

## *Bias Objectivity, Subjectivity and History*

### *Bias*

The word bias frequently sets off emotional responses. Its meaning, to be inclined or prejudiced for someone or something against another, contains an inherent conflict. The word creates an impression of extremes, of being on one side or the other, of describing unfairness, prejudice or even malevolence. Few words are more exclusively negative and bias is almost exclusively concerned with what goes on in the mind of individual: what they say, do, claim, deny or write originates in their bias. Objectivity means the opposite: to be objective is to have no leaning to one side or another, to have no preconceived ideas on a topic before an investigation based on evidence which leads to an assessment. Calmness, fairness, impartiality and balance are the usual synonyms.

Subjectivity is usually used as a pejorative because the subjective places too much stress on the personal, either in describing experiences or in expressing a viewpoint. The implication in this term is not that they have described their personal experiences or their viewpoint, but that the subjective individual cannot perceive beyond their personal situation.

With these definitions historians are prime targets for failing to be objective and for having a suspected bias which can go into being subjective. How can it be otherwise? Writing history is usually a highly individualistic process. Even creating history through interviews or filming usually relies on the viewpoint of one person. Therefore what the historian thinks or feels becomes of paramount importance in shaping history. This not only applies to the created narratives in secondary sources where bias frequently appears as obvious. Even when historians assemble primary source material for reproduction what they select or reject has to be of vital importance.

Once chosen, what emphasis they place on their selected evidence shapes the given account. Comments in captions, explanations and references in a secondary text are all part of the process shaped by their preferences and perceptions. In relating reactions to an event, does the historian select what is commonplace, giving several examples to emphasise that this experience was commonplace - or do they reproduce the unusual because it is interesting and not boring, the way commonplace experiences frequently are? Publishers and their sales managers who predict likely sales know that audiences frequently

like the unusual, the sensational and the bizarre. They will have also have a say in how a historical work will be shaped and marketed and their bias favours what makes profits. The idea that secondary sources are biased while edited collections of primary sources are bias free does not hold up to even a brief examination.

Historians and journalists doing interviews are more obviously prone to these problems. What questions they ask, how they ask them and what they omit to ask are all highly personal choices. Unless they are independent workers, their superiors will also have a say in their interviewing style. The use of body language, facial expressions, voice tones and manners or their lack are all clear indications of what the interviewer agrees with, suspects, believes or knows. Those interviewed often reveal their own leanings through these same methods as much as by their replies. Their answers and narratives often evade, omit or gloss over what they do not wish to discuss.

Questions concerning historical bias frequently focus on controversies current at that time, but this is not necessarily so. Historians writing of the ancient and medieval worlds give obvious examples, many of which are in an extremely interesting book, *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions (1990)*. The author Lucy Hughes-Hallet does not write another biography of one of history's most controversial characters, but traces how Cleopatra has been constructed in both primary and secondary sources and also fiction from within her lifetime until the 1980s. This process begins as a political narrative of expediency from both her contemporary admirers and enemies. Throughout the centuries she becomes both a target and a construction based on male desire and misogyny. These characteristics are sometimes entwined and frequently reveal a taste for the erotic and the dramatic. Evidence is then interpreted with an emphasis on those two characteristics. Such constructions make her a beautiful and erotic fem fatale. Some aspects of these depictions which add to the fem fatale image, the luxury she lived in, her ruthlessness and her regal power were real. However judging by depictions on coins and sculptures from her lifetime she was not dazzlingly beautiful. Firm contemporary evidence of sexual involvement only applies to two men, Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony, both of whom were her husbands, by whom she had children. One of her major concerns was securing the children within Roman hierarchies. This goes against the image first developed by Roman enemies of the promiscuous, sensual sex goddess out to lure noble Romans to their destruction after corrupting them. As many cultural images and biographies clearly show, this image still has a wide appeal, even when it goes against primary source evidence, much of which seems to be rarely used. Instead melodramatic scenarios predominate, creating fallacies. The most

salient example is the way everybody thinks they know that Cleopatra killed herself by claspings an asp to her bosom because this image gains endless repetition. Much less known is the primary source evidence from the puzzled physician conducting her autopsy was that the only marks on her body were two tiny cuts on one arm. They may have been from a snakebite. The two handmaidens who died with her are rarely mentioned or depicted and snakes cannot bite three people at once. Did they poison themselves while Cleopatra held her arm out to a snake or did all three die of poison? Unfortunately most of the public and therefore publishers do not like uncertainties or multiple possibilities and therefore clear, definite narratives are preferred. The appeal of the implicit sexual imagery of a femme fatale claspings an asp to the bosom adds to this: there is no such attraction in holding out an arm for a snakebite. This type of subconscious allure and the lack of it works as a more subtle form of bias.

