THE METHODS
AND SKILLS OF HISTORY
For my wife, Peggy, who means more to me than she can ever know, and to my long-time writing partner and friend, Conal Furay

M.S.
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This book first saw the light of day in 1979 with the title *History: A Workbook of Skill Development*. The first revision came almost a decade later (1988), with a new title (the present one) and a new publisher, Harlan Davidson. Over the years the book attracted a loyal group of users, making it more successful than we had any reason to expect, prompting a second revised edition in 2000, a third one in 2010, and the present one, issued by Wiley Blackwell, in 2015. It is tempting to let well enough alone. But no work can remain fresh and challenging without the incorporation of the rethinking spurred by regular use as well as student comments and criticisms, not to mention developments in computer technology and electronic research techniques. Still, it would be folly to jettison too much of what made, and continues to make, the book so successful. A recent survey of users confirmed the need for relatively few changes. The most dramatic alterations (new chapters, significant reorganization, and the use of introductory vignettes for individual chapters) came in 2000. The revisions of the third edition, and now this fourth, were lighter, but the aim remains the same: to improve the book for students and instructors alike without undoing the many things all readers like so well about it. Regular users will find much that is familiar, along with additions and alterations that hopefully have enhanced rather than transformed a trusted text and workbook.

Two trends in American higher education prompted us to write this book in the first place—trends that, even in the twenty-first century, remain very much in evidence. First, there has been a drift away from traditional forms of history in many high schools and colleges in favor of what are seen as more “relevant” topic courses in the social sciences. Valuable though they may be, such courses often make students aware of many contemporary problems but leave them innocent of the relevant historical background. Further, these courses do little to encourage students to develop the conceptual tools to think historically. Second, the long exodus from “liberal arts” curricula to professional and pre-professional programs of study continues apace. The assumption, explicit or not, is that courses in the liberal arts—especially those in the humanities—do little to prepare one for a career in the “real world.”
Both trends are deeply disturbing, for clear evidence exists to support the conviction that a good liberal arts education can provide a better all-around career preparation than can many narrowly focused professional or vocational programs. And within the context of a liberal arts education, the development of basic historical literacy is essential. Not only can history give one a perspective on the world that no other discipline can provide, but the serious study of history can also help one develop and nurture skills that will prove useful in any career or field of work.

The purpose of the book is thus twofold:

1. To provide a general introduction to the nature and methods of history that will help students think historically and better appreciate the importance of historical literacy.
2. To help students develop the intellectual and communication skills applicable not only to the study of history, but also to many other academic disciplines and to a wide variety of professional pursuits.

To accomplish these goals the book combines theory and practice, with slightly more emphasis on the latter. Each chapter provides a brief introductory overview of a topic followed by a number of exercises. The aim of the essays and exercises is not to teach sophisticated research skills to prospective graduate students, but to make the study of history more meaningful for students whether they are majoring in history, taking a history course as an elective, or simply reading history on their own. It is our hope that this book will enhance students’ appreciation of history on a purely intellectual level and at the same time help them develop skills useful in other academic disciplines and in their post-college lives—the “real world” if you will.

The exercises in this book range from the relatively simple to the complex. Most of them have two sets of questions—Set A and Set B. Few instructors will want to assign both sets or even every exercise in a given set. But should the instructor feel that the repetition of an exercise might help a particular student or class, a second set of materials is provided. Although most of the exercises call for written responses, ideally students should also have the opportunity to discuss their answers in a classroom setting. History, obviously, is not a subject in which only one answer is “correct,” and the value of many of the exercises will be greatly enhanced by general debate and discussion. It might be worth noting here that the book includes exercises or sections of exercises for which no universally acceptable “right” answer exists. Often the more ambiguous questions or passages are quite useful educationally because they force students to clearly define terms and present their arguments carefully—to think critically and express themselves precisely.

Another important point: Although the chapters are ordered in a way we think makes sense, both students and instructors should feel free to use the chapters in whatever order seems most appropriate to their immediate purposes. For example, students beginning to collect information for research papers might want to skip ahead to the section on taking research notes in Chapter 7 or to the chapters on writing (Chapter 6 and Chapter 13).

If circumstances so dictate, individual students can use this book as a program for self-directed learning. The programmed approach may be especially valuable for
students with family and work responsibilities who find it difficult to conform to class schedules designed for resident nonworking students. It is also quite conceivable that a teacher might wish to assign certain exercises to individual students in “content” courses so that they might strengthen their skills in a particular area—e.g., writing book reviews, reading secondary sources, etc.

