

Thinking as an historian: what can we learn from evidence about the past?

1) What do we learn from studying humanities subjects? What inspires you to study.... history?

2) What do we learn from evidence about the past?

1 War. 21/9/41

2 War is a word which has, for me, anyway, completely changed its meaning in the last two years.
3 Before September 1939 it signified Flanders, mud, barbed wire. Then it changed to the North
4 Atlantic, Submarines, rafts. In August 1940 it signified Spitfires, Hurricanes, Messerschmidts, Junkers.
5 But in Sept 1940 it became wreckage, corpses, bereaved families, and... guts. Guts is the only thing
6 which gives the English a chance to survive. In Tanks, Aeroplanes, Men and Guns, the Germans lead.
7 Even in Brains they lead. Our Ministries of Information, Home Security, Air, War, Sea, and now even
8 Food, hither to the best Ministry, Have to worship the Deities of the Government; Red Tape,
9 inefficiency, That "Muddle Through" idea, and all the other characteristics which are trying to drag
10 England under into defeat. The Ministry of Food used to be as nearly efficient as the English
11 characters of its "inmates" would allow. Then they rationed Eggs. That was the most inefficient
12 move in an inefficiently run war. But even Hitler can be inefficient. After the Collapse of France,
13 Hitler couldn't have failed in an invasion. But he didn't try. Why? Maybe he did not know how things
14 stood? That is improbable. Maybe he was afraid of the Navy? That is very probable, but surely the
15 knowledge of England's conditions would have made him risk even that. That is one of the
16 unresolved problems of the war. Another is "why where eggs rationed?" I would give my reasons for
17 that query, such as the fact that eggs are rotting all over the country for lack of distribution, only my
18 time has come to a close.

19

20 V.N. McEldery. English Essay. 19/9/41

21 When I think of the word "war," the first thought which comes into my mind is a picture of long rows
22 of trenches, seen from a few hundred yards away, set in a flat piece of ground. In the background
23 are some barbed-wire entanglements, and the whole scene is in the early morning.
24 The next thought is a scene of confusion. I imagine I see a war minister in London shrugging his
25 shoulders and saying that Germany will not accept any proposals. The scene switches to one of some
26 German politicians receiving an ultimatum, and I see a man shouting to someone else that Britain
27 was going to war over a scrap of paper, as portrayed in a certain film I saw once.
28 Then I see at night a picture of bombs falling at various angles on to a town in Germany from a
29 British bomber. I see the dark night, then suddenly there is a thunderous explosion, and the whole
30 view of railway-sidings with trucks is lit up by a red glow. [...]
31 The last thing that I think of is Lybia; I don't know why, but I think of it as a flat plain all of dry sand. I
32 think here of British soldiers and tanks advancing after Signor Musolini's Italians.

33

34 W.D. Buchanan. "War". 20/9/41

35 The raid on Derry, Messines Park, the 'bus terminus, going to school, Foyle College, the Junior Exam,
36 the Senior Exam, leaving school, the war should be over then, Old Moore, astrology, the stars,
37 telescopes, reading the time on Portrush Station clock, from the Giant's Causeway, holidays,
38 Scotland, the Clyde, H.M. Submarine "Clyde" which torpedoed the "Scharnhorst", the navy,
39 destroyers, corvettes, the River Foyle, Londonderry, wish I was back there, Half-Term, Hallowe'en,
40 fire-works in peace-time, this blasted war again, hope there are better times after it, if I were M.P. I
41 would squeeze every penny out of Germany to pay for the war, cut Hitler's head off, Charles I,
42 Cromwell, "Keep your powder dry," gunpowder, China, Japan, America, Americans in Derry, motor-
43 bike's, hope I get one sometime, I could join the Army as a despatch rider, but not much fun cycling
44 along the mountain road at 3 a.m., better as I am.

3) Creating an argument: what is the most accurate story we can tell from our evidence?

Did the Second World War transform British society?

4a) How does Oxford University assess applications to study history?

Information used to assess undergraduate applications:

- a) UCAS forms, including personal statements, reference, qualifications achieved and predicted
- b) Performance at GCSE (contextualised)
- c) Written work submitted by candidates (marked schoolwork essay)
- d) Performance in interviews – interviews normally include unseen primary source exercises
- e) Performance in the History Aptitude Test (HAT) based on primary source analysis, see: <http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/history-aptitude-test-hat>
- f) Comparison, in all these areas, with other candidates.

4b) What qualities do historians need to have?

- a) Intellectual curiosity;
 - b) Conceptual clarity;
 - c) Flexibility - the capacity to engage with alternative perspectives and/or new information;
 - d) Accuracy and attention to detail;
 - e) Critical engagement;
 - f) Capacity for hard work;
 - g) Enthusiasm for History
 - h) Evidence of historical imagination and understanding (the ability to speculate and compare, alongside the possession of appropriate historical knowledge and the capacity to deploy it)
- How to apply for history at Oxford: <http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/how-apply#collapse1-0>

5) How might you develop your own interests and understanding, beyond schoolwork?

a) Podcasts

BBC podcasts, e.g. Radio 4 'In our time', 'Document'; Radio 3 'Free Thinking', via the BBC sounds app.
History Extra: <http://www.historyextra.com/podcasts>
Malcolm Gladwell 'Revisionist History': <http://revisionisthistory.com/about>
Gresham College lectures (all subjects): <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch/>

b) Museums, culture, archives

Museums, archives and galleries: <https://museumcrush.org/> ; BBC Arts <https://www.bbc.co.uk/arts>

c) News and policy-making

Recent research that relates to news stories: <https://theconversation.com/uk>
The Guardian 'The long read' journalism: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/the-long-read>
Connections between history and current policy-making: <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/>

d) Find out more about studying History and at Oxford

Oxplore: debates and big questions that Oxford students and academics explore: <https://explore.org>
History Faculty: a blog by Oxford history student: <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/historyoxford-blog>
Oxford University undergraduate admissions: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/undergraduate>
Oxford University Instagram: @StudyAtOxford @oxford_uni

e) Books

Read about whatever interests you. Work out what you think about what you read – e.g. what is the author's argument? Is it convincing? Why (not)? What evidence does the author use to make their argument? What's missing from their approach? What else do we need to find out? Talk with other people about whatever you find interesting.