

Historical Sources

Studying historical sources is an important part of studying history. They provide us with information about when an event took place, who was an important person at the time, what was significant about a historical event, where these events took place, how these events affected the people of that time and why these events happened. When studying historical sources it is important to note that there are two types of sources, primary sources and secondary sources.

Primary Sources

A primary source is a source that has come from the era or time that the event took place. Examples of a primary source are photographs, letters, diaries, speeches, maps, video and audio recordings.



The above image is a primary source. It is a photo of the anti-war movement in the United States during the 1970's. Think about what you can see in this picture. Looking at the people in it can you tell when the photo was taken? Who is in the picture? What do you think they are doing? Where are they? Why are they there? How did this affect history? When looking at a primary source you need to think about these questions.

Secondary Sources

A secondary source is a source that was created after the event took place. These sources have generally been put together after primary sources have been analysed. Examples of a

secondary source are books written about the event, documentaries, essays, surveys and other documentation.

“Politics changed from the focus on imperial powers to a power struggle between the West and East. This struggle that shaped the events of the second half of the Twentieth Century had humble beginnings in the treaties of the Allied victors. President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Prime Minister of Great Britain, Winston Churchill, and General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Josef Stalin worked together during the later years of the war, from the Atlantic Charter in August 1941 to the Yalta Summit in February 1945, however each involved faction had alternative interests in Europe, with Roosevelt wanting a peace established on ‘liberal-democratic ideals’ Stalin and Churchill, on the other hand, were aware of the change of social structure and politics after the wave of fascism and understood that ideology could not re-build war torn Europe. In this essay I will explain what meetings and agreements each of these three leaders reached in preparation for post-war Europe, and the results of these agreements.”

The above paragraph is an example of a secondary source. It is an excerpt of an essay about the agreements of the Allied leaders at the end of World War II. When looking at a secondary source you need to think about the following questions:

What period of history is the source talking about? Who are the figures in the source? What is the point of view of the author? What details can you take from this source?