Many of the quoted extracts from historical literature reveal a bias toward the more traditional narrative varieties of history. This may seem old-fashioned at a time when so many researchers have abandoned the narrative approach to history in favor of analyses with a distinctly sociological flavor. But when history is true to its intellectual heritage it does tell a story. In his 2012 American Historical Association presidential address, William Cronon argued that history can maintain its relevance only if historians “remember the roots of our discipline and be sure to keep telling stories that matter as much to our students and to the public as they do to us.”

Historical literacy implies the ability to see events as part of an organic continuum linking past ages and experiences to our own: one of the strengths of narrative storytelling. A sense of chronological development is one of the basic characteristics that distinguishes history from other academic pursuits.

The Fourth Edition: Features Old and New

This fourth edition retains the essence of its predecessor as well as some of the exercises and their content. But there are changes as well.

Carried forward is the four-part organizational scheme and the introductory vignettes in each chapter, features much appreciated in the recent survey of users. As before, the fourth edition includes a number of “Writing Capsules” to supplement the chapters on writing. (More on this below.) Finally, one will still find Appendix A (fur trade documents) and Appendix B on source references and bibliographies. The chapters progress from a theoretical discussion of the nature of history (Part I), to practical considerations involved in confronting historical accounts (Part II) and then actually “doing” history (Part III). The final section (Part IV) provides a brief overview of how history as a discipline evolved and how it relates to other academic disciplines.

Fourth edition revisions include:

- Revisions to the material on writing with an emphasis on history as story telling. What used to be a single chapter on writing has been divided into two chapters, Chapter 6 “Telling a Story,” and Chapter 13 “Writing for Your Reader.” Again, instructors might have students turn to these whenever they see fit, but if students read the book sequentially, they will encounter formal material on writing much earlier than previously was the case. Chapter 6 has a new writing exercise that, like Appendix A, uses primary documents as the basis for a short student paper.
- An updated treatment of electronic research in Chapter 7, “Libraries.” Much, much more might have been said on the topic, but limitations of space dictated the inclusion of only the most essential points.
• The addition of a new section on the use of photographs as evidence in an expanded Chapter 11.
• The replacement of certain excerpts within the exercises, and the updating of others.
• Innumerable editorial attempts to make the writing clearer and the exercise directions more precise.

I am deeply indebted to a number of people who assisted me in this revision. Of most importance was the careful editorial eye of my wife, Peggy Brockmann. Also, many thanks to numerous colleagues at Webster University who have given unselfishly of their advice and classroom materials: to historians John Chappell and Kristin Anderson for their aid in identifying landmark titles in recent American social and cultural history; to political scientist Kelly Kate Pease for allowing us to incorporate her ideas on paper writing; to reference librarian Donna Church for her help in preparing the chapter on libraries. At Wiley I owe a huge debt to Andrew J. Davidson, my longtime friend and editor, as well as Lindsay Bourgeois, Georgina Coleby, and Leah Thompson. Working behind the scenes Linda Gaio-Davidson did much to ensure that key files and images from the third edition were carried over seamlessly to the new edition. And, of course, students over the last decades have been indispensable partners in this enterprise; this revision, as those before, reflects their comments, complaints, suggestions, and answers—both brilliant and questionable.

Finally, who can write a book such as this and fail to thank the many scholars from whose works we have sought counsel? They have been mentors throughout. Of course, the standard closing line is appropriate: For all errors of commission and omission, we are fully responsible, though I wish there were someone else to blame.

Michael J. Salevouris, Professor Emeritus
Webster University, 2014

A Personal Note

The authors were a team when this book was originally published. However, due to Conal Furay’s failing health and recent death, the task of revision for the third and fourth editions fell to me. Still, Professor Furay’s influence remains very much visible. He originated the idea of writing such a book, and his words and insights inform many of its narrative passages and exercises. I will always be grateful to Conal for including me as a partner in this enterprise.

Michael J. Salevouris
PART I

HISTORICAL THINKING
1
THE USES OF HISTORY

“[Since college] I’ve spent a third of my life exploring Europe—enjoying my ‘continuing education’ with a curriculum I’ve tailored specifically for myself. I marvel how my travels stoke my interest in history, and how much fun my interest in history brings.”

—Travel writer (and history major) Rick Steves

“When history was no longer an instrument of the [Russian Communist] Party, the Party was doomed to failure.”

