

Official Documents

David Trask

Guilford Technical Community College

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One of the first questions historians ask when analyzing documents is “who is the author?” The author is often seen as a historical actor with goals or experiences that shape the document. Is the author male or female? An identifiable member of a minority or majority ethnic group? A possessor or a pursuer of political power, economic wealth, or social status? What is the author’s purpose in writing the document? To what extent does the statement provide an accurate insight into events? This kind of information can provide a starting point for analysis.



But what if the author is not an individual? What if the author is a national government, a corporation, a legislative body, or a United Nations commission? How does this affect historical analysis? These official, and often “authorless,” documents are staple features of all societies. They include government reports and laws, press releases, diplomatic communication, and local policy statements. How should historians respond to these “authorless” documents? If they have no author, can we assume they have no bias?

Many of these writings are pretty bland in their language. Lively events are submerged in legalistic language and stripped of emotion. If you came “cold” to the *Treaty of Versailles* that ended World War I, would special terms such as the war guilt clause leap out at you as the obvious basis for future grievances and fuel for a political movement? Authorless documents present a different set of issues for analysis.

Even without an identifiable author, these documents are still “historically constructed” writings ripe for careful analysis. Understanding the nature of the processes that resulted in a particular authorless document, historians are able to mine these sources for more information than might be readily apparent to the novice reader. For example, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* was the result of a long, drawn out negotiation among many contending parties in the French National Assembly in 1789. As evidence of these compromises, historians point to the provisions calling for liberty and those calling for property rights. The sweeping declaration of personal liberty was a demand of the more radical members of the Assembly, while the guarantee of property rights satisfied the more conservative members. Paying attention to nuances such as these gives historians important clues into the underlying nature of these official documents.

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What was the formal purpose of the document? Formal statements of purpose can include the terms of an alliance, a declaration of war, a treaty of peace, a statement of diplomatic recognition, a trade agreement, or a communiqué of mutual understandings. Agreements also have instrumental purposes. These are underlying and often unstated agendas that are not immediately apparent. For example is the goal of an alliance to prepare for war or is it to make the allies appear powerful so they can avoid war? Is the goal of a treaty to create terms that will treat a defeated foe fairly or to insure that it cannot reestablish itself as a threat for decades to come?

Answers to these questions are based on an understanding of the document and its historical context. Often an uncritical acceptance of the surface meaning of the source can lead you astray. Nevertheless, reading the entire document is an important place to start. What, on the surface, does the document actually say? Write down your initial speculations of what is involved. Note where the document fits in relation to other issues you are studying. Check the title and names of any people mentioned against other sources. Are you looking at a famous pronouncement or treaty? Was the decree reversed the following month? Then go back and read the document carefully. Make a list of unfamiliar terms and research their meaning. Write down the names of all countries involved as well as references to specific policies or issues. Note any statements that do not make sense.

The formal relations between nations, the work of diplomats, produce a unique kind of official documents. Diplomacy is largely based on the creation and dissemination of messages that are based on established conventions. Basic diplomatic processes convey messages between governments, often through official spokespersons. Traditionally there have been debates over how accurately foreign policy reflects the ideas of government officials. Some argue that the need to protect national security means that diplomacy does not reflect shifts in leadership within nations.

Nations play for high stakes and need to assert their interests while avoiding inflammatory language that might disrupt diplomatic relations or insult other countries. Diplomatic documents, therefore, often use formulaic language stating concerns delicately. This language has emerged over several centuries and such communications tend to be both bland and precise. Many citizens, for example, have heard about joint communiqués issued after public meetings asserting that “a frank exchange of views” took place. Sometimes we also get the accompanying translation that “frank” means that there was a lot of shouting back and forth. The idea that a meeting resulted in “agreement in principle” actually means that neither nation plans to take any action in relation to the issue under discussion. These “conventions” help nations work toward solutions in moments of strong emotion and high stakes. Analyzing these documents means uncovering the decision-making processes and the stylized language of the governments involved.

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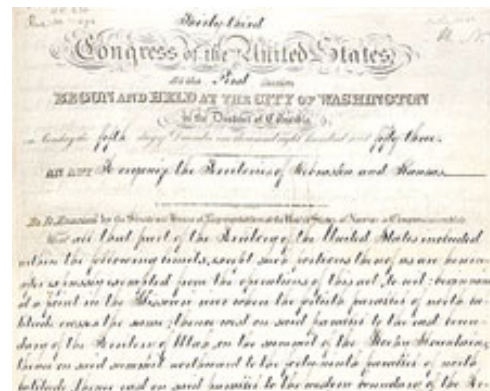
Official documents exist for a wide variety of reasons. Sometimes the identity of a writer is deliberately concealed. In other situations, documents are produced by committees whose members claim joint authorship or are negotiated among a number of groups or governments. The common practice is to say that “the government said” or “the committee decided,” treating documents as historical actors that decree or demand even though we have great difficulty saying exactly who is involved.

