Analyzing a Source Document

Historians make use of a wide variety of source documents when they produce their histories. Generally these source documents fit into one of two categories:

1. Primary Sources – In general, primary source documents are written in the first person and contain references to the author’s personal observations or personal involvement. These include such things as accounts by participants in an event, descriptions by eyewitnesses, artifacts, photographs, posters and other visuals.
2. Secondary Sources – The distinguishing characteristic of secondary sources is that they are produced by people who rely on others for their information. These include everything from contemporary newspaper accounts to books written many years after the fact by people with no direct experience of the events or circumstances.

Accounts of both participants in, and eyewitnesses to, an event will not be exactly the same. In addition, people’s own perspectives and observations are affected by their idea, attitudes, expectations and preconceptions. These factors are the main contributors to what is called bias or point of view. For an historian, attempting to find the true nature of an event, he or she must choose between these conflicting accounts.