

**Decoding Primary Sources and Historical Arguments:
Defining what Students Have to Do
History Learning Project
Oxford, April 1, 2009
Appendix 4**

Student progress in the making of historical arguments

The following two samples of a single student's work have been selected to show the student's progress in making substantive and critical historical arguments about the nature of violence perpetrated during the Holocaust.

Student Sample 1 (early in the semester)

"History is a relative subject which can be viewed in different lights. For example, the underlying causes of the extermination of Jews can be viewed in many theoretical approaches. The book The Origins of Nazi Violence by Enzo Traverso approached the Holocaust in a material and ideological way... On the other hand, the book The Roots of Evil by Ervin Staub approached the Holocaust from a psychological point of view."

Analysis

The student is aware of possibilities, but hasn't made a commitment to any of them. Here the student is also parroting what he or she has been told in class about the approaches of the two authors.

Student Sample 2 (final paper)

"This paper seeks to discuss why much of the German population willingly conformed to extermination during World War II. Three specific aspects of this question will be analyzed: 1) The effects of post-World War I and anti-Semitic feelings before extermination began 2) The experience of duress felt by the German population brought on by the Nazi regime 3) the effect the role of power has on an ordinary person. These aspects created an environment in which ordinary people could commit atrocities. Specifically, examples of ordinary people committing atrocities will be taken from Police Battalion 101. This was a large group of ordinary Germans who were assigned to the task of killing and deporting Jews and Poles in Poland."

Analysis

This student made great strides in understanding what historians do, how they make arguments and how to marshal evidence. He made his own confident and relatively informed argument in the final piece, although he should have positioned himself in a debate with other authors, especially considering that he uses the same evidence they do. He is clear about the propositions he is defending and he provides specific evidence in support of those propositions.