

Critically assess the view that the possibility of manipulating historical facts should lead us to conclude that there is no truth in history. [RI Prelim 2023]

We live in what many scholars call the 'post-truth' era, where scepticism of the possibility of truth abounds in many fields. A similar criticism has emerged of historical inquiry, with some arguing that the possibility of manipulating historical facts — both intentionally and unintentionally — renders historical truth elusive and unachievable. While the possibility for the historian to introduce bias into historical accounts does perhaps eliminate the possibility of historical accounts perfectly 'corresponding' to the events of the past, it would be hasty to dismiss the possibility of truth in history altogether: coherentist truth can still exist in history, as the historical method allows for an intersubjective understanding of the past. Ultimately, this coherent truth is more than sufficient for history — it is not by perfectly representing the past but rather by offering a narrative of history within the bounds of facts that we manage to learn from the mistakes of the past.

Sceptics often claim that truth is dead in history, because historians often manipulate facts to suit their agendas in historical accounts. Of course, this does unfortunately happen in history: political constraints often induce historians to omit details from their records or fabricate facts altogether. In the USSR, mention of the Holodomor was wiped from the historical record for over half a century, with historians citing fabricated statistics about the availability of grain and the death toll in Ukraine during the early 1930s. Similarly, in China, the Tiananmen Square Massacre remains excluded from official records today — the CCP's account of the events of June 4, 1989 omits any mention of the use of tanks to disperse the crowd of student protestors in Beijing. This has justifiably led to critics questioning the possibility of attaining historical truth altogether — if historians are given the licence to fabricate facts, it seems that historical accounts will not correspond to the events of the past.

Of course, these cases of outright fabrication are few and far between. However, it remains true that historians can often unintentionally yet inevitably manipulate historical

facts in a number of ways to suit their biases and agendas, threatening the possibility of objective truth in history. First, historians will have to select the historical facts to include in their accounts, introducing subjectivity that distorts the 'truth' of what happened. This can occur when they make subjective decisions about which facts are 'relevant' to their account — as Carr notes, just as a fisherman will select different fishing spots to catch different types of fish, a historian will select different historical facts to suit the account they wish to tell. For instance, a revisionist historian of the Cold War might — for the sake of uncovering new perspectives of the origins of the Cold War — select more sources that reflect the US was to blame, omitting sources that reflect Soviet expansionism in Eastern Europe. As such, historical accounts seem to inevitably bear the imprint of their historians' agendas, leading to subjectivity that deviates from 'what really happened'. Similarly, historians' accounts are similarly affected by subconscious biases that are difficult to mitigate — for instance, accounts of WWII written by Western historians often focus more heavily on Nazi atrocities as opposed to war rape by Allied soldiers, as they were brought up from young to think that the Allies were liberating Europe from the fascist Nazi empire. Hence, such biases — introduced by historians without their conscious knowledge — limit our possibility of attaining the truth of events of the past, as our accounts will inevitably deviate from this 'truth'.

Even without the problem of selectivity, language constrains the possibility of historians accessing and conveying correspondent truth, as it inevitably manipulates our understanding of historical facts. It is impossible to describe a historical event in value-free terms, as our language is coded with connotations and associations that affect the interpretation of these events. For example, Russian accounts of the war in Ukraine describe it as a "Russian special military operation", while Ukrainian accounts call it an "invasion". With the former phrase conveying a sense of neutral impartiality, while the latter is imbued with a sense of injustice, the historian's inevitable choice between these phrases will present the war in a different light, obfuscating the true nature of the war. With language serving as a coloured lens that distorts our understanding of the past, truth in history seems to be elusive.

Such a pessimistic view, however, seems to fixate merely on one version of truth — truth as correspondence with reality. This conception of truth might be an unrealistic ideal for history, given the nature of the field of inquiry. While we can easily check if scientific facts like “water boils at 100°C” correspond to physical reality by conducting an experiment, such a possibility for verification does not exist for history — the inexorable linear march of time means that we can never return to the past to verify whether our accounts correspond perfectly to the events of the age. Insofar as we can only learn about the past through sources and artefacts, we need a version of historical truth that accounts for this means of constructing knowledge, rather than unproductively holding historical knowledge to a high bar of correspondent truth that we can never ascertain.

