How is the source base of the twentieth century different from that of earlier periods?

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Historians often debate when, exactly, the twentieth century began; that is, when the themes and trends that we have come to understand as defining this tumultuous, rapidly changing period first started, and when they ended. One place we can look to answer this question is the available primary resources that help us to understand this era. Because of enormous technological, social, cultural and political changes that began to develop in the late nineteenth century, the twentieth century is in some ways defined by the new kinds of sources that it left behind. Historians of the twentieth century are blessed with an enormous source base that is distinct in many ways from earlier periods. This source base, in turn, determines how we, as historians, explain the era. We can know more about what individual people, groups, and whole populations thought, felt, did, and experienced in the twentieth century than at any other time in history. But this abundance comes with significant new challenges as well.

New technologies, new media, and growing audiences

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the advent of revolutionary new communication and media technologies. Thanks to new ways to take and process pictures, and the development of smaller and cheaper cameras, news photography and personal photography became easier, cheaper, and more widespread. Radio became a staple form of entertainment and information in many homes, and the making of films – both for entertainment and for newsreels – increased dramatically. By mid-century, television news and entertainment had come into their own. The second half of the century saw the dawn of modern computing, followed in the late century by the internet and the world wide web. These new technologies represent for the historian potential new sources, enabling them to see and hear the past in an unprecedented way and to chart the social, cultural and political effects of mass communication. There is, however, a significant gap between the amount of material that was created – especially in the early century – and the amount that has been preserved.

With these new technologies came growing media and arts audiences. More people listened to or watched the news, bought and listened to popular music, went to the cinema, took and looked at photographs. The twentieth century saw a massive rise in popular readership of newspapers and the invention of the 'tabloid press', which increased sales of newspapers through more sensationalised reporting, the use of images, and the courting of controversy. This period also saw the dramatic expansion of the publishing industry, with an expansion of popular magazine titles and the creation of the mass paperback market for fiction and non-fiction readers. When we use these sources, we still don't know what every person who saw or read or heard them thought, but we can know that many more of them did.

New practices of self-expression

New technologies, improving standards of education, and cultural shifts in the way people thought of their 'selves' contributed to new practices of self-expression in the twentieth century. People had always painted, written, sung, danced, and engaged in other creative, emotive, and important forms of self-expression; but the twentieth century saw more and more people do this more and more often. They also used new technologies – audio recording equipment, film and then video cameras, typewriters and computers, for instance – to do so. This means that the twentieth century is marked by a huge rise in the number of sources that tell us about the way individual people thought, felt, and saw the world. Perhaps most significantly, we have more sources that tell us these things about non-elites who, by the twentieth century, were far more likely to engage in self-expression thanks to having more money, more education, and more free time, than they were in previous centuries. This plethora of more diverse 'ego documents' – documents written by an individual to communicate something about themselves – is a defining feature of the twentieth-century source base.

A changing state

There are few periods that witnessed as much governmental and bureaucratic change within countries, nations, and empires as the twentieth century. New government departments sprang up in response to increased human mobility; to the demand for better social services; to the general needs of rising populations, including policing and crime control; and to changing ideas of governance and the relationships between states and citizens. These different agencies and organisations in turn created massive amounts of records – ledgers, statistics, correspondence, fiscal reports, legal reports, police records, trial records, immigration records – the list could go on. None of these records were dramatically different from their analogous records in the centuries before, but there is vastly more of them for the twentieth century, and they were created more systematically.

Migration records are a good example. States had for several centuries made note of which people were on the move – especially people who moved between jurisdictions. But the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a huge rise in world migration, thanks to a globalising market, cheaper and faster travel, and wars, violence and political upheavals around the world. At the same time, racism and nativism in white, western nations saw them raise their borders and more carefully control who entered the country. This means that we have many thousand times more migration records for this period than at any other time in history.

The creation of the welfare state is another example of the way a changing state created new sources for historians. In most affluent nations starting in the early twentieth century, state-run social services began to increase and take over from the role once filled by the church and by charities. After the Second World War, many countries, including Britain, had established some form of 'welfare state': a form of government where the state, through tax revenues, theoretically guarantees access for all people to education, health care, housing, and social security in times of hardship, unemployment, and in old age. This social revolution, as some historians have described it, meant that the state had to keep records in new, more systematic, and more reliable ways, and meant that more people interacted with the state. The avalanche of records created by welfare states can be mined by historians for statistics about populations, for changing health, income, and work trends, and for the smaller stories of personal difficulty and perseverance as individual people moved through this new bureaucracy.