Similarly Pieter Geyl's *Napoleon: For and Against* (1949) starts by examining the creation of a legend – but this time Napoleon, not his enemies, is the creator. Like Trotsky, in exile Napoleon wrote about himself in ways that reduced the importance of his military career and his ruthless methods to maintain his rule. Instead both men focused on a mixture of the vileness of his enemies and the greatness of their utopian aims. From there Geyl assembles articles and essays by many different historians who focus on differing aspects of Napoleon's career. Their focus makes most either clearly for or against. By placing them in the one volume Geyl shows why the controversy over Napoleon continues. Depending on which article the reader focuses on they will form opinions for or against. Napoleon's funding and encouragement for science and history, his egalitarian issuing of respectful titles for all French citizens, his abolition of the Spanish Inquisition, his effective reform of weights, measures, transport and tolls create a favourable image. His devastating wars of conquest and the less well known use of secret police and enforced conformity alienate.

Two books which illustrate other forms of bias (but not prejudice) are both biographies of Richard the Lionheart. Both writers assess on evidence and avoid polemics, idealism and impassioned arguments, all signs of bias. Both are extremely detailed, both use great amounts of primary source material, both have the same chronologies, events and characters for their narratives and both regularly have source notes to back up their presented facts and viewpoints – and both have diametrically opposed views on King Richard.

In assessing both his character and his level of success the one thing both writers agree on was that he was courageous and inspiring in battle. Almost everything else concerning him is in opposition.

Douglas Boyd in *Lionheart: The True Story of England's Crusader King* (2014) portrays him as an extremely repellent individual. His Lionheart was a callous, cruel, reckless, selfish, greedy, homosexual, arrogant, boorish killing machine who frequently made extremely unwise choices in his appointments, tactics and alliances. He exploited England for what he could get. He was dominated by his mother. He sometimes publicly abased himself and could be treacherous and scheming.

In John Gillingham's *Richard the Lionheart* (1978) Richard is a cultured, heterosexual, wise in most appointments, shrewd, able in governing, magnanimous and munificent. While his record as a war leader in the much written about Third Crusade was mixed, Gillingham places an emphasis on Richard's successful role in the 1190s French campaigns. Most historians give these little attention. Gillingham shows that here Richard was an extremely able strategist, army quartermaster, financier and organiser as well as a victorious field commander. Here he was not hampered by rivalries and intrigues in his own camp, but was in control and so successfully regained his conquered territory in France and then added to it. Even so, Boyd has a valid point when mentioning the financial cost Richard inflicted on England to win this campaign. When both historians move their emphasis away from Richard's personality and military record to the effects of his policies his record appears as very mixed. Despite some successes, his reign caused widespread misery and was a financial disaster for England. Apart from the troubled environment of his times, he personally caused trouble for his allies and underlings. Many of them became enemies: he could make those in abundance.

Richard for: Richard against. As with Geyl's Napoleon, Cleopatra and myriad other examples, bias can be shaped by what historians find and do not find and what finds they see as of vital or of lesser importance. Many facts are not given their due importance or are overly stressed due to what they decide to emphasise. This is a crucial area for bias to work. Gender, nationality, ethnicity, personal experiences, can all become subconscious or conscious contributors to bias. Hypothetically if a Palestinian feminist-pacifist who had been once been libelled by a British royalist wrote of Richard the Lionheart, could she be impartial? What would she emphasise? What would she ignore or deride? If a male French nationalist read Geyl's book as research for a debate on Napoleon for and against, what would fire their interest? What would he belittle? How

would he see Napoleon's enemies? If a producer has been given the task of making a television series about Cleopatra will they cast the most beautiful actress they can find - or somebody who resembles the more homely Cleopatra of the coins and sculpture? Will he depict her successful efforts in education and building temples or will he focus on her real or fictional sex life? Given public tastes, this is a rhetorical question. The choices made by such a hypothetical director would probably be made with a bias to keeping his job. The influence of finance in shaping bias remains an undermined field in academia.

Even age can be a factor in slanting bias. Children and adolescents who need heroes as role models tend to create repeats of admiring portrayals of people widely believed to be heroes. Richard the Lionheart and Robin Hood are common examples. Then in later adolescence or adulthood comes the disillusionment: this frequently overcompensates and the childhood hero becomes demonised. The more mature process of playing the hero/villain in their times may not be reached. This process locates the hero/villain amongst his peers and considers them by the ethics and beliefs of their times and their available options and how and why they made their choices. Many writers have arrested development and stay in the first two categories, childhood worshippers and adolescent exposers. Others write in those ways to satisfy a combination of market demands and their financial needs. Others write from an apparent obsession. This writer recently read a large biography of Katherine Hepburn – which had only the occasional sentence about her acting or her films: almost the entire book was about her sex life. Upon investigation that writer turned out to have written several similar biographies. Writings on sexuality usually attracts bias without even a pretext of objectivity. The historian writing of such matters usually vanishes behind a veil of morality and a vaguely admonishing tone .

