

## CHAPTER THREE



### *Historical Interpretation: The Traditional Basics*

**H**aving assembled their sources and subjected them to the technical investigations described in the last chapter, historians face the task of explaining them, of connecting them into a story about the past. This process can be analyzed from several perspectives, ranging from the fundamental question of how a historian might go about reconciling the often conflicting information that is found in a group of sources to the most sophisticated questions of what kinds of knowledge about the past the historian is in a position to offer. In this chapter, we will take up basic questions of how historians traditionally choose among facts, how they decide what evidence to privilege, which to suppress, which to ignore. In the two succeeding chapters we will turn to larger issues of interpretation, concerning the kinds of questions historians ask and the ways these questions determine their approach to evidence.

#### A. Comparison of Sources

Typically, historians do not rely on just one source to study an event or a historical process, but on many, and they construct their own interpretations about the past by means of comparison among sources—by sifting information contained in many sources, by listening to many voices. Sometimes the information they have from various sources is contradictory, sometimes mutually confirming, but the historian's job in any case is to decide which accounts he or she will use, and why. In the previous

chapter, we considered the various ways that historians evaluate sources individually. Here we want to look at some of the techniques they employ to choose among different texts or to rank them in order of usefulness.

The essential problem here is distinguishing among the useful, less useful, and useless source. Generally, historians consider sources to be useless (for reporting purposes) if they derive from other, usually older, sources. Although it is sometimes hard to decide if a source is in some way derived from another, once that assessment is made, eliminating the dependent source is usually easy. It is much harder, however, to rank sources that all seem to be "original" in that each provides an independent account of the particular events in question.

Nineteenth-century historians developed systematic rules for making such comparisons. Two of the best-known rule books of the age, that of E. Bernheim, published in 1889 (*Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie* [*Guidebook for Historical Method and the Philosophy of History*]), and Charles Langlois and Charles Seignobos, from 1898 (*Introduction aux études historiques* [*Introduction to the Study of History*]), provide a seven-step process, which we have summarized below. As we shall see, the procedure hardly guarantees the kind of scientific proof these scholars and their contemporaries imagined as the historians' goal (only numbers (2) and (6) seem uncontroversial), but it can, nevertheless, provide entry into the challenging world of source comparison.

1. If the sources all agree about an event, historians can consider the event proved.
2. However, majority does not rule; even if most sources relate events in one way, that version will not prevail unless it passes the tests of critical textual analysis (explained in chapter 2, section B).
3. The source whose account can be confirmed by reference to outside authorities in some of its parts can be trusted in its entirety if it is impossible similarly to confirm the entire text.
4. When two sources disagree on a particular point, the historian will prefer the source with the most "authority"—i.e., the source created by the expert or the eyewitness (again, see chapter 2, section B, for a discussion of this assessment).
5. Eyewitnesses are, in general, to be preferred, especially in circumstances where the ordinary observer could have accurately reported what transpired and, more specifically, when they deal with facts known by most contemporaries.
6. If two independently created sources agree on a matter, the reliability of each is measurably enhanced.



7. When two sources disagree (and there is no other means of evaluation), then historians take the source which seems to accord best with common sense.

To illustrate the application of these rules, let us take an example from recent history, the Watergate affair of 1972–74.<sup>1</sup> The story begins in June 1972, when five men were caught breaking into an apartment rented by the Democratic National Committee for its campaign headquarters. The headquarters were being used in preparation for the upcoming presidential election, in which President Richard M. Nixon (Republican) was the incumbent. The investigative journalism that followed, led by the *Washington Post* and ending in a formal Senate investigation and impeachment hearings, would lead to President Nixon's resignation in August 1974.

The course of this investigation can be divided into three periods: the first from June 17, 1972, until June 25 of the following year, during which Nixon denied any knowledge whatsoever of the break-in; the second, which began on June 25 with the confession by John Dean, one of Nixon's advisers, stating that the president was implicated in the cover-up; and the third, between July 13, 1973, and August 1974, when Nixon gradually confessed to his involvement, until the climax of his resignation.

During the first phase of this drama, all witnesses reported the president's version of events—all, that is, were inclined to accept the lie. This might have been because all the sources were derived from the same source, Nixon, and were, as we now know, also lying. It might also have been the case, however, that the agreement reflected a situation like that described in (6) above—that all agreed because all had independent confirmation of the same (true) fact. At that stage in the drama, there was no way of knowing.

By phase two of the history, we are in another situation. Then, with Dean's testimony, we are faced with contradictory sources—Dean's account, and the account of other top advisers to the president such as John Mitchell and John Ehrlichman, who disagree. Neither is, on the face of it, more "reliable" than the other in the sense intended by rule (4) above (they were all equally competent), and Dean's account has not yet passed the critical tests of rule (2).

In phase three, however, the situation changes. Another of Nixon's advisers, Alexander Butterfield, let slip in the Senate hearing that Nixon

1. On the Nixon tapes, see S. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate* (New York, 1990) and *Abuse of Power* (New York, 1997). The tapes can be consulted on-line at [www.hpol.org](http://www.hpol.org) and in print (a slightly different version from the Web-based text): William Doyle, *Inside the Oval Office: The White House Tapes from FDR to Clinton* (New York, 1999).

had kept tapes of private conversations held in the oval office. At first, Nixon refused to release these tapes, and it was only after enormous legal and political pressure was applied that he consented. The tapes provided the necessary hard evidence. At this moment, Dean's testimony (A) was vindicated by independent witness (B)—the tapes—in the sense implied by rule (6) above. Never, however, would rule (7) have helped Dean's case, for there was no way for outside observers to determine the "common sense" of either position. The "proof" came only with the corroborating evidence.

Another more recent political scandal provides an even more spectacular example of how a single piece of outside evidence can resolve a stalemate between competing sources. On February 7, 1983, an Israeli special commission (called the Kahane Commission after its chair, a prestigious member of the Israeli High Court), which had been formed to uncover Israel's role, if any, in the massacre in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatilla in Beirut that had taken place on September 16-18, 1982, issued its findings. Until then, the press reports had all been in conflict on the question, and no one appeared to have definitive information. For his part, Prime Minister Menachem Begin had on September 18, when the massacre first became public, firmly denied any official involvement. The commission, however, was able to supply a critical piece of evidence: the report of a cabinet meeting on the 16th in which, it was revealed, the Israeli cabinet had discussed the planned attack and decided to let it occur, by authorizing the anti-Palestinian Phalangists in Lebanon to enter the camps and by providing them Israeli military support.<sup>2</sup>

What, however, when there is no "smoking gun," no external piece of information that renders one account "correct" and another "incorrect"? Are historians then compelled to throw up their hands? Not always. Let us look at several different situations that typically face the historian who has assembled a group of sources bearing on a particular problem.

What is often called a "stalemate" occurs when the sources (or particular witnesses) flatly contradict one another and when the historian has no obvious independent way to verify either version. Sometimes these stalemates can be resolved, at least with some degree of plausibility, by reference to the larger context in which the sources were created. Let us consider, by way of illustration, a case from recent political history. On July

2. For the official report, see Abba Eban, *The Beirut Massacre: The Complete Kahan Commission Report* (Princeton, 1983). For commentary, see Claremont Research (ed.), *The Beirut Massacre Press Profile*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1984); Claud Morris, *Eyewitness Lebanon* (London—New York, 1983); and Walter Prevenier, in J. Art and L. François (eds.), *Docendo discimus: Liber amicorum Romain van Eeno* (Ghent, 1999), pp. 445-62.