New global and transnational trends

The twentieth century also witnessed the birth of important international organisations and the development of new global trends. International humanitarian and reform organisations which began in the late nineteenth century to fight poverty, stop trafficking, or campaign for moral reform professionalised,

until by the late twentieth century they were a complex, international sector. Their records are plentiful and invaluable and offer a unique insight into new twentieth-century ways of thinking about and responding to the world's problems.

These organizations were joined by more formal and governmental organizations: the League of Nations, established to keep peace and improve living standards after the First World War, and then the United Nations, established after the Second World War. They were joined by others which monitored, controlled, and responded to matters of global importance – the International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration, the World Health Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, to name a few. Through the records of these massive organisations historians can gain an understanding of a new, more connected, more globalised, more mobile world.

This was also a world in crisis. The twentieth century was the most violent century on record. It has been marked by two world wars, collapsing empires, the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, the Rwandan genocide, Indian partition, and many dozens of major international conflicts, revolutions, and civil wars around the globe that were inflamed by the 'cold war' between the century's two superpowers. This violence, waged with new bombs, new machinery, and new automatic weapons, has left a large and terrible record, documented across the twentieth century's new technologies, which allows us to bear witness and to try to understand the causes and consequences of this age of unprecedented violence and destruction.

This was a century of immense social and political change in other ways as well. After centuries of informal and organised resistance, colonised peoples around the world were able to declare their independence from the empires that had controlled them in the middle decades of the twentieth century. As the British, French, Dutch, German, and Italian empires lost

more and more territories and countries to independence, both former coloniser and colonised alike struggled to determine what shape these new nations would take. This has created a huge number of records: both those created by the former colonial state, and those created by decolonisation movements around the world.

Decolonisation was perhaps the most significant, but by no means the only, new social and political movement at work in the twentieth century. This century, with all its violence and catastrophe, also witnessed the rise of new democratic and social movements, especially those that championed the rights of groups previously marginalised: the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the anti-apartheid movement, for example. The records created by and about these movements are invaluable as they represent a way to learn, in detail and with a frequency unseen before the twentieth century, about a new kind of social democracy, and about the collective and politicised voice of marginalised and non-white people.

Oral history and living memory

Another distinctive feature of the twentieth-century source base is that, for now at least, the period still lies within living memory. We can still talk to and record the words of some of the people who lived through the changes detailed above. Not only this, but we can access oral histories of those who are no longer alive, thanks to the pioneering work of early oral historians, working in the mid-to-late twentieth century and recording interviews with people from the generations before. This 'direct line' to the voices of the past, reflecting actively on their memories and experiences, does not exist for any other period in history.

Opportunities and challenges

What can we learn from this unique twentieth-century source base? What opportunities do historians of the twentieth century have to write new kinds of history? We can know and write more about people's thoughts and feelings, especially those

of poor, marginalised, 'ordinary' and humble people. We can use more reliable datasets and statistics. We can gain a much clearer idea of how the modern state functioned and how states collaborated; how information flowed transnationally, how policies were created internationally. We can know more about crime, about health, about family, about the intersectional experiences of individuals who tell us, through various means, of the experience of being a woman or a man, a black person or a white person, a disabled person, a young or an old person in a century of intense personal and collective change.

One feature of the records of the twentieth century that is not unique to them, but which is especially true of them, is that they lend themselves toward digitisation. Migration records have been scanned and are searchable by name. Individual archives – such as the League of Nations – have begun major digitisation projects to put all their material, character searchable, online. The twentieth century's explosion in print and audiovisual media is increasingly available in digital, searchable form. This has given us new tools to write family history, to create prosopography (the intense study of a group of people about whom little is known, which can help produce a picture of a typical or representative person from that group); it enables us to write more intimate microhistories and biographies. It allows for more transnational research, letting us find people, ideas, and things that crossed borders, it helps us find things that appear in multiple archives. Digitisation has also made the records of the past more accessible to non-academic historians and has empowered an exciting expansion of all kinds of public history.