The first step, then, is to ask who created a document. Is the work attributed to an individual or is it the presentation of a committee, an organization, or a government? What does the document say about its origins? Is it signed? If the statement appears to be authorless, try to figure out what it claims to be. Then ask yourself if the statement has additional clues. Are you looking at a treaty, a diplomatic note, or an instruction to an embassy? The answers to these questions help establish the direction of your analysis.

The identity of an author may be deliberately concealed from view. For example, a national government official may publish an article in a major journal such as *Foreign Affairs* or be quoted “off the record” in a newspaper. Sometimes an organization does this in an effort to test reactions to an upcoming policy initiative or provide the rationale for a policy already in place. The article may be signed “Anonymous” or “X,” while the news source may be identified as a “high ranking” official. The goal of this approach is to prevent recrimination against the author or the government in case of negative public or international reaction.

In other cases, a document is signed by a committee or by committee members. The individual preparing the document tries to capture the “sense” of the committee. While the “known” writer may have been influential, the committee perspectives also shaped the final document. The press releases and other documents produced over the last half century by the African National Congress are frequently presented as the work of committees. Today, the [ANC website](#) adds the notation that Nelson Mandela was present or approved of the statement. This attribution should not be taken as proof that Mandela, the former president of South Africa, actually wrote each of these statements, but they do imply his agreement with the views expressed in the document.

When working with official documents, we often start with a definable document over which no individual can claim authorship. Congressional bills, for example, often begin but do not end up with identifiable authors. A bill, once introduced, goes to a subcommittee for review and, if approved there, goes on to a committee for further review or modification. Once the bill reaches the legislative floor it may be further modified by amendment. If it passes, the bill goes to the other branch of Congress that repeats the process of review and amendment. Then, in many



Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)

cases the two different versions of the bill—the one that passed the House and the one that received Senate approval—have to be reconciled by a conference committee. New features are often added during the conference.

In this example of the legislative process, there generally is an identifiable “author” of the bill—members of Congress and their staffs—but the final product is the result of a process that may have amended the bill into a form that bears little resemblance to the original proposal even though the legislation may still be known as the Smith-Jones Act. The process involves many actors and many decision points. Along the way there were lobbyists who initiated or modified the proposal, Congressional staffers whose understanding of the issues helped shape the language of the law, and Congressmen and women who agreed to support the bill only if it contained an extraneous provision of interest to voters in one state or district or to a special interest group. While it is often possible to identify the person who inserted a particular provision, there is no clear author for the totality of the measure.

The same issues of analysis apply to other kinds of organization. Corporations often “speak” as legally constituted entities (in contrast to small business owners who are readily identifiable as the voices of their own companies). This is true because public corporations are owned by stockholders who have no role in daily management. Indeed the owners (stockholders) do not directly authorize specific actions of a company except at rare moments when they are asked to approve the decisions of executives at stockholder meetings. They reach their decisions through bureaucratic processes that try to account for all of the different areas of corporate activity and concern. Similarly, churches often speak through councils that issue their statements collectively.

The United Nations (UN) provides another good example. One of its best-known measures is the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(1948\)](#). The *Declaration* states that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.” Who wrote this statement? The [UN description](#) of this passage of the declaration refers to Eleanor Roosevelt, an inspiration for the declaration, and Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1997. Overall, though, it presents nations rather than people as the prime actors in its development. Thus, passage of the *Declaration* is portrayed as the result of widespread consensus.

We rarely refer to these official documents as “authorless,” saying instead the Smith-Jones Act or the UN declaration; that the church “said” or Congress “passed” a resolution. Remembering the difference between the historical actions of individual actors and the processes created by people working in groups is

important, even though this approach separates individuals from the processes they create. This elimination of an identifiable writer of a document does not make the document neutral—but neither does it mean that the agency that produced it can be automatically regarded as an author comparable to human authors.



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Official documents are written within a historical and organizational context. When analyzing an official document, think about the events and issues of the time period and apply this knowledge to a close analysis of the statement and the processes that produced it. If it is a diplomatic note or a treaty, look at foreign policy issues. If it is a constitution, learn more about the domestic political history. For example, reading the pronouncements of the African National Congress, you may encounter references to proposed laws or general strikes. Learning more about the history of South Africa opens up the significance of these documents.



If this is a constitution, ask about the relationship between government and people. Does the constitution assume that “government rests on the consent of the governed”? Or does it assume that people are subjects who should be ruled for their own good or whose interests are subservient to those of the state? The key issue is how the members of that particular culture looked at the world. Is it a new government or one that has been around for a long time? Many new governments go through a process to establish a workable, long-term structure of governing. Some never achieve stability in this regard. What are the challenges confronting this government? Survival? Expansion? Economic growth? How does this government make decisions? In the name of a single ruler? On behalf of a ruling class? In the name of the people? With a process fully involving the citizenry? Answers to these kinds of questions help explain the underlying cultural assumptions and lead to deeper understanding of the document.