Given these problems and the myriad examples of bias in any field, can any selective assessing process, so vital in creating history, ever be impartial? While the loud, the dogmatic and the manipulating arguing against objectivity, by their very methods making a strong impression, it should be remembered that there are complex, more serious arguments made by sincere historians who are not motivated by self-interest about bias and objectivity. Their contributions are featured towards the end of this essay.

With the disillusionment emerging from WWI and the successful Russian Revolution many writers from the 1920s onwards questioned how history was constructed. While this tendency submerged during WW2 and the subsequent McCarthyist era, it resurfaced in the late 1950s and developed further in

subsequent decades. White male radicals and women and males in ethnic minority groups began attacks on what they described as the white, male dominated field of history. They have frequently shown with validity many examples where bias, vanity and self-serving, self-deluding historical constructions have been used to uphold the heterosexual white male view.

There are problem with this iconoclastic viewpoint. The problems do not concern a lack of valid evidence; an abundance exists. The problems concern what the more self-promoting historians, politicians and writers attacking objectivity and exposing bias do not emphasise, their many self-exemptions from their own logic and what their argument leads to.

The more moderate give examples of white male bias to validate their point. This has led to it becoming fashionable to say that objectivity in creating history does not exist. People saying this often explain that people carry around memories which can be distorted: we all have cultural learning patterns and points of view based in what we experience or learn. These can be conscious, unconscious or subconscious but are unavoidable. From that statement they have placed this logic at a fork. The first choice which rapidly leads to a dead end is that nothing is real, everything must be just an opinion or a constructed fiction. Does this also then apply to their definitely stated logic and their statements, including the last?

This obviously inherent contradiction only starts off the problems. The dogmatic, elitist self-serving and patronising way this idea usually gains expression should cause a questioning of the idea's veracity - as well as the reliability of those expressing it. In the more extreme cases these people write as if they come from some remote, morally pristine planet. They condescend to be amongst us to study a strange species infected with a delusion called objectivity caused by a disease they diagnose as bias - which cannot infect them.

The second choice in the fork is even worse. This usually gains expression simplistically as because objectivity cannot exist, therefore all history, all art, all culture, ideas, statements and beliefs are propaganda. Dangerously simplistic in itself, this idea then can go to either of two ways. The first is that those expressing this idea imply (and only occasionally clearly say) that their culture and their ideas are propaganda for goodness in some form: progress, fairness, equality, socialism, patriotism, Marxism, feminism, the good of the nation, the good of their political party, the betterment of the family (usually meaning theirs) the company, cult, their ethnic group, religion, or some organisation of which they are a part. Those arguing like this usually insist you are either for them or against them. While bad enough and dangerously simplistic at least in

this form, the falseness of the concept and the exploitation it will lead to are easy to recognise. The second choice is more subtle and manipulating. After making sure that they have destroyed both a belief in security and in being able to rely on recognising truth, the identifiers of bias and presenters of doubt then supply some belief full of dogma, dubious facts presented as absolute truth, and convenient certainties. This usually gets a presentation delivered in a loud, fast voice with snide innuendoes, emotional blackmail, no refutations tolerated and butting in and shouting down. Once the target is silenced they have a way of verbally burying the target audience in an avalanche of sophistry and supposed facts, from people who do not believe in facts –when it suits them. This type usually glide around their tactics by avoiding the word “propaganda” when presenting their side and never say “I am morality incarnate” or “I represent goodness” or even “This is all to my advantage.” They almost always pose as and usually believe themselves to be the representative of a higher power, usually in the twentieth century personified. Jesus, Allah, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Hitler, Franco, Gandhi and Mao seemed the most common. As in the twenty-first century views about such individuals move away from the religious and the quasi-religious, organisations, groups, nations profit margins, refugees, the environment and other assorted causes replace them.

## *Objectivity*

As both the methods and the personalities of many critics of objectivity show, show, unquestioning belief in objectivity creates problems, but so does an unquestioning belief in the dominance of bias. Faced with this alternative to objectivity and witnessing how it goes and being fooled by such beliefs in my youth, give me even a flawed attempt at objectivity any time. Even so, the critics of objectivity have a point. Historians should be aware of forces that shape their views – and the views of those who create the evidence historians use.