It is also important to think about what we cannot learn from these exciting, unique and plentiful sources. Firstly, we cannot know how many records have been destroyed, nor what they may have told us. We have increasing evidence that colonial states, including Britain, destroyed huge amounts of records related to their colonial past during the period of decolonisation. We know that records of genocides have been expunged, and we know that institutions (run by the state, by religious institutions, and by charities) have obscured, hidden

and destroyed evidence of abuse, corruption, and violence.

Secondly, we need to ponder the huge number of things that happened which never got recorded in the first place. This includes the thoughts and feelings of people who for all kinds of personal and structural reasons were not empowered to write, speak or create art; and a smaller but still significant number of people who never interacted in any form with any state. It also includes some of the most severe forms of abuse and violence – which went unspoken and unwritten. Here, it is the material record – often in the form of mass graves and abandoned detention and concentration camps – to which we must turn to uncover some evidence of what happened in the all-too-near past.

Less dramatically, the records of the twentieth century still over-represent white people, affluent people, western people, and give us less information about non-white people, poor people, and people from what is now called 'the global south'. This is doubly true in some ways, because it is replicated through the uneven digitisation of the twentieth century's sources. As historian Lara Putnam writes 'The records of human social life now captured in the digitized world tell us so much about so much that we might forget to remember the systematic absences within them.'[1]

As we work with these detailed and digitised sources, I would also encourage students and their teachers to consider the ethics of finding out so much about so many people. Hospital records, love letters, crime reports: would the person have wanted these to survive to furnish the future historian with evidence for their arguments about the past? How do we sensitively treat and use these sources? Is this question more acute for the twentieth century, when a person or their immediate family could potentially still be alive, or do the opinions and privacy of the dead-and-gone cease to matter? Historians often leave the basic question of access to archivists, who determine through a series of rules and regulations when an archival document can be made available – or 'opened' – to researchers; but it is important for historians themselves to reflect upon these questions as well.

How can historians do justice to the sources that the twentieth century has left behind? How do we connect the millions – billions – of individual experiences that we can now learn about to a bigger story of the twentieth-century world? And as for the bigger story: does this unprecedented number, and unprecedented diversity, of sources make recognizing the large trends, the 'big story', of the period easier, or more difficult? Do so many different perspectives make it far more challenging for historians to say that they have 'the' explanation for why something happened in the past? These questions will not get any easier to answer for those historians who begin to look back at our present time. Historians of the *twenty-first* century (amongst whom will be the historians that today's teachers are training) will have to grapple with still more kinds and numbers of primary sources in our digitally connected, incredibly diverse, and ever-changing world.
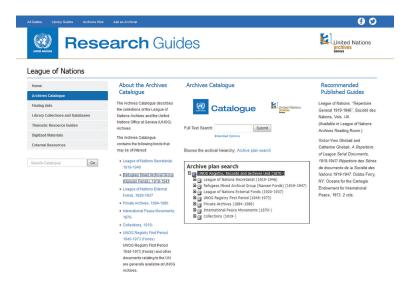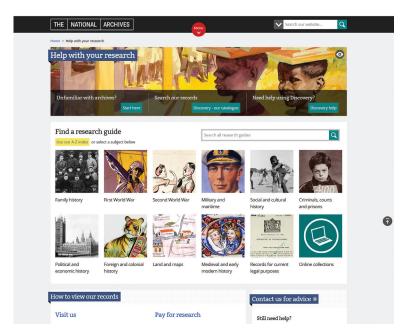
Further reading

Jane Caplan and John Torpey, eds., *Documenting Individual Identity: the development of state practices in the modern world* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

Joe Moran, 'Private lives, public histories: the diary in twentieth-century Britain' in *Journal of British Studies*, 54:1 (Jan. 2015), 138-162.

Shohei Sato '"Operation Legacy": Britain's destruction and concealment of colonial records worldwide' in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45:4 (2017), 697–719.

Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, 2009).

Online resources

The Oral History Society – www.ohs.org.uk

History Workshop Journal's 'Radical Objects' blog – www.historyworkshop.org.uk/category/radical-objects/

British Library Sounds Archive – sounds.bl.uk

Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenstein, *Digital History: a guide to gathering, preserving and presenting the past on the web* – chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory

Graham Smith, *Oral History* – www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html

REFERENCES
[1] Lara Putnam, 'The transnational and the text-searchable: digitized sources and the shadows they cast' in *The American Historical Review*, 121:2 (April 2016) 377–402.

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