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Library Research Award  

Contemplation of My Research Project  

The enterprise of developing my research project on Heinrich Von Treitschke has been the single most important academic experience of my scholarly career, as it gave me a firm understanding of the methodology of historical research, a proper perspective on evaluating sources, and, for me most importantly, my first true encounter with the joys and knowledge that spring forth from the total emersion of oneself into a specific time period. I was able to learn, with significant help from my mentor on the project Dr. Elizabeth Williams and other OSU faculty, the right way to gather sources and construct a research paper.

Choosing the topic for my project was surprisingly difficult and took a large amount of background research to accomplish. Though I had written research papers before, never had I written one of this size. I was intensely worried that I might choose a weak topic. Fortunately for me, I had the guidance of Dr. Williams, who helped me select an area of history to explore. I knew I wanted my scope of research to fall somewhere in between the late 19th Century and the end of World War I. I was torn, however, between focusing on the Russian or German experience of this time period. Dr. Williams recommended two general textbooks on each country, which I read over the summer before the project started. Though it was difficult to choose between the two, the dynamism of Germany, as well as the larger than life characters that operated within this Epoch, proved too tempting. I next sought to narrow my research even further, to a specific political or cultural
movement within this parameter. My general reading, as well as the information I gained from a WWI class I was taking at this time, pointed me towards the study of German militarism and the important figures that drove the development of this trend. Having finally settled upon a subject, I was able to begin gathering my sources.

Building my bibliography taught me invaluable skills in accumulating and evaluating sources. I began by reading the most prominent scholarly works on German militarism, which fell into two camps: the German apologists, and those that blamed Germany for causing WWI. From the bibliographies of these works, I began constructing a potential bibliography of my own. I was also able to identify some of the major figures in this movement and included their biographies, as well as their major writings in my bibliography. Once I had this list of sources, I created a reading schedule, which would allow me to study them in a timely manner. The lesson that I struggled with the most, and therefore perhaps the most significant lesson I learned during my project, was that it is better to spend a large amount of time reflecting on the purpose and focus of one’s paper, than to just dive into the sources and develop one’s thesis on the fly. Looking back on the notes of all the books I read, it is embarrassing how many were not useful for my paper. For example, I wrote ten pages on Friedrich Nietzsche before deciding not to include him in my paper. I was far too eager to build a large bibliography and did not take the proper amount of time to consider how they would be used in my final work.
Understanding how to fully utilize the library search engine, the ability to procure difficult to find books, and the proper methods of using historical databases were all important skills that I was able to hone during this project. Though I had used the Boss search engine with previous projects, my searches were unrefined and inefficient. Through frequent use and a fair amount of trial and error, I was able to make much better use of this valuable tool. I began to employ the refining mechanisms in my searches, such as selecting the type of content, limiting the range of publication date, and employing the appropriate subject term limitations. I also came to more quickly recognize the various types of sources, the best way to access these sources, and the manner in which to determine if it was worth exploring a source further. Additionally, I became familiar with the best avenues of obtaining books that the Oklahoma State Library did not posses. I discovered WorldCat and used it to find books in nearby libraries, such as the University of Oklahoma's library. Furthermore, Dr. Williams explained to me what Inter-Library Loan was and the process of using it. Finally, I learned how to evaluate potentially useful databases and discover sources from within them. I made use of several online databases, such as the Hathi Trust Digital Library and the German History in Documents and Images database. From these I was able to find sources from over a century ago and incorporate them into my paper.

In terms of evaluating primary sources, this project gave me a greater understanding of judging a sources quality. I learned to contemplate the purpose of the work and how this purpose might affect its content. For example an English propaganda pamphlet on a German professor might not convey a full understanding
of its subject’s teachings. Additionally, I came to realize one has to research the author of a document before one can hope to use it. For me this became most clear when reading about the exploits of Karl Peters, a German adventurer who was a notorious self-publicist.

The most enjoyable part of my project involved the experience of immersing myself in another time period. I was able to use my German, in a very limited way, for the first time outside of my language classes, which was exciting. Reading eloquent lectures, excerpts from fiery right-wing meetings, and vicious propaganda gave me some understanding of the fascinating cultural climate in Europe leading up to World War I. This project showed me the value of historical research and both gave me the skills and motivation to pursue similar research in the future.