



Centre for Southeast European Studies  
Zentrum für Südosteuropastudien



UNIVERSITY OF THE PELOPONNESE  
Department of Political Science and  
International Relations

# Southeast European Studies Doctoral Studies Course on Methodology



European Union  
European Social Fund

Operational Programme  
Human Resources Development,  
Education and Lifelong Learning

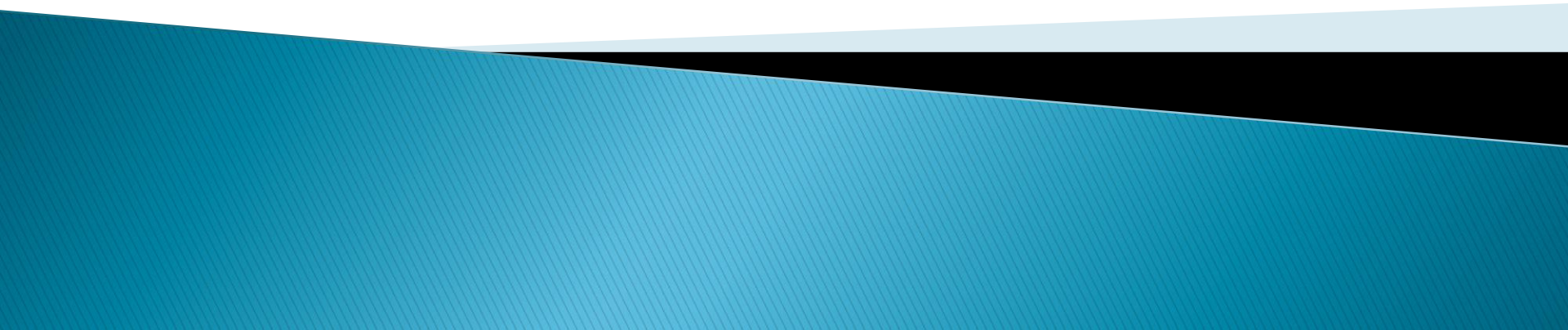
Co-financed by Greece and the European Union



# THE USE OF PRIMARY SOURCES IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

## A variety of primary sources

Some of the most important primary sources in historical research are:

- Archives
  - Collections of documents
  - Minutes and proceedings
  - Diaries
  - Autobiographies and memoirs
  - Interviews
  - Newspaper and magazine articles
  - Audiovisual material
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## Archives

- Two different main types
  - Public archives
    - Governments, international organisations etc.: e.g. The National Archives, UK, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>; Records of the State Department, USA, <https://www.archives.gov/research/foreign-policy/state-dept/agency-records>; League of Nations Archives, Switzerland, <https://archives.ungeneva.org/lontad>)
  - Private archives
    - Politicians, political parties, diplomats, intellectuals, opinion makers, entrepreneurs, private institutions etc.: e.g. The Archives of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, <https://www.ascsa.edu.gr/research/personal-papers-and-archives>; Papers of Ernest Hemingway, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/about-archival-collections/papers-of-ernest-hemingway>)

## Archives

- Archival material is a very (probably the most) valuable source of information for historical research, as it brings researchers as close to the real events as possible
- However, they do not necessarily tell us the whole truth about exactly what happened
- Documents found in archival collections actually contain only what their author wanted to include, what their author remembered, what their author had understood



## Archives

- In fact, documents are just personal perceptions (from their authors' point of view) of what actually happened
- It is even possible that in some cases documents actually include false information, either because their author was misinformed himself/herself, or because their author has deliberately (for his/her own personal or any other kind of reasons) falsified the truth
- Crosschecking is always very important so that history researchers avoid jumping to unfounded conclusions

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## Collections of documents

- They usually contain a selection of primary source documents related to certain events and/or certain periods of time
- In some cases, the published primary source documents may be supported by explanatory comments made by the individuals who had edited the collection
- They may be published by official government agencies (such as Ministries or other state bodies) or even by private institutions (such as foundations, research institutes, political parties etc.)
- In some cases they are published in series

## Collections of documents

- In some cases they are published in series (more often when it comes to diplomatic documents)
  - Some of the most famous series of this kind are:
    - Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939
    - Documents on British Policy Overseas (<https://diplomatic-documents.org/information/?pdb=36>)
    - Foreign Relations of the United States (<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments>)
    - Documents Diplomatiques Français (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/archives-diplomatiques/action-scientifique-et-culturelle/publications-et-travaux-scientifiques/documents-diplomatiques-francais/>)
    - I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani ([https://www.esteri.it/it/uapsds/documenti\\_diplomatici/](https://www.esteri.it/it/uapsds/documenti_diplomatici/))



## Collections of documents

- It is possible that information contained in these collections may be biased or documents may deliberately selected so that they offer the publisher's side of the story
- We need to ask ourselves some critical questions
  - Who made the selection?
  - Why this selection was made?
  - Is it possible that the person who made the selection wanted us to be misguided by the content?
  - Was the selection the result of a scientific process or propaganda purposes were to be served?