Therefore, a more appropriate understanding of truth in history is coherentist in nature — we check if historical accounts are consistent and cohesive with each other, in order to arrive at an intersubjective understanding of what happened in the past. This is highly possible in history, since this goal is integrated into the historical method. Historians piece together their accounts by referring to numerous sources, checking if they corroborate and including what the sources agree on in their accounts. This cross-referencing occurs not only on the level of the individual account but also within the historical field as a whole — the different interpretations of historians are compared with one another before other scholars refine and synthesise an account of the past based on the points of intersubjective agreement between these historians’ accounts. This process of revision and synthesis is evident in the historiography of the Cold War — while initial accounts of how it began pinned blame variously on the US or the USSR, scholars by the 1990s had begun to recognise the roles that both countries played in the outbreak of tensions, converging on a similar account of the Cold War as sparked by ideologically-fuelled suspicions. This shows us how history can achieve intersubjective consensus over time, making coherentist truth possible even when individual accounts by historians might unwittingly manipulate some facts.

Additionally, historians are able to identify and discard accounts of the past that heavily manipulate or even fabricate facts of the past. The fact that we know the Holodomor and Tiananmen Square Massacre were omitted by the official Soviet and Chinese records of

history shows us that these intentional manipulations can be discredited in a coherentist conception of truth — by checking the accounts of these historians against that of other sources (e.g. Western accounts of the Holodomor and Tiananmen) and questioning their possibly hidden motivations (e.g. their writing under Soviet and CCP censorship), we can spot accounts that do not cohere with our intersubjective consensus on what happened in the past and discard these manipulated historical accounts from our historical knowledge. As such, manipulations of historical facts do not pose a fatal challenge to the possibility of coherentist historical truth — the historical method enables us to construct an intersubjective account of history independent of these fabrications.

Overall, attaining coherentist truth is more than sufficient for the historical endeavour, because an intersubjective consensus on the events of the past is enough to allow us to learn from them. We seek correspondence to reality in other fields because it is only with correspondent truth that knowledge in the field becomes useful — if our knowledge that haemoglobin carries oxygen in our blood does not correspond to reality, then medicine would not be able to achieve its aim of treating diseases like anaemia, since the field would be operating on completely mistaken assumptions of how oxygen transport works in the real human body. However, we do not need to have an account that perfectly corresponds to the past to learn from it. Even if our accounts of Hitler's rise omit some of the exact reasons why he came to power, our intersubjective consensus that the punishing reparations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles led to the popularity of extremist ideology is already instructive for future generations — that is sufficient for the Allied powers to support the reconstruction of Western Germany after WWII. Thus, insofar as our historical accounts cohere with each other, history will have succeeded in its aim of helping us understand our past mistakes and learn from them. In fact, coherence is more important than correspondence in this regard — to learn from history, it is more important to have a cogent set of historical accounts that illuminates a lesson for future generations, as opposed to a perfectly comprehensive and objective chronicle of what 'really' happened that does not form a coherent narrative. Coherentist truth in history is sufficient for its purposes, unlike in other fields.

Overall, while it is true that the inevitable manipulation of historical facts renders correspondent truth elusive in the field, sceptics of truth in history are ultimately barking up the wrong tree — we neither need nor strive for correspondent truth in history, since it is neither possible given the nature of the field nor productive given the aims of the inquiry. Ultimately, the historical methods sufficiently mitigate the biases and manipulations of facts, enabling us to access coherentist truth in history.

AO1: 13/15   AO2: 8/10   AO3: 5/5   Total: 26/30

### **Examiner's Comments**

Excellent piece that addresses the possibility of manipulation and more importantly why and how truth can still be found in the field. Good use of examples, with clear and concise writing. Comprehensive understanding of the nature of construction of knowledge in history.