

# Constructing a Historical Account

## Guiding Questions:

- What language do I use?
  - First / third-person?
- Is *my* voice unavoidable?
  - Memoir? Autobiography?
- How do I want to be portrayed? What do I value?

**Boundaries**

**Truth**

# What is History?

1. “I still vividly remember the sound of gun fire, people shouting for help, smoke from the crematorium chimney and the swearing of evil men during the summer of 1988 that claimed the lives of thousands of peaceful demonstrators. I was a final year Dentistry student.”
2. “The 8888 Uprising began as a student movement but thousands of monks, teachers, housewives, and doctors soon joined in. It eventually ended with a bloody military coup by the State Law and Order Restoration Council.”

# What is History?

- What is the **role of the historian**?
- How might we recognize the **'goal'** in accounts of history?
- Does this mean that there is always a slant to / agenda in historical accounts?
- If so, what are the implications on knowledge in history?

# History as Literary Artefact

- Hayden White: Histories are **narratives**, because they are bound by narrative conventions
- **Meaning** exists not only in the texts but also in the tropes adopted.
- Example: the **Singapore Story** could be emplotted as comedy, revealing also a conservative mindset to preserve what *history* has validated as a system of governing this country.
- Can we think of examples of histories that are tragedies, or satires, or romances?

# History as Political Battlefield

- “History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.”  
– Winston Churchill
- If the **goals** of historians differ, then the historical accounts can differ in the way they **represent** the past **depending** on the viewpoint or perspective of the community one represents.

## Consider this Excerpt A

- Consider this excerpt from ABC 5 Jerusalem Chronicle (part of the Babylonian Chronicles):
- “In the seventh year [598/597], the month of Kislîmu, the king of Akkad mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti-land, and besieged the city of Judah and on the second day of the month of Addaru he seized the city and captured the king. He appointed there a king of his own choice, received its heavy tribute and sent to Babylon.”

## Consider this Excerpt B

- Consider this excerpt from The Book of Daniel, in *Ketuvim* (Writings):
- In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. <sup>2</sup> The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God. These he brought to the land of Shinar, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his gods.

# History as Political Battlefield

- Who is the more powerful – the colonizer or colonized?
- Post-colonial criticism
- What other examples of differing perspectives to history can you think of?



# History as Interpretation, Re-Interpretation, Re-Re-Interpretation, ad infinitum

- “and if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it - backwards.” – Kierkegaard
- Progress is abstract, “and the concrete ends pursued by mankind arise from time to time out of the course of history, not from some source outside it.” – E H Carr

# Summary

- History is **interpretive** as the past doesn't speak for itself.
- We look back in time as a basis for constructing **meaning** for ourselves in the **present**.
- Our present perspectives and concerns (in turn shaped by our beliefs about our direction for the future), therefore, **influence** how we see the past.
- **Meaning** is given to historical accounts not only in the content of the narrative, but also through the tropes adopted in the narrative.
- Accounts of the past may differ from one another because of different **perspectives**, or due to passage of time.

# BIG QUESTION

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Can we speak of truth in history?