

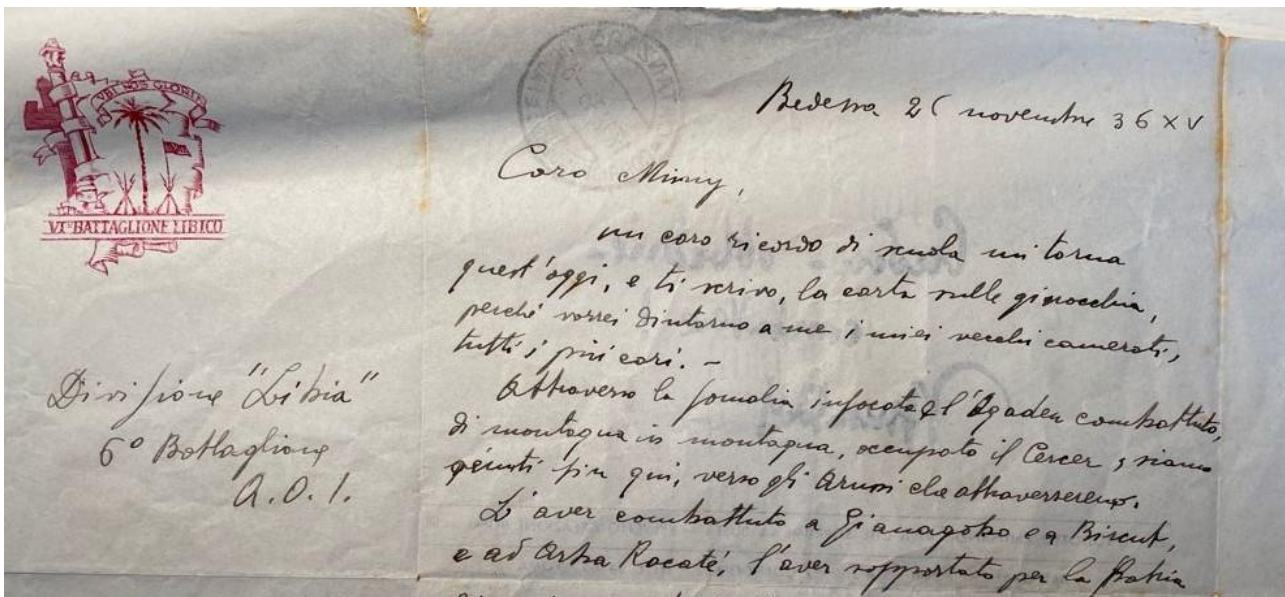
Historical Research and the Problem of Sources

Academic year 2023-2024

Syllabus

Coordinator: Olindo De Napoli, Università di Napoli Federico II

email: olindo.denapoli@unina.it



(Letter by an official of the Italian Army during the Italo-Ethiopian War, Ethiopia, 26 November 1936)

I and II Semester: 2023/2024

Description

The course consists of a series of two-hour lessons. Each meeting is composed of two parts: the first part consists of seminar-type lessons during which instructors develop a series of arguments on the approach to historical sources and discuss with the students; in the second part, PhD students (and possibly undergraduates) discuss the suggested readings. In each lesson professors and researchers of the SSM will take on the question of historical sources starting from the perspective of their past

and present researches.

General objectives: the course deals with historical sources, considering them in their variety and analyzing the possible interpretative problems their use raise. The main purpose of the course is to equip PhD students with a minimum "toolbox" to deal with the problems that the historian faces in identifying and interpreting the sources. General aim of the course is providing PhD students with a laboratory focused on the possibilities and risks of the historical work.

Readings: A few general readings are required for the course and some special readings are required for each lesson. Part of the materials is available online via the digital library or provided by the instructors in a shared SSM folder, or, in paper, at university libraries.

General readings:

1. Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*, Paris: A. Colin, 1974
2. Richard Evans, *In defence of history*, London: Granta Books, 1997
3. Edward Carr, *What is history?* New York: Knopf, 1964.

Translations are admitted.

First Semester

17 November 9-11 https://twitter.com/Nadav_Eyal/status/1724531730193723516/video/1
Olindo De Napoli (Università di Napoli Federico II)

Critique of the sources: general remarks

The first seminar aims at introducing the problem of historical critique and critique of sources. Through concrete examples, some classical historiographical reflections will be proposed on the problem of the relationship between the historian and the sources.

Readings:

- C.-V. Langlois, G. Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques*, Paris, Editions Kimé, 1992 (or. ed.: Paris, 1898), pp. 1-26,
http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/langlois_charles_victor/intro_etudes_historiques/seignobos_etudhisto.pdf ;
- M. Bloch, "Critique historique et critique du témoignage", *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations*. 5^e année, N. 1, 1950, pp. 1-8; in Italian: "Critica storica e critica della testimonianza", in *Storici e storia*, Einaudi, Torino, 1977, pp. 11 ff.,
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1W6PLQGpYW0jqeQLdQ7GL1u-msZ41hGSHs9dSnCmgFvo/edit?usp=sharing> .

