

Assignment: Secondary source critique

Due: Thursday, April 17, 2:30 PM

Secondary sources are historians' reconstructions (or interpretations) of the past. Most of what any one person knows about the past comes from reading secondary sources, since it would take a lifetime, or more, to master and interpret the primary sources for any one historical period and place. Secondary sources also help frame the questions that motivate and guide research in primary sources. For both those reasons, it is important to be attentive and critical—not necessarily in a negative sense—when reading secondary sources. This assignment is intended to develop your skills in criticizing secondary sources.

For this assignment, you will analyze Joseph Klait's essay, "Witchcraft trials and absolute monarchy in Alsace" (e-reserve). In 3-5 pages (about 900-1500 words), address the following questions:

1. What is the author's thesis—the main point he is trying to establish?
2. What are the important parts of his argument?
3. What sources are used to support the argument?
4. How successfully does the author support his thesis? Does the argument convince you? Do the sources support the argument adequately? What questions does the source raise for you?

All of these questions are interrelated; your paper should not be a simply a list of answers to individual questions, but a coherent essay with an introduction and conclusion. It is not a *book report*, which would address only the first three questions; instead, it is a *critical essay* or *critique* of the source.

Papers must be typed, double-spaced, with at least one-inch margins on all sides. (A 1.5 inch left margin would be nice, since it gives me and your peer editor more room to write comments). Please give a full citation, in a footnote, to Klait and any other source you use; subsequent quotations or references may be cited by page number in parentheses after the sentence. (Example: "Briggs claims that, despite beliefs to the contrary, 'historical European witchcraft is, quite simply, a fiction' (p. 6).") You must use *footnotes* to cite sources for any facts or interpretations that you take from other sources, unless they are common knowledge. (Example of common knowledge: "The Inquisition used torture." Example of a fact that is not common knowledge: "Inquisitors were not allowed to use torture themselves until Pope Alexander IV granted them permission, in his decretal *Ut negotium* of 1256."¹) You do *not* need to provide a bibliography. Remember that footnote forms are not the same as bibliographic forms; see Rampolla for models.

Reminder: Your essay will be given to another student in the course for peer review, and you will review one of your fellow students' essays.

Please ask me if you have any questions about this assignment.

¹ Edward Peters, *Torture*, expanded ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 236.