—David Remnick

In mid-August 1991, Colonel Aleksandr Tretetsky of the Soviet (Russian) Army wondered whether to continue his gruesome task. The word out of Moscow several hundred miles away was that the overthrow of the Gorbachev regime by a hard-line Communist faction was imminent and that “treasonable” projects like the one he was overseeing were to be immediately terminated.

Some months earlier the government had assigned Tretetsky to manage the excavation of mass graves near the Katyn Forest in eastern Poland. The graves contained the remains of thousands of Polish army officers who, in the Russian version of things, had been murdered by the Nazis during their 1941 invasion of eastern Poland and Russia. Hints that the Russian secret police had really been responsible for the massacre had circulated for years, but in Russia such stories had been ruthlessly suppressed by the state. Information control was the centerpiece, perhaps the vital

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1 Quoted with permission of Rick Steves, author of Rick Steves’ Europe Through the Back Door (Avalon Travel Publishing, 2009).

factor, in sustaining the long, seventy-year rule of Communism in Russia. Press reports, film productions, and especially history textbooks had to clear censors in the Moscow bureaucracy. The result was that the Russian people received a cliché-ridden, doctored, party-line version of the past that systematically hid from view the criminal viciousness of earlier Soviet regimes. An entire nation, with few exceptions, believed in a vast fairy tale.

Things began to change in the mid-1980s, especially when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power as the leader of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party. Gorbachev was a true believer in the Communist system, yet at the same time it was he who took the Soviet Union onto a new path of glasnost (openness) that included leanings toward honesty concerning the historical record. Perhaps it is significant that both his grandfathers had suffered imprisonment during the Stalinist era (1924–1953). Gorbachev seemed to believe that the course of development of the socialist state would be advanced if it confessed to its earlier sins—a public cleansing that somehow might bring renewed public devotion to the original Marxist ideals. He therefore ordered the “blank spaces”—essentially those ugly episodes of the Communist past previously hidden by party slogans and lies—filled in. Now, as one writer put it, “the lion of history came roaring in.”

What followed went far beyond Gorbachev’s intent. The “return of history” shook the Soviet regime to its foundations and brought the eventual collapse of the Communist state. After the August 1991 coup by the Communist Party hard-liners against Gorbachev failed, Colonel Tretetsky was able to resume the work of detailing the massacre, in the process confirming that it had indeed been a Soviet secret police operation. But this was but a small part of a much larger movement. Throughout the Soviet Union, historians, researchers, writers, and journalists, with the historical record now open to them, provided elaborate accounts of past Communist crimes. Finally, the Soviet people were informed that since the Russian Revolution in 1917 literally millions of citizens had been systematically exterminated, and that millions more had been imprisoned without trial in Siberian labor camps. In time the “return of history” completely destroyed the Communists’ credibility, and with it their power to govern. David Remnick, in his dramatic account of the collapse of the Soviet Union writes:

[D]espite Gorbachev’s hesitation, the return of historical memory would be his most important decision, one that preceded all others, for without a full and ruthless assessment of the past—an admission of murder, repression, and bankruptcy—real change, much less democratic revolution, was impossible. The return of history to personal, intellectual, and political life was the start of the great reform of the twentieth century and, whether Gorbachev liked it or not, the collapse of the last empire on earth.

The final irony is that recently the Russian regime of Vladimir Putin has tried to turn back the historical clock by glorifying the Stalinist crimes that Colonel Tretetsky and others were trying to expose. Says Emily Whitaker in a *History*

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3 Remnick, 4.
Today essay: “In 2007 the Putin government directed an initiative to restructure the national curriculum, teaching schoolchildren that Stalin’s actions were ‘entirely rational’. In the same year the archives of the eminent human rights organisation, Memorial, were raided. Police confiscated images of Stalinist atrocities, along with 20 years’ worth of oral testimonies chronicling everyday life under his regime.”

Clearly, free and open historical inquiry is not compatible with a government that has authoritarian ambitions.

The foregoing is but one lucid example of how history can be influential in shaping human affairs. But history has other uses as well, giving each of us an informed perspective on the world around us. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with their rapid and far-reaching changes, have made the past seem irrelevant and uninteresting to many. Yet a moment of reflection will show us that in countless areas of life organic connections with the past remain unbroken. The legacies and burdens of the past, the long-term continuities, are with us still. In fact, one could argue that precisely because change has been so rapid in our time, the need for good history has actually increased. There is much truth in the aphorism “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Without historical perspective we are in danger of falling into the mistaken and perhaps arrogant notion that the problems we face and the solutions we propose are unprecedented and bear no relationship to past human problems. Just one of the contributions history can make is to serve as a useful antidote to such narrow present-mindedness.

