Critical Analysis of Historical Sources and Information Resources

Course Type: Bridging course for students with bachelor’s degree in subjects other than history.

Course Summary:
«L’histoire se fait avec des documents», “the history is made on the basis of documents” – this was a famous dictum of two nineteenth century French historians, Charles Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos, the statement that opened the first chapter of their classic textbook Introduction to the Study of History (1898). In this course we will explore the ways professional historians use documents, as well as other types of primary sources, in their research. We will consider the role archives play in shaping collective memory of the past, and will examine in details the peculiarities of institutional records, statistics, court and law files, surveillance reports, diaries, letters and memoirs, newspapers and fiction, maps, oral and visual sources.

Pre-requisites: Students should be familiar with the general contours of Russian and European history from the 16th-17th centuries to the present. No prior experience of working with primary sources is assumed.

Learning Objectives. The course is intended to give students an understanding of the role primary sources played in the making of history as an academic discipline, as well as to elucidate recent controversies about the nature of historical interpretation of primary sources that lie at the core of the debate on the foundations of historical method. At the same time the course seeks to introduce students to the peculiarities of a broad range of textual, aural and visual primary sources that have been used in the study of early modern, modern and contemporary history. We will achieve this objective by a critical reading of a few selected pieces of recent historical research that combine methodological reflection on primary sources with practical examples of
source criticism. Finally, the course aims to familiarize students with some useful on-line primary sources databases and depositories.

**Learning Outcomes:** Upon the successful completion of the course the students will be able to differentiate between primary sources and other types of information resources, as they are used by historians. They will know the general premises of traditional source criticism, as well as the challenges posed by post-modern approaches. They will acquire basic skills in interpreting different types of primary sources, ranging from institutional records that have been traditionally used in political, diplomatic and military history, to a rapidly expanding domain of visual and aural sources. Last but not least, they will be able to suggest a workable research strategy for their own project: to identify and locate their primary sources, as well as to analyse their advantages and pitfalls in relation to the research objectives.

**Methods of Instruction:** The course will consist of 10 lectures (20 academic hours) and 11 seminars (23 hours). The seminars will focus on group discussions of the assigned readings. Below you will find the list of topics (“course schedule”) that we will examine in our course. Each topic corresponds to a lecture and a seminar, with the exception of the very last topic when we will have only a seminar. The list contains the required readings for each seminar.

**Assignments:** Students are expected to attend all seminars, *to do all the required readings, and to participate actively in the seminar discussion.*

Once during the course each student will act as a **discussion leader**. It means that during this seminar the student will be responsible for structuring our discussion by providing a list of important, analytical questions for other students to think about while preparing for the seminar. These questions should be circulated among other students no later than 48 hours before the seminar. There is no fixed number of questions but something in the range between 6 and 10 questions will do.

For the final seminar students will have to give **team presentations** on internet resources for historians: students will split into teams (3-5 students for a team), and each team will prepare an oral presentation (10-15 minutes in length) on one of on-line information resources or databases of their choice.

**Take-home written exam** is due by December 19. It will consist of a research paper (1,500–2000 words) that provide a critical analysis of the sources used by a few selected historians who explore a common issue (e.g. they work on the history of emotions in early modern Europe, or explore the making of the Soviet ‘subjectivity’ in the 1920s-1930s). The paper should not only
include general information on the sources itself (details of their publication history, if published, references to archival holdings, etc.) but also examine the ways in which these historians have already been using these sources. In the exam paper students should also reflect on various methodologies and interpretative strategies that can potentially be applied to this particular type of primary sources. The paper should include appropriate bibliographic references and a list of literature.

**Grading:**

Seminars (regular participation and discussion leader) - 42% of the final grade

Team presentations (all students in a team get the same grade) - 18%

Take home written exam - 40%

The National Research University – Higher School of Economics uses a 10-point grading scale: grades 1-3 – failed, 4-5 – satisfactory, 6-7 – good, 8-9 – excellent.

**Course schedule:**

1. **Introduction: Historians and source criticism**
   The concept of a historical source. The rise of source criticism and the making of history as an academic field. Historical source criticism in the late 19th – 20th centuries. The ‘linguistic turn’ and a new understanding of source criticism.
   No required reading, lecture only

2. **Archives and archival research.**
   Institutions, their documentary record and social memory. The rise of history as an academic discipline and state archives. Political, diplomatic and military history. Institutional records and the decision-making process. Declassifying state documents for political purposes. Bureaucratic culture, political rhetoric and actual policies.

   **Required reading:**

   **Recommended:**

3. **Statistics and opinion polls**

**Required reading:**

**Recommended:**

4. **Law and court files**
Law and its application. Early court files and the inquisition. 20th century historians, popular culture and court files. Grids and filters of investigative procedure: the language of interrogation, the complexity of interaction between oral and written communication, juridical procedures. The dialogic nature of court files. Remission letters: narrative patterns and plots employed to construct a pardonable exception to the rule of law.

**Required reading:**

**Recommended:**

5. **Surveillance reports**
Surveillance reports and historical perspective on dictatorships: from ‘top-down’ to revisionists approaches. Surveillance reports as the means to assess popular opinion: the picture of dissent confined to personal grievances. Surveillance reports and recent research on the rise of modern ‘national security states’ in the 20th century. Early modern surveillance reports and post-modern deconstruction of the established narrative about the Enlightenment.

**Required reading:**


Holquist P. ‘Information is the alpha and omega of our work: Bolshevik surveillance in its pan-European context,’ *Journal of modern history*, vol. 69 (1997), pp. 415-450

6. **Diaries, letters, memoirs**


**Required reading:**


**Recommended:**


7. **Fiction and journalism**

Required reading:

Recommended:

8. Oral history

Required reading:

Recommended:
Portelli, Alessandro. *The order has been carried out: history, memory, and meaning of a Nazi massacre in Rome*. New York ; Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. (available on ebrary)

9. Visual arts, photography and film
Functions of art images in historical research. History of art and general history. Photography, its history, the advancement of technology and its social functions. Photographic image – a direct witness?

Required reading:
Burke, Peter, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. London: Reaktion, 2001. – chapter 1, pp.21-33; chapter 5, pp.81-102; chapter 8, pp. 140-156. (also available on ebrary)

Recommended:
10. Maps

Required reading:

11. On-line databases for historical research
Seminar only – team presentations

Literature:
Required readings for the seminars are indicated above. Below you will find a list of recommended literature including a few general textbooks that will be useful for writing the take-home exam paper (they are marked with asterisks).

(*) Howell, Martha C., and Walter Prevenier, From reliable sources: an introduction to historical methods. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011. (Some chapters can be downloaded from the LMS)


**Equipment and Software Support**: The students will be able to download all the required readings from the Higher School of Economics’ Information Learning Space (LMS – www.lms.hse.ru). The course requires a computer or a laptop, and a projector.