

Fundamentals of EVIDENCE ANALYSIS



BASIC ISSUES

1.1 Analysis & Mindset

As history researchers, we do not speculate. We test. We critically observe and carefully record. Then we weigh the accumulated evidence, analyzing the individual parts as well as the whole, without favoring any theory. Bias, ego, ideology, patronage, prejudice, pride, or shame cannot shape our decisions as we appraise our evidence. To do so is to warp reality and deny ourselves the understanding of the past that is, after all, the reason for our labor.

The historian Barbara Tuchman has famously described evidence as a kaleidoscope.* As researchers, we can appreciate that analogy. When we gather under a lens all our bits and shards of evidence, we form a mental picture of a time, place, event, or person. Yet the next time we peer into our kaleidoscope, those same fragments may form a different picture. Tuchman's analogy, taken out of the context, could also suggest that evidence is random and that one view can be as good as another. Experienced researchers know better.

History's surviving fragments might also be likened to a chain of DNA. To the untrained eye, the endlessly twisted coils of letters appear to be a string of random repeats. They make sense only when we learn to read the string, interpreting both the parts and the whole, and then explain those interpretations to others in a meaningful way.

Every research project produces a chain of records with some obvious patterns—both repeats and mutations. As with physical DNA, those patterns identify the people we study and the circumstances in which

* Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (1962; reprint, New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 442.