The effort to be objective must be made and quite frequently it has. Several attempts at objectivity which cannot be easily refuted exist. Listed below are nine examples where writers go against a writer’s self-interest and initial beliefs, strong signs of a tendency to be objective.

*Martin Luther* (1485-1546) is usually credited with breaking from Catholicism over the issues with indulgences, but he was also dismayed by the church’s mistranslations of the Bible, the foolishness and superstition in accounts of the saints and the differences between sixteenth century church interpretations of

Christianity and what the Bible said. He argued for what he believed was the truth and lost much for little gain by doing so. For taking his stand for what he objectively believed to be true his promising career as a scholar within the church was over, respect was replaced by animosity, security by danger and the threat of being burnt at the stake hung over him. When he said those who wanted to write history needed the heart of a lion he had it right.

*Giordano Bruno* (1548-1600) was burned as a heretic for his scientific opinions, based on his objective research and developed ideas which he refused to abandon.

*Emma Goldman* (1869-1940) and *Alexander Berkman* (1870-1936) were anarchists who were deported to Soviet Russia in 1919. They initially looked forward to working for a revolutionary society. Soon after their arrival Goldman became increasingly sceptical about the Bolsheviks and their claim that Russia needed to go through a period of regrettably strict proletarian dictatorship before advancing to an anarchist communist paradise. Berkman accepted their logic until the March 1921 Bolshevik suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion. Both anarchists wrote accounts of their disillusioning experiences. As many anarchists became Bolsheviks at this time these histories were written they could have had lives of privilege and power if they toed the party line. Instead by writing the truth as they saw it they had to admit that they had been fooled, gained the enmity of the left as well as the right and gained little from their publications. These effects were easily foreseen when they made their choice. Radically changing opinions and beliefs on presented evidence and personal experience goes against bias being a dominant trait in writing history.

*Voline* (1882-1945) being a friend of Trotsky's from before the 1917 revolution could have had an easy life if he had gone along with the Bolshevik line, but he stayed true to his ideals and lambasted them for taking power from the workers to establish a dictatorship over them. In 1919 his execution was ordered by Trotsky and averted by mutual acquaintance Victor Serge. Voline was no anarchist propagandist: he wrote sadly of prominent anarchist Nestor Makhno's failings. His account quotes the Bolsheviks more frequently than their critics and by frequently matching the accounts of Goldman and Berkman gives their work veracity.

*James P. Cannon* (1890-1974) was a prominent founding member of the Communist Party of America. After reading the documents concerning the dispute between Stalin and Trotsky he concluded that Trotsky was correct and should have been Lenin's heir. He took this stance after Trotsky had clearly lost the power struggle to Stalin, being exiled to Alma Ata in late 1927. Cannon's



account of leaving the Communist Party wryly focused not on his time devouring years of service, his approaching loss of power and comrades becoming enemies, but on his regretful loss of his comfortable swivel chair! Beneath the wry humour Cannon seems to have sensed that he was putting himself into the political wilderness. Cynics could argue that he was trying to make himself leader of the Trotskyists rather than be a secondary figure in the Communist Party: Cannon would eventually become the dominant figure in world Trotskyism after Trotsky. However in 1928 Max Eastman was the dominant figure in the tiny world of American Trotskyism and would hold that position until 1938. In the later 1940s Cannon would encourage Michel Pablo to take on the world leadership of the movement. Like his voluntary retirement in 1953 to a small Californian cottage, promoting Pablo over himself is hardly the act of an intensely ambitious man biased into believing what promotes himself.

*Mahatma Gandhi* (1869-1948) not only attacked the British for exploitative practices, he also wrote denunciations of aspects of Hinduism that he considered exploitative. While frequently a fervid orator and writer and often inconsistent in his tactics, Gandhi was consistent in his determination to end exploitation. He gained nothing by attacking aspects of Hinduism, made enemies of those who could have been allies and weakened the unity of those fighting for the cause which devoured his life. Do his denunciations mean that he was biased in his attitude to exploitation or applying a principle in a fair minded way?

*Maxim Ghilan* (1931-2005) was initially an extreme Zionist, being a member of the Stern Gang. As many in the group became prominent in Israeli politics after independence was gained in 1948 he could have had a prestigious, powerful position in Israel. However after seeing the reality of Israel's government he chose to fight for human rights, working with many Palestinians. His major work *How Israel Sold Its Soul* (1974) depicts in its first sections how the idea of establishing a Zionist homeland was developed with deep flaws. In practical terms these would lead to elitism and exploitation. Later sections trace how the situation worsened during and after the establishment of Israel. As both a Jew and a European refugee finding acceptance in Israel from General Franco's repressive rule, logically his bias would be to become staunchly supportive of his new home. Israel not only offered him so much immediately, but offered him future career potential. Instead Ghilan went against his self-interest. Witnessing Arab's being tortured by Israeli wardens was a factor turning him against Israel's government. Did repression and probably bullying in Spain give him a bias against all repression? Ghilan's example could be that of a person with biases which are in contradiction. This suggests a more complicated and

subtle way to examine bias rather than just finding proof for a writer's biased viewpoint.