Even the rapid change we see around us should not hide the basic reality that all we do, all we think, indeed all we are is the cumulative result of past experiences. The future is an abstraction, the “present” but a fleeting moment; all else is history. The past, and judgments about the past, are inescapable. Daily we speak and act according to some perception of past events; and though our knowledge of the past may be incomplete or fallacious, we are thinking historically. When we choose to enroll in a particular course because we like the teacher, when we vote Democratic or Republican on the

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basis of our assessment of each party’s record, when we decide not to go to a movie with someone who “isn’t our type,” we are making judgments based on our analysis of past experience. We are thinking historically.

Not only is it impossible to escape history, it would be catastrophic to try. Imagine for a moment what life would be like if you totally lost your memory. You would, in a very real sense, have no sense of belonging—no family, no friends, no home, no memories to guide your behavior, no identity. In short, you would no longer “be” you. Clearly, your sense of personal identity is not so much a function of what you are at the moment, but what you have been your entire life. The same can be said of society as a whole. A society’s identity is the product of the myriad individuals, forces, and events that constitute its past. History, the study of the past, is society’s collective memory. Without that collective memory, society would be as rootless and adrift as an individual with amnesia. Of the many legitimate reasons for studying history, this seems to us to be one of the most compelling. Individually and collectively what we are is the product of what we have been. In the words of philosopher George Santayana, “A country without a memory is a country of madmen.”

History and the Formation of Public Policy

The events discussed in the introduction to this chapter marked the end of the decades-long conflict between the Soviet Union and the West (especially the United States) known as the “Cold War.” During that period (roughly 1946–1991) the basis of U.S. foreign policy was known as “containment”—the idea that if the West “contained” Soviet expansionism, eventually the Soviet Empire would collapse under its own weight.

The idea of containment was suggested by one of America’s most brilliant diplomats and historians, George Kennan. It is interesting to note that Kennan’s idea owed much to his reading of history. According to a recent reassessment of the Cold War era, “This idea of time being on the side of the West came—at least as far as Kennan was concerned—from studying the history of empires. Edward Gibbon had written in The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire that ‘there is nothing more contrary to nature than the attempt to hold in obedience distant provinces,’ and few things Kennan ever read made a greater or more lasting impression on him. He had concluded during the early days of World War II that Hitler’s empire could not last, and in the months after the war he applied similar logic to the empire [Soviet leader Josef] Stalin was setting out to construct in Eastern Europe.”

EXERCISES

The discussion of the uses of history emphasized the relationship between the past and the present, and the role history plays in defining our own identity. These concepts are summarized below, along with a variety of other reasons why the study of history is a rewarding venture.\(^5\)

A. **History provides us a sense of our own identity.** Each of us is born into a nation, but also into a region, a culture, an ethnic group, a social class, and a family. Each such grouping can and does influence us in a number of ways. The life experiences and values of an African American born into a poor family in the rural South are apt to differ greatly from those of a white Californian born into a suburban family. The study of history helps us to get our bearings in such respects—in other words it allows us to achieve a social as well as a personal identity.

B. **History helps us better understand the present.** The cliché is true that to understand the present one must understand the past. History, of course, cannot provide clear answers to today’s problems (past and present events never exactly parallel each other), but knowledge of relevant historical background is essential for a balanced and in-depth understanding of many current world situations.

C. **History—good history—is a corrective for misleading analogies and “lessons” of the past.** Many who believe the proposition that history is relevant to an understanding of the present often go too far in their claims. Nothing is easier to abuse than the historical analogy or parallel. Time and again politicians, journalists, and sloppy historians can be heard declaring that “history proves” this or “history shows” that. But the historical record is so rich and varied that one can find examples that seem to support any position or opinion. If one reads selectively, one can find historical episodes to support a variety of policies and ideas. Good history, on the other hand, can expose the inapplicability of many inaccurate and misleading analogies, as well as expose the dishonesty inherent in “cherry-picking” historical episodes in order to bolster a predetermined conclusion.

D. **History enables us to understand the tendencies of humankind, social institutions, and all aspects of the human condition.** Given the vast range of its inquiry, history is the best “school” for study of many dimensions of human behavior: heroism and degradation, altruism and avarice, martyrdom and evil excess, freedom and tyranny—all of which are part of the record and part of the story that history tells.

