

**MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT  
OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE**

by Teodoro Tagliaferri (University of Naples Federico II)

No. 15 (January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

**1961**

**MINOR WRITINGS ON HISTORY AND HISTORIANS**

Arnold and Veronica Toynbee, *Problems of Research in International Relations*, in «International Studies», III, 1 (July, 1961), pp. 1-5.

**NOTE**

«Dr. Arnold Toynbee is the well-known author of *A Study of History*. Mrs. Veronica Toynbee is co-editor of *Survey of International Affairs 1939-46*. This article is the substance of a seminar discussion led by Dr. Toynbee at the [the India] School [of International Studies, New Delhi] on 15 April 1960» (ivi, p. 1, note).

## PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

by Arnold and Veronica Toynbee

It is a pleasure for us to be invited to contribute an article on this subject to «International Studies». We spent thirty-three years (1924-56 inclusive) in producing, in partnership, a survey of international affairs for Chatham House. This work brought us up against these problems in a practical way.

There have, of course, been international relations ever since there have been such things as local sovereign States in contact with each other. Our archaeologists have brought to light a good deal of information about the relations between the Sumerian city-States in the third millennium B.C. International relations have, in fact, been one of the important facets of history since the dawn of civilization. But, in current usage, the meaning of the term is usually restricted to the international relations of our own time. In other words, we mean contemporary international history. In our Chatham House survey of international affairs, we were writing only six months to eighteen months after the event when we were producing our inter-war annual volumes. When we were writing the history of the Second World War after it was over, we were sometimes writing twelve years or even fifteen years after the event. At these different intervals of time the same events may appear in an appreciably different perspective. All the same, what happened fifteen years ago, as well as what happened only six months ago, is "contemporary" compared to the international events of the third millennium B.C.

Is the writing of contemporary history feasible? Some people would contend that it is not – not even when one is dealing with a rather longer span of time than the immediately current events that are the subject of journalism. Even when we are dealing with events that are already one year or fifteen years back in the past, it is not possible (it may be objected) either to know the facts accurately or to study them dispassionately. This is true, but it is also

true when we are studying the events of the eighteenth or the eighth century of the Christian era or of the second or the third millennium B.C. One's feelings are faintly stirred even by the career of the Sumerian statesman Lugalzaggizi, and the ancient Egyptian religious and artistic revolutionary Ikhnoton is almost as controversial a figure as Franklin D. Roosevelt is. Besides being controversial, our information about less recent events is also defective and unsatisfactory, as our information about more recent events is. Most of the information about the less recent past has been lost. For contemporary affairs the amount of information is more abundant. It is true that the holders of this information often distort or suppress the truth for their own purposes, but it is also true that sometimes they succeed so well in this that they make it permanently impossible for future historians to penetrate the smoke-screen that they have thrown up; and this means that the history of the more remote past, as well as that of the more recent past, is liable to reach us in a distorted form. The Athenians have made it virtually impossible for us to see the history of ancient Greece through other eyes than theirs, and the Jews have done the same with the history of ancient Syria. We cannot now ever see either the Spartans or the Philistines as they really were.

The passage of time does, no doubt, generate what is called "the verdict of history", and this looks like the truth because it is no longer disputed. But this appearance of veracity is an illusion. "The verdict of history" is no more than a fable *convenue*. It is the story as told to us by the people who have won the monopoly of telling it, and who have taken advantage of this opportunity to tell the tale in the form that has best suited them. In short, the obstacles to studying contemporary history are obstacles to the study of the history of all periods.

It is true that a historian writing after the archives have been thrown open to non-official researchers will have one important advantage over the historian writing at a date at which these same documents are still being kept secret. On the other hand, the contemporary historian enjoys other advantages which the retrospective historian can never recapture. The retrospective historian does have access to the letter, but this is perhaps poor compensation for having no direct experience of the spirit. Every document is a sphinx. It will be

uninformative or, worse still, misleading if one does not hold the key to the riddle that the dead written word presents. The contemporary historian has the enormous advantage of having lived through the events that he is recording. His personal experience is a document that carries its own interpretation with it. And he can also draw on the personal experience of other living people – including, perhaps, some who have played a more important part in events, and who know more about their inner history than the historian himself. The best of all contemporary historians will be one who has previously played an active part in the life of his time. Two out of the three greatest ancient Greek historians, namely Thucydides and Polybius, were ex-men of action whose active careers had been cut short by exile in the one case and by deportation in the other. The careers of these two great historians indicate what are the most favourable conditions for becoming a historian. It is significant that both of them were students and writers of the history of their own times.