*Barbara Tuchman* (1916-1989) also wrote of the early years of the Israel – Palestine dilemma in her *Bible and Sword: How the British Came to Palestine*. (1956). Like Ghilan she was Jewish and expressed a strong dislike for exploitation. However she was his opposite in having her views shaped by close proximity. Her book was supposed to end with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, but she found after researching the period 1918-1948 that she was too close to it. In her 1964 essay 'When Does History Happen?' she described how her research left her with feelings of disgust, anger and a sense of injustice which stunted and twisted her writing abilities. She had become involved. Tuchman was aware of how the evidence was working on her emotionally. The last contemporary chapter was written in a different style to the previous seventeen, so unhappy with that, she ditched it and ended her narrative in 1918. Here was a writer very much aware of the problems of bias and objectivity and willing to do her best by sacrificing six month's work to resolve the dilemma.

*Alexander McKee* (1918-1992) a WW2 British infantryman, came from a very military family and by his own account initially believed in British aerial superiority. In *Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinder Box* he describes enduring several bombing raids in Southampton, some of the London blitz and some 1944 V2 rocket attacks. His home was hit in one attack and he was blown twenty feet in the air in another. His experiences would seemingly make him the last historian on earth to disparage his government's destruction of Dresden by aerial bombardment and then to write with sympathy of the German civilians who endured the Dresden tragedy, yet he does this. His methods involve a calm writing style and a focus on evidence and differing viewpoints. His book is heavily based on interviews with both the victims and the air crews, who frequently tell their stories in telling quotes.

All of these ten individuals, despite differing belief systems and being in different situations, went against their self-interest in fairly successful attempts to be objective, to overcome biases which their environment, their pasts and their sense of self-preservation reinforced. It may well be that the proponents of bias always existing in any individual, can prove that all of these nine show bias somewhere, but proving this is their dominant factor obviously becomes much more difficult.

The problem of bias verses objectivity and the related topic of subjectivity by historians has been much discussed, particularly since E.H. Carr's *What is*

*History* (1961) and what was essentially a rejoinder by Arthur Marwick in *The Nature of History* (1970). Barbara Tuchman also had astute comments to make on these points in essays written at the time which were republished in her *Practising History* (1981). The sixties and seventies were a time when feminist, radical new left and third worldist viewpoints were emerging with strength and credibility. Writers with these viewpoints launched their attacks on the concept of objectivity, their belief in the hidden influence of bias and the dominance of white heterosexual males.

By the 1980s they had won the first round; by then few could defend the idea that there can be absolutely no bias within the human mind, yet as the nine examples above show, some people come very close to assessing without bias and they ensure that bias is far from being always the dominant factor in shaping history.

However the point made at the beginning of this essay soon emerged: those launching the attacks on objectivity and then revealing the biases of their targets had their own biases. From that realisation new opinions developed. These included the following:

All history reflects the views of its time and therefore needs to be continually rewritten.

All history is a construction based in bias and is therefore subjective and therefore is fiction.

As everything is subjective, therefore all views are valid.

If all views are valid all views are true.

The above viewpoints are more common in coffee houses, hotel bars, university cafeterias and the meeting rooms of sects than in lecture theatres or historian's studies. That in itself is not necessarily a dismissal: not only the weird, the ridiculous and the dangerous ideas develop there. The English, American, French and Irish Revolutions owed much to discussions and speeches made in such places. Even so, these virtual edicts and attempts to develop where these ideas would lead are sometimes easily refuted. As suggested at the beginning of this essay the poststructuralists and postmodernists are caught in an inherent and obvious trap within their own edict. If everything is a fiction is the edict "everything is a fiction" also a fiction and therefore factually untrue? Apart from the self-contained disproving contradiction in that idea the related next idea "If all views are valid all views are true" is caught in a similar disproving and obvious contradiction: how can all historical views be true - if they are all fiction?

In attempts to rescue these ideas some argue that although they are fictions, not really certainties, society needs these fictions to function as certainties for social stability. Those arguing this are usually highly selective in their random examples to prove that point. Shark repellent that does not work, hopes of future superannuation payouts that are impossible, false heroes who are upheld so that children will have role models, saints' relics that effect miraculous cures and exotic 'scientifically proven' foods that supposedly do the same are all valid examples that work in this way. Larger ones include the fiction that there will always be a frontier to exploit somewhere on the planet, that politicians control things and if we only elect a good one all will be well and that rituals and good deeds will avert disasters. Many people do seem to need such fictions, but these are only a few examples in a world that still functions on certainties.

