

## **How can sources help us to teach history ?**

By Jim Byrne

**Introduction** This short article is based on a lecture given to the Dublin branch of HTAI in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra. Its main purpose is to focus more accurately on our objectives in using source material in the teaching of history and to categorise the skills which source-based teaching can help develop.

From the start some general points need to be recognised. The use of sources in the classroom can be affected by the ability of the group being taught or by the wide range of abilities within a non-streamed group. The number of periods per week available to the teacher is also important. Nobody will deny that the preparation and use of source material is a time-consuming task. Then there is the problem about the availability of suitable sources. Given the complete lack of back-up to the teacher in Irish schools, suitable sources have to be sought out and often edited by the teacher personally for classroom use.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages**

Some advantages of the source-based approach are obvious. It is a more varied teaching method for both teachers and students. It is perhaps a better method of teaching because the student reaches his or her own conclusions, even if guided by the teacher, rather than being led directly to the answer. Finally, the skills of the historian are more easily taught using sources. Indeed it is arguable that these skills cannot be taught without using sources.

All disadvantages are equally obvious. Use of sources requires preparation and this means time and effort on the teacher's part. With a full school day these are not always readily available. Students are not professional historians nor should it be our aim to make them such. Generally source material will have to be selected and, depending on the class group, edited. Make no mistake about it - such selection and editing is a distortion of the historical task. As long as we realise this we may still be able to achieve some specific goals related to skills.

### **Objectives, Skills and Abilities**

Using sources can teach students a wide variety of the skills necessary for the study of history. These skills vary in importance and difficulty but may be conveniently grouped under three headings:

- A. Skills in understanding documents (written or visual) on the basis of internal evidence. In other words we look only at what the document says or shows without reference to anything else.
- B. Skills achieved by applying external criteria to the evidence. In other words a document is presented in its context.
- C. Higher skills which require a student to marry internal and external criteria before reaching conclusions.

Under each of these headings a variety of very specific skills can be taught and tested.

**A. Using Internal Evidence. 1. *Comprehension***

This is a low level skill much used in question 1 of the old Inter. Cert. paper. The student is required to summarise the content of a document and understand the terms used. In fact, this corresponds to a comprehension test on an English language paper.

**2. *Translation***

This skill requires the student to translate the content of a document from one form into another. A good example of this skill would be a student's ability to translate a tabulation of statistical information into a written paragraph.

**3. *Selection***

This is the skill which enables the student to select a fact or piece of evidence from the document in order to answer a specific question.

**4. *Analysis***

Here the skill required is the ability to compare two or more pieces of evidence within a single document or in several separate documents.

As you can see, all the above skills are straightforward and even self-evident.

However, they form the bases of all higher historical skills. Perhaps too we should remind ourselves that with young students we take nothing for granted !

**B. Using External Criteria with the Evidence. 5. *Recognition***

This is the skill whereby a student recognises a fact in the context of the document which has already been learned in a different context.

#### 6. *Application*

This is the skill whereby the student is able to link material within a document to his or her own experience or with ideas or happenings which are now current.

These skills require the student to use knowledge outside the document to further illumine the document itself. The mental agility required to do this obviously places these skills on a higher plane than the preceding skills 1, - 4.

### **C. Skills Using Internal and External Criteria.**

#### 7. *Synthesis*

This is one of the most important of the historical skills. It requires the student to select material from a variety of sources and then present this material in written form.

#### 8. *Inference*

Again this is a vital skill for the historian. It implies an ability to recognise and explain problems in a piece of evidence by referring to other parts of the same evidence or to a wider historical context.

#### 9. *Judgement*

The ability we would all like our students to achieve. This implies being sufficiently skilled to identify reliability, bias, assumptions etc. in a document. This identification can be made by reference to the content (e.g. style) or to knowledge about the writer or source of the evidence.

These last three skills we all recognise as being those most obviously associated with the historian. Yet in each case it will be seen that the skill required depends to a large degree on the ability to demonstrate the lower-level skills already discussed.

Having identified clearly what skills the use of sources can develop, it is up the teacher to decide which are most attainable with the group being taught.

