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5 Things Worth Knowing about History

by Peter Posefsky



Peter Posefsky teaches courses in Russian and Western European history. When not grading your papers, preparing for class or teaching, he likes going to the park with his daughter Minnie, watching movies and eating chocolate in its many forms. He has never worked for the C.I.A.

- 1) **History as an academic discipline emerged in the early nineteenth century** as part of a cultural movement known as Romanticism. Romantic thinkers preferred music and poetry to philosophy and logic and firmly rejected the application to human problems of the methods of natural scientists. The first historians argued that history was radically different because humans—unlike the entities studied by physicists, chemists and biologists—had the power to shape their own lives. Moreover, the cultures that gave their lives meaning were by definition unique, as were the events that made up history.
- 2) **History, a “new science,” was the study of the particular and the singular.** There were no universally valid laws in history as there were in physics or chemistry or even as some social scientists believed there were in economics, political science and sociology. For the first generation of university-trained historians, every age and people had its own truths, which it was their task to uncover and interpret to enrich the present.
- 3) **Historians have techniques designed to help them uncover time-bound and culturally specific truths.** These guide their collection, comparison and authentication of primary sources, which can include anything from published books to handwritten diaries, letters, works of art, oral testimonies, and objects of material culture.
- 4) **Most historians are confident that historical truths do exist, but they are not so confident about their ability to uncover them.** Thus historians spend less time asserting what actually happened than speculating about possibilities and comparing and contrasting diverse, often-irreconcilable perspectives on the same episodes.
- 5) **Historians are not very interested in short, factual answers.** They concentrate instead on the analysis of primary sources and the works of other historians to formulate their own interpretations. Creativity, imagination, empathy, and good writing skills are crucial. In fact, what unites all historians is the love of a good story, whether they study the United States, Europe, Africa or Asia, gender, ideas, politics, international relations, or one of the many other human constructions whose change over time interests them.