How to Use the Digital History Reader

Evidence: Photographs

Photographs often seem to capture events truthfully and realistically. In the past, historians used photography alongside narrative to "show" what really happened. More recently, however, historians have become much more interested in what photographs actually reveal and how we should go about "reading" them. Although photographs may seem to capture a moment in time, they are, in fact, usually deliberately framed images that we must carefully contextualize in order to understand what they convey. Photography is a valuable source of historical data, but we must scrutinize and question photographs the same way we do written sources.

Take the following image:

Without the context, it is very difficult to discern exactly what the image captures. It appears to show a large group of mostly men outside of what appears to be a factory. But what are they doing? When and where was the photograph taken? If we look to clothing and architecture to provide clues, we might tentatively conclude that the photograph was taken in Germany in the 1930s. Luckily, however, we can glean much more about the image from the caption provided, assuming that the caption is factually accurate.

According to the caption, the photograph shows a large group of unemployed men waiting for welfare payments in the Neukölln neighborhood of Berlin. We can presume, then, that the photograph was taken during the first years of the Depression, between 1930 and 1933, although we can't establish a firm date without further information. Yet the image is instructive in another way. Look carefully at the men in the foreground. They appear to be looking back toward the photographer, who, based on the angle of the shot, most likely took the photograph from a perch above the workers. Rather than merely capturing the moment, the photographer is actually affecting the scene. It is important to think of photography as an active process, rather than as a passive capturing of "reality." When you examine photographs, always take into account the points of view of the photographers and how the images frame and directly influence the situations they capture.