dissent, we seek validation of the Bible's stalwart truths amongst the tangible remains of ancient Egypt. And when that is not forthcoming, many choose to read biblical myths as history anyway. Their lie betrays their heart, neither of which is evil, but neither of which lives in fact, either.

Modern American civilization is no less saturated with invented history. The brave days of cowboys in the Old West, the "good ole times" when there was religious uniformity and moral behavior, even George Washington and the cherry tree are all invented histories. The last is an anecdote concocted by an early biographer who needed to say something about Washington's childhood when nothing significant was known. There's no doubt about it, these tales are made up, "full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing," as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* asserts, but in this case the tales "told by idiots" *do* signify something.

Invented histories are indeed quite significant. Whether true or not, such stories affect people's perceptions of their own lives and can constitute a major force in their decision-making processes. While invented histories may not rest in any real way upon the facts of the past, they can affect the course of the future when those who subscribe to them make choices based on the false realities which have been concocted through these fictions. Moreover, when any event in the past, real or not, assumes some sort of moral force and society sees a purpose for carrying the story across time, it is far more likely to survive in the collective memory. Without some clear ethical value, a piece of history can seem pointless and risks extinction because of general public disinterest. Invented histories almost always have that sort of moral force—they've been manufactured to have it—and so they tend to persist because they meet a need that the past be significant in the lives of the living.

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## V. Conclusion

"A guy ought to be very careful in making predictions, especially about the future." (Yogi Berra, baseball manager)

Thus, despite all the pitfalls of studying the past and the hopelessness of ever securing a completely accurate picture of what-really-happened, there's good reason to suppose that, given access to historical sources and evidence, we can circumscribe, define and delineate the truth of past events. Moreover, we must also remember that the purpose of exploring history is not merely to uncover what-really-happened but to shed light on what *is* happening, because the study of history is rarely, if ever, an innocent, unprejudiced survey of the past. Rather, it's used by factions in conflict to influence others' judgment and affect the present, to chart our course ahead and measure our morality. Seen this way, any history is in the end a crime of sorts, the deliberate misreading of the past to justify the perpetration of some sort of present and future . . . .

But because no observer or interpreter of history is unbiased and, even if one were, no one can record the absolute truth in such an imperfect medium as human language, history is, in sum, a branch of literature, where good writers—that is, ones who are persuasive and convincing—prevail by the force of their will and charisma. And even if we were not dependent on writing and had video tapes of history, it would only change the situation insofar as good editors of *film*, not text, would be standing at the forefront of history, shaping and reshaping our view of the past by manipulating what was and was not included, scoping out where they believe our focus and interests should lie. All great historians—indeed, most great figures of the past—are fundamentally good story-tellers with some sort of slanted message, and all who listen in are their happy, hapless victims.