

What-Really-Happened

- according to most people, **history** is “what really happened in the past”
 - but our understanding of history is often based on the testimony of witnesses
 - and different people see things different ways, so it’s not always possible to determine what happened in the past
 - cf. the police report of an accident based the report of eye-witnesses

What-Really-Happened

- people's memories are filled with bias, self-righteousness, pride, vanity, spinning, obfuscation and outright lies
 - anyone who writes or records history has an agenda
 - cf. the different meanings which have been given to Christ's crucifixion
- Would having a time machine help?
 - Probably not! cf. the Zapruder tape of Kennedy's assassination

What-Really-Happened

- Is it impossible to find out what-really-happened-in-the past?
 - Probably! but by understanding certain things, we can get closer to the truth
 - nevertheless, not so much that everyone will agree
 - but discussion is good, especially in a democratic society
 - allowing no or limited discussion is an essential ingredient in tyranny!

What-Really-Happened

- in fact, discussing and arguing about the past is one of the ways we discover who we are collectively
 - cf. the evolution vs. intelligent design debate today
 - it's an argument about our shared past and how one past or the other should affect our decision-making process today

What-Really-Happened

- indeed, all “historical” debates are at heart arguments about the present and the future
 - often with specific goals relating to how people should think — and vote!
 - all the martyrs and revolutionaries who have fought for a cause have usually done so to endorse some belief about the past
- so, history is very “relevant”
- all in all, studying the past is the only way to steer a course into the future

What-Really-Happened

- the best approach then is to do all we can to reconstruct as fully as possible our picture of the past
 - if we can't nail down the truth completely, we can approach and circumscribe it
- one big advantage: the liars of history are usually quite transparent

What-Really-Happened

- for instance, the historian **Tacitus** (*The Annals of Imperial Rome*)
 - wrote about the *Pax Romana* (31 BCE - 180 CE)
 - especially the early period: the reigns of the **emperors** Augustus to Nero (31 BCE - 68 CE)
 - Tacitus laments the loss of the Romans' freedom in the “gilded cage” of the Empire

What-Really-Happened

- for instance, the historian **Tacitus** (*The Annals of Imperial Rome*)
 - though he never says so directly, clearly he wants to shock the Romans into rejecting the very concept of having “emperors”
 - cf. his viciously negative picture of Nero
 - there can be no doubt about it: Tacitus’ *Annals* are *great* history, but are they *good* history?

What-Really-Happened

- cf. a very different historian who lived half a millennium later: **Procopius**
 - official court scribe of the Byzantine Emperor **Justinian** (r. 535-565 CE)
 - by day, he sang Justinian's praises
 - but by night, he wrote ***The Anecdota*** ("The Unpublished Accounts"), only discovered several centuries later
 - a scathing attack on Justinian
 - full of lies and scurrilous gossip
 - one historian can write two histories!

What-Really-Happened

- from one perspective, all history is propaganda, distortions and lies
 - for the simple reason that it's been recorded by people who care
 - people who don't care don't write!
- but the lies of history are not all that hard to see through
 - especially, if there are **external sources**

What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

- **REMEMBERED HISTORY**
 - the collective memory of a living society
 - “**oral history**” is **primary evidence**
 - but memories are easily distorted
 - cf. the grandfather who doesn't want his grandchildren to know that he fled a battle
 - also, various “grandfathers” remember an event in different ways, which leads a large and often irreconcilable body of data
 - at heart, all history is “remembered”

What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

- **RECOVERED HISTORY**

- forgotten “remembered history”
- today, the most visible form of “recovered history” is **archaeology**
 - but also library research, decipherment
- all in all, “recovered” data seem less biased because they haven’t been tampered with, but what about context?
- how do we evaluate archaeological evidence?

What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

- **RECOVERED HISTORY**

- cf. **Pompeii**, destroyed in the eruption of **Mount Vesuvius** (79 CE)

- is this city representative of Rome in the day?

- a beach community full of wealthy people, gambling and prostitution

- cf. **Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii***

- full of 19th-century Protestant bias

What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

- **INVENTED HISTORY**

- myths, fabrications, lies about the past

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;

. . . it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5.19-28)

What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

- **INVENTED HISTORY**

- these sorts of historical distortion persist because people want to believe they're true
 - as such, invented histories are repeated often and in the process assume the force of truth
- in fact, what the “liars” are doing is satisfying a desperate need to see the past in a certain way
 - e.g., the Egyptian Captivity and the Hebrews' building the Pyramids

What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

- **INVENTED HISTORY**

- many examples from modern history, too
 - George Washington and the cherry tree
 - the “good ole days” of the American West
 - that simple, old-time religion in America
- but these “lies” *do* signify something
 - they show people’s hearts or sense of humor
- all in all, however, they give insight into the liars’ present, not their past

What-Really-Happened

- Conclusion: What is History?
 - so, the point of history is not just to uncover what-really-happened but to put the past into context and give it meaning and force in modern life
 - in some ways, history is the study of the *present* by looking at the past
 - seen that way, all (in)famous figures who've ever lived are “historians” of a sort: St. Augustine, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Buddha, Mohammad, and even Hitler

What-Really-Happened

- Conclusion: What is History?
 - the lesson is: if you control people's perception of the past, you control their path to the future!