

THE SEARCH FOR THE FACTUAL IN HISTORY

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Chroniclers of the past have always suffered from external pressure to make their findings relevant, that is, to demonstrate by experience the wisdom, correctness or appropriateness of current policies. They have resisted insofar as they have been dedicated to maintaining the integrity of the record; and until comparatively recently they have been successful in doing so. In our own time, however, the pressures toward falsifying the record are more compelling than ever before; and, as a result, historians and those who read them need to be reminded of the absolute value of respect for the integrity of the factual basis of the discipline.

The value of the factual record was a rediscovery of the seventeenth century in the bitter aftermath of the wars for religious supremacy and dynastic power. Legalists and theologians then at last understood that, while they could afford to disagree on large matters of interpretation, they had a common interest in agreeing on the small ones of fact which could provide them grounds for peaceful discourse. From that basis in the next century came the great enlightenment achievements which recognized the worth of the objectivity and asserted the possibility of reconstructing the whole record of the human past and which thereby laid the foundation for modern historical science. The whole development rested on the insistence that the fact existed apart from the desires of the historian who perceived it in retrospect.

True, historians as well as philosophers often thereafter worried about the problems of bias and perspective; and some of them despaired of attaining the ideal of ultimate objectivity. Incautiously, some like Benedetto Croce in the second quarter of the twentieth century concluded that objectivity was an unattainable, if noble, dream and resigned themselves to the prospect that every man would be his own historian - - interpreting the data in the light of his own expectations and with the end of pursuing his own goals. But even such relativists limited their relativism to questions of interpretation and denied any intention of doing violence to the factual record.

The assault upon the basic idea of the fact came first from the totalitarian regimes of the 1930's with the wholesale rewriting of history and with ruthless factual falsification by Stalinists, Nazis and Fascists. But more ominous has been the insidious acceptance of the permissive attitude toward factual manipulation in our own time and in free societies. Both the popular literature of "fiction based on fact" and presumably scholarly works reveal a reckless abandonment of principle, often well-intentioned, yet based upon ignorance of the price and the consequences of the sacrifice. A reaffirmation therefore is necessary of the worth of the absolute integrity of the factual record as a means of pursuing the truth.