23 November 9-11

Olindo De Napoli (Università di Napoli Federico II)

Critique of the sources: general remarks

The seminar focuses on the relationship between history and other disciplines, the possible different use of sources, and, in particular, the idea of history as a discipline of the context.

Readings:

- E.P. Thompson, "Rough Music: Le Charivari anglais", in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 27^e Année, no. 2, 1972, pp. 285-312;
- R. Darnton, "Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose", in Id, *The Great Cat*

Massacre and Other Episodes of French cultural history, New York, Basic Books, 1984, pp. 9-73.

7 December 9-11

Thaïs Gendry (Scuola Superiore Meridionale)

Judicial Colonial Sources: State Power, Racism and the Writing of History

This seminar will explore judicial archives of the colonial state in French West Africa between the 1920s and the 1930s. We will ask ourselves how to build a historical reflection based on sources that are deeply biased and firmly rooted in unequal relations of power. In the process, we will read colonial sources in ways that shed light on different levels: from interpersonal conflict, to major political trends within the French empire.

Reading:

- R. Ginio, “Colonial minds and African witchcraft: Interpretations of murder as seen in cases from French West Africa in the interwar Era”, in *The French Colonial Mind*, Volume 1, *Mental Maps of Empire and Colonial Encounters*, ed. by Martin Thomas, Nebraska University Press, 2012, 48-71.

18 January 9-11

Riccardo Cucciolla (Università L'Orientale)

Experiences and practices in Soviet Archives

In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, researching Soviet archives appears increasingly complicated, but not impossible. Due to its centralized nature, the Soviet Union maintained direct control over its "peripheries," and this was also evident in the detail and amount of material that was sent to the central organs. But not only that. There are several ways by which we can access those materials, not only in Moscow and affecting not only the republics. This seminar is intended to show the possibilities, horizons and limits of researching Soviet history from a perspective that is not necessarily Moscow-centric. At the same time, it wants to deal from a methodological point of view with what are the main critical issues in studying documents produced by a long totalitarian system with a limited private dimension.

Reading:

- A. Graziosi, “The New Soviet Archival Sources. Hypotheses for a Critical Assessment”, in *Cahiers du Monde russe*, Vol. 40, no. 1/2, 1999, pp. 13-63.

25 January 9-11

Aymeric Xu (Scuola Superiore Meridionale)

From Political Manipulation to Conceptual Importation: Same Sources, Different Histories in Modern China

This session of the seminar explores the evolution of modern Chinese historiography, spanning from the establishment of Communist China to the present, through an analysis of historical source materials. It investigates how these sources were initially employed to construct a pro-Communist narrative of Chinese history during the Mao era. Subsequently, it examines their role in reshaping a more nuanced social and cultural history in the post-Mao era, ultimately contributing to a global perspective on modern Chinese history within the framework of transnational history and Western historiographical concepts. The manipulation of sources for political and ideological purposes will be a central theme. Additionally, the contrasting agendas pursued by historians of China and historians in the Western tradition when utilizing identical notions and concepts in their research will be surveyed. This examination will touch on potential misreading of sources when taken out of

context due to the direct but problematic use of Western historical concepts in the writing of Chinese history.

Readings:

- Arif Dirlik, “Reversals, Ironies, Hegemonies: Notes on the Contemporary Historiography of Modern China,” *Modern China* 22, 3 (1996): 243–284.
- Huaiyin Li, “From Revolution to Modernization: The Paradigmatic Transition In Chinese Historiography In The Reform Era,” *History and Theory* 49, 3 (2010): 336–360.

13 February 11-13

David Foliard (CNRS - Laboratoire de Recherche sur les Cultures Anglophones)

Gravitational lenses and dark matter: the Colonial Visual Archive and its effect on African histories of photography

This session will address archival effects and the consequences of mass digitization upon the historical investigation into early African photography.

Reading:

- Daniel Foliard. *Photography as Absence: Implicit Histories (Africa, Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries)*. Sources. Material & Fieldwork in African Studies, 2023, Photos & Photographers, 6 | Photos & Photographers, pp.65-84

29 February 9-11

Ana Belem Fernández Castro (Scuola Superiore Meridionale)

The use of legal sources for historical research

This seminar seeks to explore the documentary value of judicial processes as sources for historical research, highlighting their potential usefulness to reconstruct the social and cultural scenarios that frame litigation and that are essential to understand the development and outcome of the judgment. Starting from a preliminary explanation of the general structure of lawsuits, we will explore the type of information that can be extracted from these sources, presenting some strategies as well to complete or contrast the data with other documentary resources when these are fragmentary or uncertain.

Readings:

- Kagan, R., *Lawsuits and Litigants in Castile. 1500-1700*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1981, pp. XVII-XXIV;
- Camphuijsen, F., Page, J., “Introduction: New Approaches to Late Medieval Court Records” *Open Library of Humanities* 69/5 (2019), pp. 1-26.