

The Interpretation of Primary Sources

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Agenda:

In this sequence of four classes, we will discuss new strategies for the interpretation of primary sources. In the wake of the so-called ‚linguistic turn‘, historians have begun to abandon the older notion that primary sources are passive reflections of past events and have to be read and interpreted as traces for the subjectivity of the author who invested meaning into them. Rather, they have started to explore the mediality of primary sources, i.e. the ways in which these texts shape societal communication, and have discussed approaches from discourse theory which suggest that the meaning of texts has to be disentangled from the notion of the author as subject. These approaches to the interpretation of primary sources can also be built on discussions about the ‚history of terms and concepts‘ (Begriffsgeschichte) and the idea of historical semantics, which have been developed since the 1970s.

The seminar series will provide room for a general reflection on these ideas, but will also discuss them in an exemplary fashion. We will look at four particular source genres and will discuss possible strategies of interpreting them. Each class will provide a forum for the discussion of theoretical aspects of source interpretation, but will also put a particular example under scrutiny. You are asked and invited to bring source examples to class which are relevant for your own work, either primary sources from the respective genre, or secondary works which use the source genre under scrutiny in an exemplary fashion.

Preparation:

As preparation for each class, I would like to ask you to do the following:

- 1.) Please read the set reading carefully, both the chapter of secondary reading and the primary source provided by me.
- 2.) Ponder possible ways of interpreting the primary source that I have named for each class.
- 3.) Please find a reading that is using or presenting the source genre at hand, i.e. for opinion polls, a historical book or article on any European country or the USA in the twentieth century using polls as a source, a sociological book or article based on polls, or a more or less recent newspaper or journal article with polling data. In the same manner, for letters a book that is using letters as historical evidence, or an edited collection with letters. When you have particularly interesting primary source examples, please photocopy them with an exact reference, and bring some copies to class.

Class 1. Letters

Set reading: Miriam Dobson, Letters, in: Miriam Dobson/Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), Reading Primary Sources. The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History, London 2008, pp. 57-73

Document for this class: Letter from Peter Hammerer (November 3, 1916) to his wife Rosina Hammerer in Haslach near Kempten (Allgau), Post Wertach, online at: <http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=813>

Additional readings:

Rebecca Earle (ed.): Epistolary selves. Letters and Letter-writers, 1600-1945, Aldershot 1999

Roper, Michael, Maternal Relations. Moral manliness and emotional survival in letters home during the First World War, in: Dudink, Stefan; Hagemann, Karen; Tosh, John (eds.), Masculinities in politics and war. Gendering modern history, Manchester 2004, pp. 295-316

Lyons, Martin, French Soldiers and their Correspondence: Towards a History of Writing Practices in the First World War, in: French History 17 (2003), pp. 79-95

Ziemann, Benjamin, War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923, Oxford 2007, pp. 111-154

Ulrich, Bernd, Die Augenzeugen. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914-1933, Essen 1997 (full-text online at: <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.clio-online.de/site/lang__de-DE/40208182/default.aspx>

Class 2. Surveillance Reports

Set reading:

Moritz Foellmer, Surveillance Reports, in: Miriam Dobson/Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), Reading Primary Sources. The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History, London 2008, pp. 74-89

Document: SD Report on the Attitude of Young People towards the Nazi Party (August 12, 1943), online at: <http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/English76_Exeter.pdf>

Additional readings:

P. Holquist, '“Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work”: Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context', in: Journal of Modern History 69, 1997, 415-450

Kershaw, Ian, Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945, Oxford 1983

Evans, Richard J., Kneipengespräche im Kaiserreich. Die Stimmungsberichte der Hamburger Politischen Polizei 1892-1914, Reinbek 1989

Longerich, Peter, „Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!“ : Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung 1933-1945, Munich 2006

Hellbeck, Jochen, 'Speaking Out: Languages of Affirmation and Dissent in Stalinist Russia', in: Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 1 (2000), pp. 71-96

Class 3. Newspapers

Set reading:

Stephen Vella, Newspapers, in: Miriam Dobson/Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), Reading Primary Sources. The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History, London 2008, pp. 192-208

Document: The Syracuse Herald, front-page 15 April 1912, online at: <<http://www.titanicarchive.com/Viewer.aspx?img=37469435&search=titanic's>>

You may entertain the chance to look at other newspaper front-pages covering the Titanic on this webpage, or look at Norwegian newspapers covering the incident.

Additional readings:

Fritzche, Peter, Reading Berlin 1900, Cambridge/Mass. London 1996

Pegelow, Thomas, „German Jews“, „National Jews“, „Jewish Volk“ or „Racial Jews“. The Construction and Contestation of Jewishness in Newspapers of Nazi Germany 1933-1938, in: *Central European History* 35 (2002), pp. 195-221

Requate, Jörg, Die Zeitung als Medium politischer Kommunikation, in: Frevert, Ute/Wolfgang Braungart (eds.), *Sprachen des Politischen. Medien und Medialität in der Geschichte*, Göttingen 2004, pp. 139-167

Sarasin, Philipp: *Anthrax. Bioterror as fact and fantasy*, Cambridge/Mass. 2006

Class 4. Opinion Polls

Set reading:

Anja Kruke, Opinion Polls, in: Miriam Dobson/Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources. The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History*, London 2008, pp. 106-122

Document: 'Few believe a lot'. Polling data from the Emnid-institute, published in: „This World and Netherworld“, cover story of the „Spiegel“-magazine, 18.12.1967 (extra file)

Additional readings:

Benjamin Ziemann, Opinion Polls and the Dynamics of the Public Sphere. The Catholic Church in the Federal Republic after 1968, in: *German History* 24 (2006), pp. 562-586

Sarah Igo, *The Averaged American. Surveys, Citizens and the Making of a Mass Public*, Cambridge, Mass. 2006

Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling has Shaped American Politics*, Chicago 1993

Lipari, Lisbeth, Polling as ritual, in: *Journal of Communication* 49 (1999), No. 1, pp. 83-102

Liz Stanley, *Sex surveyed, 1949-1994. From Mass-Observation's 'Little Kinsey' to the national survey and the Hite reports*, London 1995