## Minutes and proceedings

- They are made by official bodies, such as government agencies, parliaments, international organisations etc.
- When it comes to proceedings/minutes, they seem to be (almost) completely unbiased, since they should contain only what was actually said
  - However, this is not always the case
  - For example, sometimes in international/diplomatic conferences minutes we read the *translation* of what was actually said
  - Proceedings and minutes do not capture the body language, grimaces and/or any other non verbal reaction of the speakers which can be equally (if not even more) telling

## Diaries

- They are kept either for personal use or for official use
- They are kept by people in order to record events, actions, thoughts, sentiments etc.
- Diaries are a very useful source of information
- However, especially in the cases of personal diaries, the objectivity of information included in them might be questionable
- Researchers need to be cautious about the possibility that the diaries' authors might deliberately or unintentionally twist events

## Diaries

- An interesting question: did the author of the diary reckon that the content of the diary would one day be published?
  - If the answer is “yes”, then it is even more possible that the author was even less objective



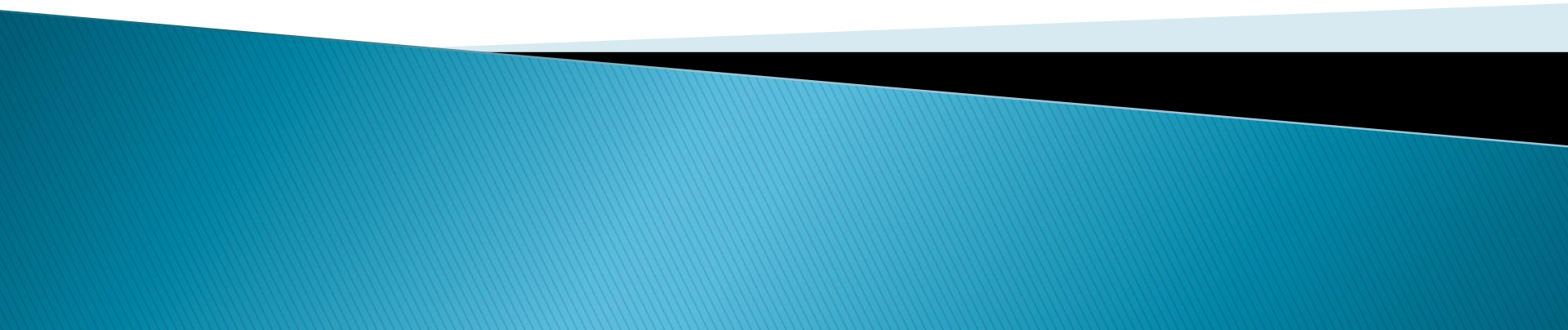
## Autobiographies and memoirs

- Personal accounts and narrations of one's life, actions, works, career etc.
- By nature, these accounts are subjective since they present the author's point of view
- The author might be unable or unwilling to accurately recall memories, and thus provide incorrect or misleading information
- In some case, authors od autobiographies and memoirs tend even to recreate history in order to excuse their actions, to give more credit to their contribution than the contribution of others, to calumniate their opponents etc.
- Even so, they may provide useful information to researchers, especially if this information can be crosschecked and verified by other sources

## Interviews

- A structured conversation, typically between two participants, in which the one participant (the interviewer) asks questions, and the other (the interviewee) provides answers
- The role of the interviewer is crucial: he/she needs to be well prepared so that he/she asks the right questions
- In research settings, the dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee can yield both favorable and unfavorable outcomes
  - On one hand, their rapport can facilitate a more profound comprehension of the gathered information
  - Conversely, it introduces the risk of the interviewer's inability to maintain impartiality during data collection and interpretation

## Interviews

- Bias may emerge from the interviewer's perception of the interviewee or vice versa
  - Moreover, researchers may introduce biases due to their emotional state, readiness for the research, or the inappropriate conduct of interviews
  - Researchers need to try leverage their biases as a means of enhancing their work, thereby achieving a more profound understanding
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## **Newspaper and magazine articles**

- Pieces written at the time the events took place
- Objectivity of the authors, especially when it comes to editorials and opinion articles
- Newspapers may be politically and/or ideologically affiliated and thus biased
- However, this objectivity is interesting from a researcher's point of view since it reflects the political, ideological social, and economic framework in which the events took place



## Audiovisual material

- The modern type of primary sources in historical research
- It includes film recordings, audio recordings photographs, newsreels, TV and radio broadcasts, digital items etc.
- It offers researchers access to different kind of information than traditional (printed) hisotorical sources
- However, images and sounds do not always tell the truth
  - In many cases, they have been used for propaganda purposes
  - There are also incidents of forged audiovisual material

## Summing up

- No historical source is 100% credible: the credibility of each source varies and it is up to the researcher to test it and identify its strong and weak points
- Historical sources are not 100% objective because they are human creations themselves
- They tell us only what their creator wanted to tell us
- Crosschecking is essential in order to minimize the possibility of making mistakes in historical narratives and interpretations

## Suggestions for further reading

- Arnold, John A., *History: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000.
- Bloch, Mark, *The Historian's Craft: Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of Those Who Write It*, Vintage Books, New York 1964.
- Carr, E. H., *What is History?*, Penguin, London 2018.
- Evans, Richard J, *In Defense of History*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York/London 2000.
- Gaddis, John Lewis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002.
- Galgano, Michael J., J. Chris Arndt & Raymond M. Hyser, *Doing History: Research and Writing in the Digital Age*, Wadsworth, Boston 2013.

## Suggestions for further reading

- Gunn, Simon, & Lucy Faire (eds.), *Research Methods for History*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2016.
- Maza, Sarah, *Thinking About History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017.
- Presnell, Jenny L., *The Information-Literate Historian: A Guide to Research for History Students*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.
- Salevouris, Michael J. & Conal Furay, *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2015.
- Schrag, Zachary, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2021.