Hopefully these certainties include surgical procedures, health checks, prescription medicines, train, plane and shipping timetables, flight paths, weather reports, petrol gauges, tidal records, bank statements and cheques, tax records, maps, sports equipment, clothes, photographs, phones, personal letters, ovens, marked prices, sales receipts, purchase orders, court transcripts, verdicts of not guilty and instructions for tools, vehicles, white goods, safety switches emergency exits and utensils. These are just a random sampling amongst the many things that make up life that are obviously not fictions. Imagine what society would become if they were! This may seem off the topic of bias and history, but history is not made up of an imagined past created out of thin air. All those previously mentioned tangible things and many many more can be remnants from the past and so become primary source evidence in history. Objects, environments, films, photographs and documents form the basis of history. Memory can only be a personal history unless it is recorded in some way and therefore becomes tangible. Imagination must be crucial to the shaping of historic narrative, but it is not a tangible building block. Even the most imaginative, biased, opinionated excuse for a historian uses some form of tangible evidence, even if it is only a single secondary source.

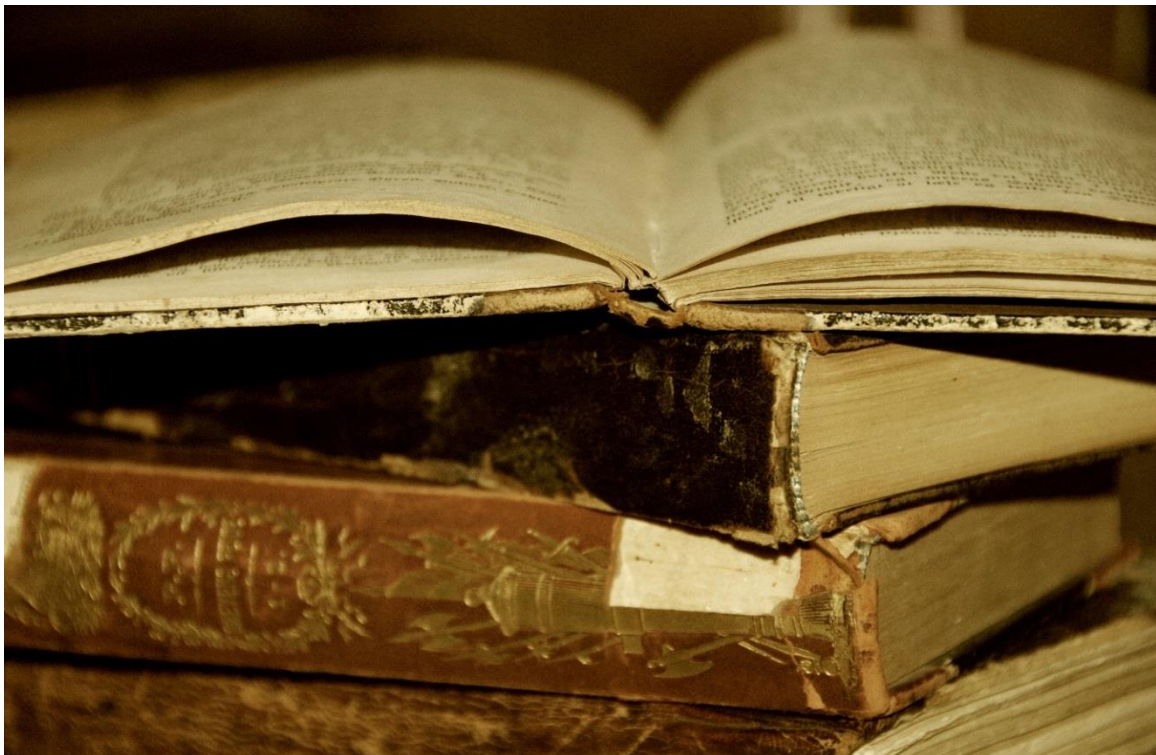
Believing that history is fiction and that all viewpoints are valid also has other obvious dangers. In Ann Curthoys and John Docker's *Is History Fiction?* (2010 revised edition) they spend a whole chapter on where this logic can lead. Many historians have alluded to or examined the most obvious danger in detail. This is that if all history is fiction the Nazi holocaust which led to the deliberate extermination of several million is a fiction and did not happen. Some people actually believe this. Although this example works as the most obvious, why stop there? People in 1971 actually came out with opinions such as this paraphrasing: "Charles Manson was a nice man, we know because he sang so

sweetly. Nobody bad could sing so beautifully. All these police and journalists and lawyers are fascist supporters of Nixon making up bad stories.”