### **Practical Use of Sources**

To illustrate practically some of the theory outlined above, a variety of sources are presented here. They relate to schooling and youth in Nazi Germany. The questions which follow the sources are intended to test the skills this article has discussed. The numbers in brackets refer to the skills numbered 1 - 9 above.

*Source A*

A visit to a Nazi girls' school, recorded in 'Education for Death' by Gregor Ziemer in 1942.

*The school bell called the girls ... Before I visited the classes I spoke to the head teacher. She told me that every class in the school was built around a course called 'Activities for W5men'. This course was divided into handwork, domestic science, cooking, house and garden work - and the most important section - breeding and hygiene. This section dealt with sex education, birth, childcare ...*

*Source B*

A school problem, from 'Other Men's Graves' by Peter Neumann, published in 1958.

*When Klaus came home from school he bullied me into helping him with his homework... Here is a maths problem picked out at random, 'A pilot on take off carries 12 bombs, each weighing 10 kilos. The plane flies to Warsaw (the capital of Poland and centre for Jews). It bombs the town. On take off with all the bombs on board and a fuel tank containing 1500 kilos of fuel, the aircraft weighed about 8 tons. When it returned from the crusade there are still 230 kilos of fuel left. What is the weight of the aircraft when empty ?*

*Source C*

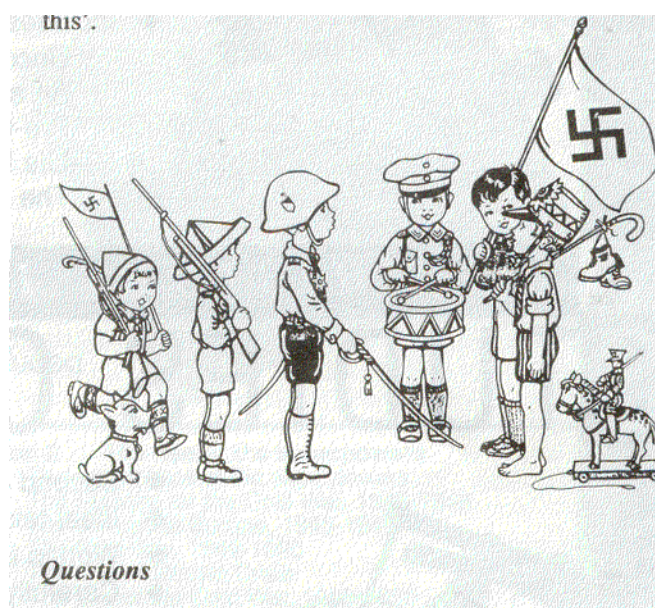
A German newspaper on education in 1939.

*All subjects - German language, history, geography, chemistry and maths - must concentrate on military subjects. They must glory in military service, German heroes and leaders and the strength of the new Germany ...*

Source D Timetable of a typical girls' school in Nazi Germany

Period	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
8.00-	German	German	German	German	German	German
8.50-	Geography	History	Singing	Geography	History	Singing
9.40	Race study	Race study	Race study	Race study	Party beliefs	Party beliefs
10-25	Break – with sports and special announcements					
11.00	Domestic science with mathematics every day					
12.10	The science of breeding (Eugenics) – Health/biology					
2.00 – 6.00	Sport every day					

Source E Illustration from a children's school book. The words printed under it read, 'Whoever wants to be a soldier must have a gun; he must load it with powder and heavy bullet; Kiddie, if you want to be a recruit, take note of this'.



Questions

1. What does source C say about German education? (1)
2. Based on source D write a description of a typical day at school. (2)
3. Who are presented as Germany's enemies in Source B? (3)
4. Examine sources A, C, D and E. What was the main purpose of German education for (a) girls and (b) boys? (4)

5. Source B refers to German planes bombing Warsaw. This was probably written after what date? Explain your answer. (5)
6. Why is there a reference to Jews in source B? (5)
7. Compare the school timetable in source D with your own. What are the differences? (4) Why do you think these differences are there? (5)
8. Based on all the sources above write a few paragraphs about Nazi education and schools. (7)
9. Source C mentions 'the strength of the new Germany' and was written in 1939. In 1945 would the writer have written the same thing? Explain your answer. (8)
10. Examine the cartoon in source E. How is becoming a Nazi soldier presented here for young children? What do you think was the purpose of this cartoon? (9)