

A Fictitious Primary Source

As the first writing assignment for this course, I have asked you to compose a fictitious primary source. I use the word *fictitious*, because you, in 2010, will be the author of the source writing *as if* the source had been composed in the first third of the twentieth century. It should be immediately apparent that this is an exercise in historical imagination – that is, a way for you to explore more deeply the mentality of historical actors who are removed from you in time and place. You will need to enter their world, to the extent that our sources allow, and to recreate their subjective perception of unfolding events. You will also need to purge from your mind knowledge of those events that followed the historical moment that you discuss. Think hard about how people at a particular moment in the past understood the events they were witnessing (and in which they were participating); contemplate the kinds of assumptions that they may have made about their world; consider closely their prejudices and aspirations; and (as noted) keep in mind what they did *not* know.

It is not my expectation that this will be a research paper. I therefore ask merely that you consult one outside source and use that together with the required reading for the course. I can help you to identify such a source once you have determined the perspective from which you wish to write your paper. In identifying a historical actor from whose perspective you will write, keep in mind that your best bet is to make that selection with reference to the readings we will have done in the course by the time the paper is due. By choosing something or someone that is not well represented in the syllabus – and in a course covering an entire continent for an entire century there are many of these – you will deprive yourself of the possibility of writing an informed paper. By the time the paper is due, we will really only have covered the first three decades of the twentieth century. Still, these decades were crucial and we will have a lot of interesting material with which to write first-rate papers.

The first step, then, is to identify a historical subject for the paper. Conceivably, you could choose a particular person in the past and then write the paper from that perspective. It might be more interesting to write from the standpoint of a "generic" person, defined by a combination of social class, nationality, religion, sex, etc. For example, one could write from the viewpoint of a peasant in Russia in 1925; a soldier returning from WWI to Germany; a Greek woman expelled from Anatolia in 1923; a member of the industrial elite in Italy after the war; etc.

In each case, you will be best served by placing your account somewhere in the 1920s or early 1930s. This will allow you to look back on all that has happened since the century began and to take stock of the experiences that have shaped your outlook at the present. If you place your account in 1913, by contrast, you will not be able to say much on the basis of the sources at our disposal. Alternatively, your paper could adopt the form of a diary or journal that reveals the author's views on unfolding events at different points. In all cases, the main concern is to elucidate the events and experiences that have shaped the given historical figure and that drive him/her to interpret his/her world in a certain way and to behave in a certain fashion. Imagine a primary source that would provide the most insightful window onto the mentalities of the past and write accordingly (though of course in a way consistent with the material that you have at your disposal). As in all matters pertaining to this course, if you have trouble you should contact me as soon as possible. I will be happy to provide further guidance on all aspects of the exercise.

The paper should be 3-4 pages in length. That means that there should probably be some text on the fourth page, but there should not be a fifth page. You should not have a title page (save a tree) but merely have the title appear at the top of the first page. Please use footnotes to refer to any external sources that you use rather than providing a bibliography. You may use parentheses and page number to refer to the required reading for this course – e.g. (Fitzpatrick, 25).

Finally, note the checklist that governs all papers submitted to me.