

Children, War and Research. Why History Matters.

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Stephen Hawking, in one of his more puckish moments, observed that it must not be possible to travel back in time. “If it were,” he said, “we’d be annoyed by tourists from the future.”

Well, I don’t know about that. Maybe future time travelers just don’t see much interesting in us here in the early 21st century. In any case, we certainly can’t travel through through time right now. There’s no way to go back to the past. No way to experience the feelings, the hopes, the fears of people from other times, and from other places. No way to witness past ideas, how people thought about their world in a way very different from our own—or perhaps not that different at all.

Or is there? The closest thing we have to time travel is the study of history. It may be impossible to climb into that time machine and set the date for some fascinating historical period. But we can travel back by studying what people thought in the past, what they said, what they did, and what happened to them. We can learn about other societies. We can move across time and across cultures. We can be someone else—or at least, we can feel what it might have been like to be someone else.

For example, I grew up in the United States some time after World War II. My generation of children did not participate in war. We were not called to help fight. Little was expected of children beyond their need to just be kids.

I’ll bet your childhood was similar to mine in that sense. I doubt you experienced war, and I doubt you as a kid were expected to do anything to help soldiers.

But my study of history taught me that this has not always been true. In fact, through much of the last century, expectations for children were remarkably different. I wondered: what was it like for children in America who grew up with war?

This is the first step to historical research. Wonder. Curiosity. What was it like for people in the past? What did they do? Because historical research at its base is a story about people who did things in the past.

To find out more about that story, though, is sometimes not as easy as you might think. If you are interested in knowing about your own past, you can try to recall events in which you participated. You can ask other people about that time, what we call “oral history.” But you need to keep in mind that sometimes people do not accurately recall events of the past. In fact, sometimes we don’t accurately recall those events ourselves.

To bolster our oral history, based on our own experiences or those of others, we may rely on documents. Documents may serve to corroborate what people tell you, or what you tell yourself—or they might serve as evidence that people’s memories are incorrect. For example, I am wearing a Bulova watch that my mother bought for me as a high school graduation gift. Or at least that’s what I told people for many years. Until one day, going through old receipts, I discovered a receipt for this watch. In fact I had purchased it myself, five years later, at Royal Jewelers in Fargo.

I was so sure I was right, perhaps because I told the story to myself and to others so many times. But I was wrong. This is why historians need to carefully evaluate oral history, and compare what they hear to relevant documents.

And sometimes, of course, no one is left available to interview. In fact, for historians, this is most often the case because, well, things you are interested in probably happened a long time ago, and nobody is around who could remember. Perhaps it was before anybody was even born.

Let’s take an example. As part of my research into World War I propaganda, I encountered some secondary material indicating some propaganda was aimed not only at adults, but also at children. Now a “secondary source” to historians is defined as information, usually written, about the event or the time period, but not written by someone who was around during that time, or that event. For example, if I read a book written by Shelby Foote, a famous Civil War historian, about the U.S. Civil War, it clearly can’t be a primary source—Foote was not living during the 1860s. Similarly, if I read a newspaper article

commemorating the end of World War I in 2008—that is, 90 years after the war ended—obviously it is a secondary source. If someone were living, they would have been an infant whose oral history probably would not be reliable.

But a newspaper article could be a primary source. A primary source is a document produced during the time period being considered. For example, a newspaper article about World War I's end written in 1918 would be a primary source.

Primary sources might also be secondary sources, of course—if that same newspaper contained an article describing the War of 1812, well, the newspaper may be old, but it's still not a primary source.

Historians base their best work mostly on primary sources. They might be letters, journals, newspapers, magazines, minutes, public documents, photographs, or other things produced by people living during the time period studied.

So back to my interest in children and World War I. I was interested not in how children responded necessarily. I was interested in how propaganda was fashioned and delivered to those children.

To pursue this topic, my first step is to do a lot of secondary source reading. We need to know as much about the topic as we can. We can ask a question: "How was propaganda presented to children during World War I?" Historians seldom state a hypothesis, such as "Children learned about the war through government propaganda." We don't know this right now. While some research methods allow hypotheses, in history we can't set up a stringent statistical system to objectively disprove a null hypothesis. We can't do surveys or experiments on the past. We even have a hard time finding significance in textual analyses, though some historians will try them. We have to rely instead on the strength of our sources, and the level of our critical thinking in interpreting them. Sherlock Holmes knew the danger of hypothesis in non-statistical research, telling Watson, "Never theorize before you have data. Invariably, you end up twisting facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."

In considering children and war, it is a danger to presume propaganda, it is a danger to presume the government actively targeted children. Without data, we don't know that.

So we need to look at useful primary sources. Where I went for primary sources depended on which group of authorities I wanted to consider. During the world wars, all propaganda themes actually emanated from the government. But they were used in different ways by other groups, such as youth organizations, businesses, churches, juvenile magazines, or education. In education, for example, I needed to know how teachers viewed the subject. So I took a look at proceedings from National Education Association meetings. From there I found names of specific educators whose comments I could seek out in educational journals and newsletters. These might lead me to look at the federal department of education, and from there I could consider librarians in their journals or documents. Looking at these primary sources helped me to understand just what these authorities wanted children to know, and how they wanted to present it to them.

What I found in some cases was that authorities were leading children to think that instead of a great evil, war might be a pretty good thing for them. It might offer all sorts of opportunities for better health and character. Heck, war as virtue!

Now we reach a second problem in doing historical research: present-mindedness. Today most of us would presume war can't be a good thing for children. How, we might ask sadly, could people from the past possibly promote war to children as a positive? These past authorities must have been not only misguided, but even truly evil.

But that is evaluating events in the past using our understanding from the present. We call this present-mindedness. Such judgmentalism is not only unfair to the past; it's unfair to us today trying to understand that past. Because before judging we have to begin by trying to reconfigure our mindset. We have to try to imagine how it might have been for a teacher in America in 1917. The patriotic excitement of war, the almost universal belief that this was a great battle of destiny, a battle for world freedom. A war, as they said, to end all wars! An affirmation that the troops were putting themselves in danger not for the present, but for the future—a future free of evil nations. The future is the children. And

for whom much was given, much was required. The children, too, had to do their duty and rally to the cause.

Avoiding the cognitive pitfalls of historical research may be more difficult than those in research methods more clearly prescriptive. But that is not the end of it. Historians, more than almost any other researchers, highly value good writing. To tell a story about the past asks the researcher to be more than factual. She must be compelling. She must be able to pull the reader into a world of the past and help that person learn not only what people did, but how they understood their world. To do that, a historian can't rely on discipline-specific jargon. Specialized vocabulary is intrinsically exclusionary: to understand the discipline you must know the specialized words, and that requires special study. We do not, for example, expect the public to understand biochemical research if they have not studied biochemistry.

But in history, we do expect the general reader to understand the stories we tell. Historians have no particular vocabulary. This is perhaps to our detriment, as part of the prestige-building process for many disciplines is to erect linguistic fences that make it difficult for regular folk to join the conversation. But anybody can read history, and common is perhaps not as prestigious.

But it is more accessible, and historians in particular like to be read by everybody. They hope their work can become known not only to their fellow researchers, but for anyone who wants to join the voyage across time and culture on the time machine constructed by a historian. It's engaging, it's fun, and it's important because, as Shakespeare most famously said, "Past is prologue."