E. **History can help one develop tolerance and open-mindedness.** Most of us have a tendency to regard our own cultural practices, styles, and values as right

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\(^5\) Even this list is but a selection of the “uses” of history proposed by thinkers from ancient times to the present. For an excellent overview of these ideas see Beverley Southgate, *What Is History For?* (London: Routledge, 2005).
and proper. Studying the past is like going to a foreign country—they do things differently there. Returning from such a visit to the past, we have, perhaps, rid ourselves of some of our inherent cultural provincialism.

F. **History provides the basic background for many other disciplines.** Historical knowledge is extremely valuable in the study of other disciplines—literature, art, philosophy, religion, political science, anthropology, sociology, and economics. Further, with regard to the last four, it is fair to argue that the social sciences “are in fact daughter disciplines [to history], for they arose, each of them, out of historical investigation, having long formed part of avowed historical writing.”

G. **History can be entertainment.** This may seem trivial, but it certainly must be counted as one of the central “uses” of history. Much written history is also good literature, and the stories historians relate are often far more engaging and entertaining than those we find in works of fiction.

H. **The careful study of history teaches one many critical skills.** As noted in the Preface, this is the book’s central message. Among the critical skills discussed in this book are: how to conduct research (Chapter 7), how to evaluate evidence (Chapters 10, 11, and 12), how to present your arguments clearly in writing (Chapters 6, 13, and the writing capsules), how to read, view, and think critically (Chapters 8 and 9), and, of course, historical thinking (Chapters 3, 4, and 5). These analytical and communication skills are highly usable in other academic pursuits—and in almost any career you choose.

### SET A  Exercise 1

Below are a number of statements describing the various uses of history. Using the letters A through H (review the list), indicate which category best describes each quotation. In each case be prepared to justify your selection. **You may use a category more than once or not at all.** The first item is completed for you.

A. History provides us a sense of our own identity
B. History helps us better understand the present.
C. History—good history—is a corrective for misleading analogies and “lessons” of the past.
D. History enables us to understand the tendencies of humankind, of social institutions, and all aspects of the human condition.

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7 Many of the quotations in this exercise, and the companion exercise in Set B, were drawn from an extensive list compiled by Ferenc M. Szasz, *The History Teacher*, “The Many Meanings of History,” Pt. I, 7 (August 1974); Pts II and III, 8 (November 1974 and February 1975). The quotations in Part IV of the series, 9 (February 1976), were contributed by subscribers.
E. History can help one develop tolerance and open-mindedness.
F. History provides the basic background for many other disciplines.
G. History can be entertainment.
H. The careful study of history teaches many critical skills.

A 1. “History is a means of access to ourselves.” (Lynn White, Jr.)
2. “History presents the pleasantest features of poetry and fiction—the majesty of the epic, the moving accidents of the drama, and the surprises and moral of the romance.” (Robert A. Willmott)
3. “The chief lesson to be derived from the study of the past, is that it holds no simple lesson, and … the historian’s main responsibility is to prevent anyone from claiming that it does.” (Martin Duberman)
4. “History can help us shake off the shackles of ethnocentrism and the debilitating bias of cultural and racial purity… . History helps us to illuminate the human condition.” (Lester Stephens)
5. “Everything is the sum of its past and nothing is comprehensible except through its history.” (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin)
6. “[History’s] chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.” (David Hume)
7. “History provides a training ground for development of many valuable intellectual traits.” (Anonymous)
8. “The chief practical use of history is to deliver us from plausible historical analogies.” (James Bryce)
9. “The study of history is in the truest sense an education and a training for political life…” (Polybius)
10. “In an age when so much of our literature is infused with nihilism, and other social disciplines are driven toward narrow, positivistic [i.e., scientific] inquiry, history may remain the most humanizing of the arts.” (Richard Hofstadter)

SET A  Exercise 2

On a separate sheet of paper, write a short, paragraph-length essay on the following topic: What is the most important reason for studying history? Read Writing Capsule 1 (below) before you begin.
SET B  Exercise 1

Below are a number of statements describing the various uses of history. Using the letters A through H (review the list above), indicate which category best describes each quotation. In each case be prepared to justify your selection. You may use a category more than once or not at all. The first item is completed for you.

B  1. “With the historian it is an article of faith that knowledge of the past is a key to understanding the present.” (Kenneth Stampp)

   2. “If history teaches any lesson at all, it is that there are no historical lessons.” (Lucien Febvre)

   3. “What man is, only history tells.” (Wilhelm Dilthey)

   4. “History has to be rewritten because history is the selection of those threads of causes or antecedents we are interested in.” (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.)

