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Whose Story? His-Story.

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Whose Story? His-Story.

Abstract

The essay instructions finally landed in front of me. I passed the extra sheets on and quickly glanced over the page, hoping that the prompt would be inspiring. There were two open-ended options from which to choose: military and social/political aspects of the war. My eyes first fell upon the social option and I pondered using this opportunity to shed light on the experiences of women during the war. I'd done this before – used assignments to explore history's untold stories – and found it interesting. Then, in a fit of frustration that erupted out of nowhere, I thought to myself that I didn't want to have to write about “women in [insert historical event typically told from a white male perspective]” again. After all, I'd never before received a prompt that allowed me to investigate the intricacies of military tactics during wartime. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, A People's History of the United States, Class, Education, Gender, Gettysburg College, historians, history, Howard Zinn, Male Privilege, Michael Bellesiles, military history, Privilege, Race, social history, war, White Privilege, women's history

Disciplines

African American Studies | Civic and Community Engagement | History | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Women's History | Women's Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward



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March 28, 2016

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Just like that, a switch flipped in my mind.

Immediately I began to imagine stoic formations of troops waiting to enter battle amid smoke and dirt. I imagined the dramatic order to go up over the top leaving an officer's lips and rows upon rows of men scrambling over muddy trench walls into no man's land. I imagined the heroic advance, moving forward into hellish fire with determination. Glorious, glorious warfare! I wanted to pen descriptions of it all and spend weeks immersed in books describing the details of ill-fated offensives and nail-biting defensive maneuvers. So, that's what I did. I wrote all about a specific army's performance and loved every minute of it.

But I never stopped feeling guilty.

I felt that I had somehow betrayed the women who lived through the war by choosing not to write about their experiences. As if I hadn't fulfilled my role as a woman by being an advocate for the history of the women who came before me. I identify as a woman, so aren't I therefore responsible for ensuring that the stories of other women are brought forth? I wasn't limited to just discussing women, either. I certainly could have used the opportunity to discuss race and class of the period as well. I could have viewed the

social aspects of the war more complexly than I initially did. I could have done all of these things, but I didn't.

A part of me just wanted to write traditional military history, which I'd never done before. But another part of me was wary of writing social history. I was afraid of falling into a kind of Howard Zinn-esque history, in which the history of socially marginalized groups was brought to the forefront but a full, complete narrative of events remained elusive. I didn't want to be seen as a historian whose work reflected her political views. I knew what it meant to do history well: following the evidence, employing a variety of sources, and viewing history through an objective lens. I had analyzed case studies of what constituted poor history, of historians fabricating and [cherry-picking evidence](#) to suit their political views. Many of these case studies, though not all, involved historians with liberal political views attempting to incorporate social history into their work. I desperately wanted to avoid being known first for my liberal politics and only second for my ability to write history well.

I wanted to do history well. Therein lies the problem. The rules that I was attempting to follow in order to do history well reflect the privileged perspectives of the white men who dominated the academic field for decades. Following the evidence, for example, often applies to written documents exclusively with other kinds of sources referenced only on the side. This in itself is inherently exclusionary, as the history of those who could not write or whose families were not socially powerful enough to be recorded on any deeds or permanent documents – due to class, race, gender, religion, etc. – are left out of the story. So we can follow the evidence, yes. But in following the documents that highlight the voices of the privileged few we are simply retelling the same old stories and continuing to ignore the history that exists between the lines.

Our view of the study of history is fundamentally incorrect. What we consider to be valid, legitimate history is the product of generations upon generations of white men studying generations upon generations of white men. So, by extension, social history – the history of any other demographic – is rendered illegitimate and invalid by comparison. It is necessary for us, therefore, to redefine what it means to do history well. We need to treat social history neither as an afterthought nor as a side note, but instead as the foundation that created the landmark events we so often limit ourselves to. That foundation relies upon the stories of people of color, of women, and of less privileged classes just as much as it relies upon those of white men. And sometimes to find these stories we have to dig a little deeper, take a different approach: one that often requires us to use interdisciplinary methods pulled from the social sciences. When you take into account the reality that these interdisciplinary methods are necessary because of the systemic injustices that have buried some voices and raised up others, it becomes apparent that to actually do “good history” we *must* redefine the principles with which we've become complacent. We do a disservice to the people who came before us every day that we continue to define “good history” through a narrow set of principles.

After all, the decision *not* to do social history is just as political as the decision *to* do social history.

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