Once history is fiction the veracity of personal experience or already existing bias becomes the decider for what is true or fiction. Anything anyone does not want to believe from the ancient past to minutes ago can be labelled a fiction. This logic can be heard from Holocaust deniers, climate change deniers and politicians and their followers shouting “Fake news!” The latter do have a point, albeit one too all encompassing. Media people frequently fabricate, omit and develop to suit their bias and self-interest: just like some historians.

One possible solution to these problems first appeared in 1999 when *The Houses of History* was first published. In 2016 the editors Anna Green and Kathleen Troup put out a second edition. Accepting different viewpoints and interests amongst historians, they avoided the bias-objectivity war and emphasised how interests in different fields could work in selecting topic matter. What slant the writers then took helped shape their work. Fortunately they avoided the impassioned moralists and obvious propagandists and apologists which is half the battle won.

Bias certainly exists, objectivity is flawed and readers of histories should treat all accounts with caution, not as an automatically accepted truth, so how should writers create and readers approach history?



Photographer: Lin Kristensen.

Timeless Books JPG. Wikimedia

## *The Questions to Ask*

Most of the following questions are taught in history classes in high school and universities around the world. Some might word them a little differently; my development resembles most, with perhaps more detail. Keeping these questions in mind, and using them habitually when researching and writing reduces bias and subjectivity, which is what historians should do.

*What is the evidence before you?*

*Who wrote it or made it?*

*Why?*

*Who is the intended audience? Why?*

*When was it created? Is it from the time dealt with?*

*Where is it from? What effect does the physical environment have? (If any)*

*What is its relevance?*

*Were the person or people who created it important at the time? How important were they and in what way?*

*What effect does this source have on my personal viewpoints?*

*Will it be useful in creating a narrative?*

*Is it a primary or secondary source or does it contain a mixture of both?*

*Is it genuine ?*

*Does it contain the attitudes and biases of its time ?*

*Has it been shaped for a purpose?*

*Is it an eyewitness account? If so is it from a participant or an observer?*

*If coming from an eyewitness, how well placed were they to observe?*

*Is their account complete and plausible - or suspicious?*

*If it is suspicious what makes it so?*

### *History's twelve Most Controversial People?*

This listing is an exercise in bias and objectivity. Reading these names, seeing these portraits gains reactions. Are you amazed that they make the list? Do you wonder why they are listed and others are not? What makes them controversial?

For me the listed reasons are below are only a summary:

Did Shakespeare really write his accredited works? Did he even exist as he is frequently depicted?

Was Lenin an idealistic, sincere visionary forced to use ruthless and tyrannical methods to protect the gains made on the way to establishing utopia? Or was he a cruel self-aggrandising megalomaniac luring people into an authoritarian nightmarish system?

Were Jesus and Mohammed saviours bearing messengers from God, frauds or lunatics?

Lawrence of Arabia rarely appears twice in the same way in his many biographies. Arch imperialist working in espionage, misguided idealist, inveterate liar, conceited ass acting out a fantasy or brilliant guerrilla leader?

Did Cleopatra and Evita Peron rule ably? Did they live staid lives or were they ruthless femme fatales using sexuality to fulfil their hidden agendas?

The theories of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud had more effect on humanity than any ideas outside of a religion, but were they based on realities?

Donald Trump has only had a few years under media scrutiny, but nobody alive is more controversial.

Richard the Lionheart and Napoleon have been dealt with in the text.

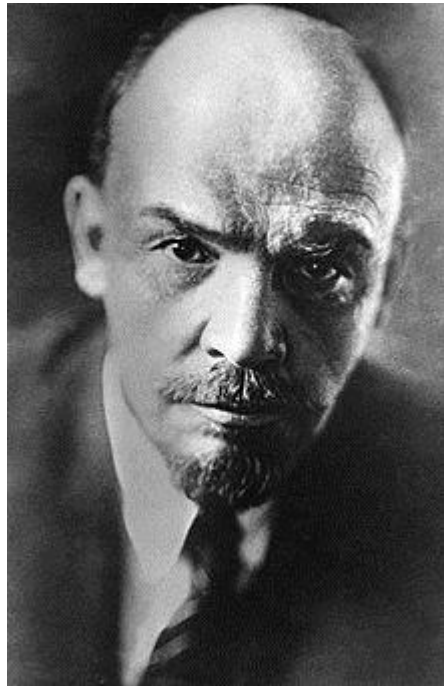
### *1 Jesus (c. 7/6 B.C.- C.30-33 A.D.)*