But, of course, the writing of contemporary history has its own special difficulties, besides the obvious handicap of having to be done without access to the relevant official documents. This handicap is tantalizing because the full meaning and purpose of these documents is known only to the people who have produced them, and this inside knowledge has to be obtained from them in their life-time, if it is ever to be obtained at all. The purpose for which an official document is produced is seldom that of bequeathing truthful information to future historians. Documents are produced as instruments of political action. Their purpose is to get something done, or to prevent something from being done, here and now. And some of the most important of the considerations involved may be so obvious to the makers of a document that it does not occur to them to put any statement of these considerations on paper. These are simply taken for granted as being common knowledge. Unfortunately, the documents usually do not reach the historian's hands until their makers, who could have interpreted them to him, are in their graves.

Meanwhile, the contemporary historian has to do the best he can with the information accessible to him, and much of this is of an inferior kind. He will be largely dependent on the press, and this is produced by people who may have little more inside knowledge than

the contemporary historian himself has. Moreover, press material is not only untrustworthy; it is voluminous. The contemporary historian will need the help of a skilled press-cutting service to analyze and classify this material and to reduce its bulk as nearly as possible to manageable proportions. The contemporary historian as well as his press-cutters will have to be linguists. Till recently it might have been enough to be able to read five Western languages: English, French, German, Spanish, Italian. By now, a knowledge of Russian, too, has become almost indispensable; and, as the voices of a larger and larger number of Asian and African countries become politically effective, the number of indispensable languages seems likely to increase beyond the limits of the repertory of even the most gifted linguist.

Apart from the press, the most important source of information accessible to the contemporary historian is likely to be the published memoirs of people who have taken a prominent part in recent events. On first thoughts, such memoirs might seem to be almost as good a source as the still inaccessible official documents. They have been written by people who have inside knowledge, and in some cases they are supported or illustrated by public documents which the memoir-writer has carried away with him from his public office into private life. On second thoughts, however, it will be obvious that, in using memoirs as historical sources, even greater caution is needed than in using the press. A memoir is frequently an apologia ; and the documents appended to it may be misleading even if they are textually accurate. They may be misleading through having been deliberately selected out of a mass of official material for the purpose of putting a favourable construction on the memoir-writer's own official acts.

What with memoirs and press-cuttings, the mass of information that the contemporary historian will have to sift and weigh will be so large that he will be driven to have recourse to team-work. The writing of the history of a single peace-time year can perhaps be managed by a team of two or three persons. But, if one is writing the history – even just the non-military side of the history – of a whole war, the minimum necessary number of collaborators may run into two figures. This creates a difficult problem, for there is no such

thing as collective thinking. All thinking is done by some single mind, and it is therefore difficult for more minds than one to collaborate on a piece of intellectual work without a loss of the unity of conception and execution that can be achieved by a single mind when the enterprise is not too vast for a single mind to cope with. A pair of minds may sometimes succeed in working in unison. Witness the unity of the work produced, in partnership, by Beatrice and Sidney Webb. We, too, in our Chatham House survey, found that collaboration was a practical possibility when it was limited to a pair of writers. But, with every addition to the numbers of the team, the difficulty of maintaining

unity increases disproportionately. This is one of the greatest of the problems now facing, not only historians, but all intellectual workers. We are still only at the beginning of groping our way towards a solution.

In conclusion, let us come back to the problem of bias, which so obviously besets the historian of contemporary events, though it is a problem for all historians, as has already been pointed out. The writer of contemporary history must, of course, do his best to approach his subject as dispassionately as if he were a neutral, or were someone writing about present-day affairs a thousand years hence, or were not a mere human being but a god. But suppose that the student of human affairs were to succeed in attaining the same emotional and moral detachment as a geologist attains without effort in studying a piece of rock or a physicist in studying an electron, would this be a satisfactory way of studying one's fellow-men? Would not one be likely, in the process, to have eliminated from one's picture of them almost everything that makes a human being human? A man or woman is not a stone or a particle, and it is therefore not illuminating to try to treat him or her like something that is non-human and inanimate. Feelings and moral judgments are surely of the essence of one human being's relation to another, even if this fellow human being who is the object of the historian's study has been dead for the last two hundred or two thousand years. Our feelings and judgments are a distorting medium of communication. At the same time they are an indispensable medium if we are to communicate with each other at all.

These considerations suggest that, while we must do our best to keep our feelings and our moral judgments within limits, we cannot expect to be able to eliminate them altogether, and ought not even to hope to achieve this. What we can and must do all the time is to strive to be aware of what our own personal bias is, and to make our readers aware of it as far as we know it. To recognize our human limitations is less misleading than to flatter ourselves that we have transcended them. Whether the historian's subject is the more recent or the less recent past, the historian himself is a human being who is studying his fellows. This is a situation from which he cannot escape, and, the more frankly he acknowledges it, the greater the chance that he will be giving himself of doing, in his line of work, the best job that is practicable for human nature.