   5. “History maketh a young man to be old, without either wrinkles or gray hairs; privileging him with the experience of age, without either the infirmities or inconveniences thereof.” (Thomas Fuller)

   6. “The ultimate reason for studying history is to become conscious of the possibilities of human existence.” (Rudolf Bultmann)

   7. “History is, in its essence, exciting; to present it as dull is, to my mind, stark and unforgivable misrepresentation.” (Catherine Drinker Bowen)
8. “To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to be ever a child.” (Cicero)

9. “History is not only a particular branch of knowledge, but a particular mode and method of knowledge in other disciplines.” (Lord Acton)

10. “History enables bewildered bodies of human beings to grasp their relationship with their past, and helps them chart on general lines their immediate forward course.” (Allan Nevins)

**SET B  Exercise 2**

On a separate sheet of paper, write a short, paragraph-length essay on the following topic: “What is the most important reason for studying history?” Before you begin, review Writing Capsule 1 (on page 10).
2

THE NATURE OF HISTORY: HISTORY AS RECONSTRUCTION

“God alone knows the future, but only an historian can alter the past.”
—Ambrose Bierce

“The past does not influence me; I influence it.”
—Willem de Kooning

It is important to realize that historical “periods” and “eras” are artificial constructs that help the human mind come to grips with the immensity and complexity of the human past. For instance, some historians have referred to the previous century as the “short” twentieth century, citing the inclusive dates 1914 to 1989. Why only seventy-five years? Because, these historians argue, the years 1914–1989 mark a series of interrelated conflicts—World War I (1914–1918), World War II (1939–1945), and the so-called Cold War (ca. 1945–1989)—that finally came to an end in 1989.

From this perspective, then, 1989 marked the end of an era—a major turning point in Western history that deserves considerable attention from scholars. Indeed historians have already begun the process of describing and explaining the events that led to the end of the Cold War, and the mountain of literature on the subject grows daily. Given the twenty-four-hour news cycles of the electronic age, one would assume that historians have more than enough information on which to base these accounts. To some degree this is true, but it would be a mistake to assume that we can easily and completely write the history of these world-shaking events. One small example dramatizes this reality.

During the Cold War a number of Eastern European states were closely controlled by Communist Russia, or, more accurately, the Soviet Union (USSR). In 1989, as the world watched with astonishment, these states began to break from Soviet control and set up more democratic, non-Communist governments.
In Czechoslovakia this process was called the “Velvet Revolution,” because of the peaceful and “soft” nature of the transition. Noted British historian and journalist Timothy Garton Ash was an observer of the events in Prague, the capital, and he commented on the difficulties of writing history:

[T]he evidential basis on which history is written is often extraordinarily thin. Sometimes we have only one witness. During the Velvet Revolution in Prague, in 1989, crucial decisions were taken by a group around Václav Havel [who was to become Czechoslovakia’s new president], meeting in a curious glass-walled room in the subterranean Magic Lantern theater. Most of the time, I was the only outsider present, and certainly the only one with a notebook open, trying to record what was being said. I remember thinking: if I don’t write this down, nobody will. It will be lost forever, as most of the past is, like bathwater down the drain… . [W]hat a fragile foundation on which to write history.1

This story dramatizes an important truth about the nature of history: there is a vast gulf that separates the actual events of the past from the accounts that journalists and historians later write about those events.

What Is History?

In English the word “history” has two distinct meanings. First, “history” is the sum total of everything that has actually happened in the past—every thought, every action, every event. In this sense, “history” is surely one of the broadest concepts conceived by the human intellect. “History,” broadly defined, encompasses the entire scope of the human experience on this planet. And this meaning of the word—things that happened in the past—is what most people have in mind when they use the term in daily conversation.

But there is a second meaning of the term “history,” one more central to this book. If “history” is the past, it is also an account of the past—i.e., the books, articles, films, and lectures we encounter in school. It should be clear with just a moment’s thought that the past (all of those thoughts and events that actually happened) is lost forever, as Garton Ash noted in the quotation above. Our only contact with the past is through the relatively scant records left by those who lived before us and through the accounts written by historians on the basis of those records. It is this “history”—created accounts of the past—that we read, think about, and study in school. And it is history in this sense—history as a creation of human intelligence—that is the subject of this book. As historians James Davidson and Mark Lytle put it, “History is not ‘what happened in the past’; rather, it is the act of selecting, analyzing, and writing about the past. It is something that is done, that is constructed, rather than an inert body of data that lies scattered through the archives.”2