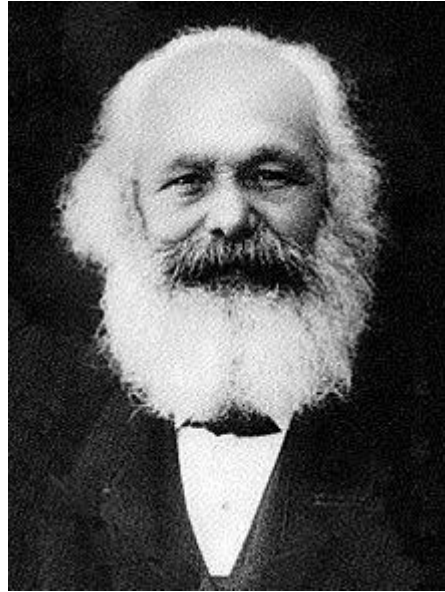


*2 Mohammed* No authenticated portrait of Mohammed is known to exist. Under Islamic law none are allowed to be made.

*3 Lenin (1870-1924)*



*4 Karl Marx (1818-1883)*



*5 Lawrence of Arabia (1888-1935)*



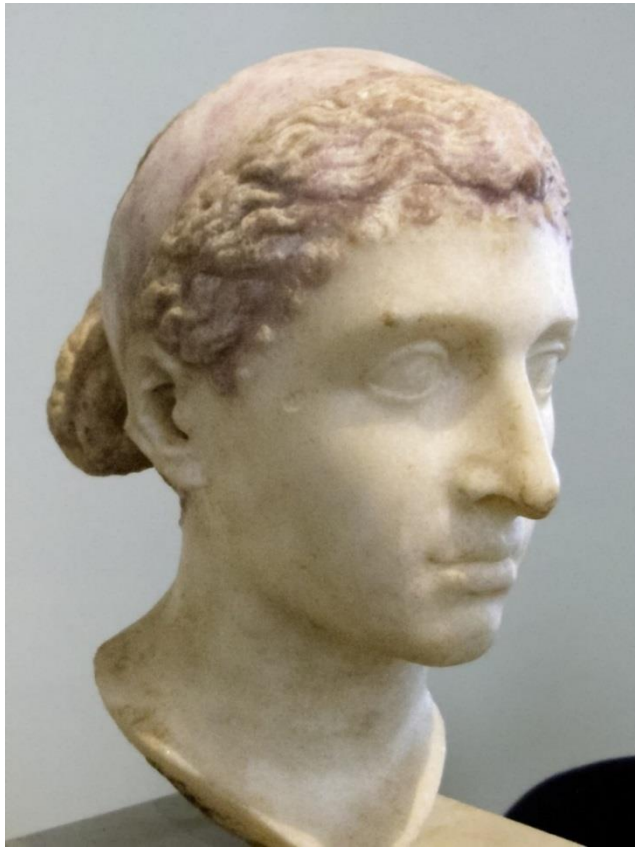
*6 Evita Peron 1919-1952*



*7 Richard the Lionheart (1157-1199)*



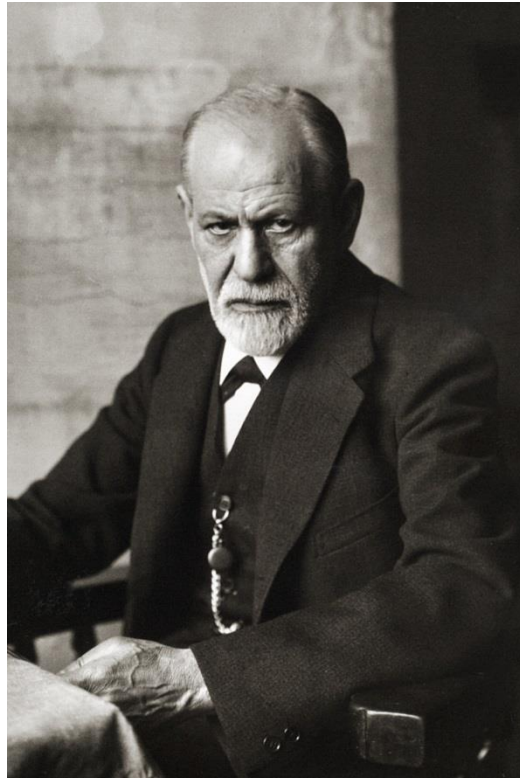
8 Cleopatra (49 B.C. -29 B.C.)



9 William Shakespeare (1564-1616)



*10 Sigmund Freud*



*11 Napoleon*

*12 Donald Trump*