Most official documents are the result of a process. An understanding of the process—and the groups that participated in the process—is essential. For example, school dress codes are the result of negotiation that involves predictable steps with identifiable actors. The process usually includes school board administrators, elected school board members, parents, teachers, and (sometimes) students. In this process an initial code is developed by administrative officials, perhaps in response to school board pressures that reflect public concerns about student fashions such as body piercing. The proposed policy is presented at one or more

public hearings for parent and community reactions, and then is modified and may be enacted as policy. The result is a policy without an identifiable author even though teachers and school administrators are expected to enforce the policy and must reprimand students for violating “school policy.” In this case the process has produced a legally enforceable document whose initiators—those concerned with student behavior or appearance—cannot be singled out for criticism. Everyone involved in enforcement can say, “Don’t blame me, I’m only following policy.”



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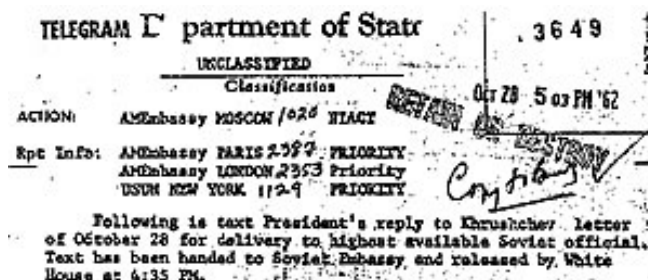
All documents can have specific audiences. Indeed, they can have several audiences. Messages directed toward other governments can also have multiple audiences. A message from the government of the United States to the government of Cuba may also be intended to show Cuban Americans that the American government (and the political party in power) is responding to the concerns of this influential segment of the Florida electorate. A strong statement of concern that one nation is conducting its affairs in an unacceptable manner may also be directed toward other nations that might contemplate similar actions. A government can also choose to present information about its own internal affairs in a way designed to avoid harmful consequences in the international arena. An optimistic press release on economic growth can be intended to calm international investor fears about the stability (and security) of foreign investments within the country.

Such documents provide valuable insight into a government's intentions or strategies, but may not provide critically important information about an issue. In addition, significant amounts of international correspondence are classified and not publicly available for many years. Statements from the diplomatic archives of the Soviet Union and the United States often began their existence as "classified" (secret) documents, but now are part of the public record. Often the declassification of these formerly confidential sources leads to a revision of the historical record.



Cuban Missile Crisis - Missile Range

For example, scholars had long suspected that United States President John F. Kennedy promised the Soviet Ambassador to Washington that he would remove American missiles from Turkey in exchange for a Soviet promise to remove their missiles from Cuba—something the Kennedy Administration vehemently denied at the time. [Recently declassified sources](#) indicate that such a promise was indeed made.



State Department Telegram conveying President Kennedy's reply to the Radio

Moscow Announcement, October 28, 1962

Was the intended audience very small? Was the document ever intended for public viewing? How can you assess primary audience? Secondary audiences? When confronted with an official document that has many possible audiences, the first step is to make a list of all the possible audiences you can think of. Next, examine the text carefully to determine which passages of the text seem to be directed at one or more of these audiences. Finally, consult other sources, especially books and articles written by professional historians that offer insights into the source and its context.



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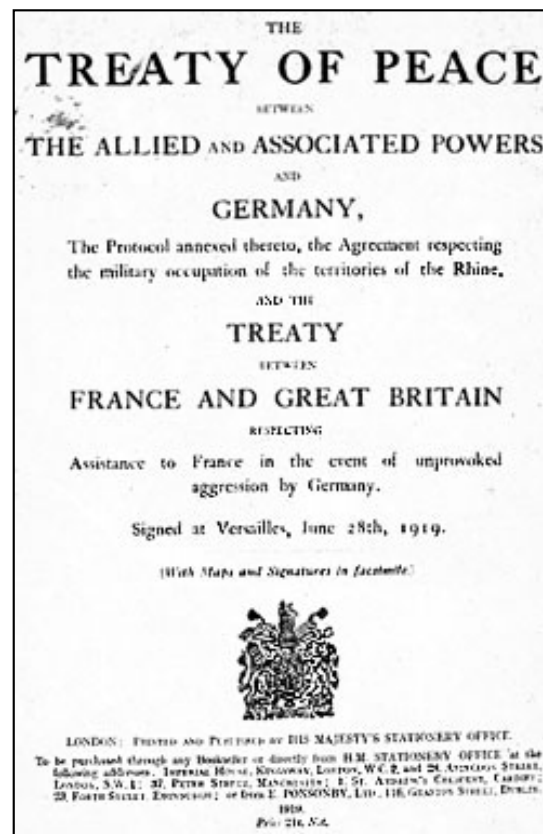
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How did the document shape policy, public response, or daily life? Did the document have a short-term influence? Were there any long-range implications? The *Kellogg-Briand Pact* to outlaw war as an instrument of national policy was signed by numerous nations, but had no apparent impact on the frequency of war. Violation of the treaty, though, was used in the post-World War II prosecutions at Nuremberg. The *Treaty of Versailles* at the end of World War I was intended to usher in a world of peace based on the principle of national self-determination. World War II broke out 20 years later. The United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was passed in 1948 but, although it stands as an ideal to be honored, the world is still home to egregious violations of the rights proclaimed in the document.



Treaty of Versailles

Does the document you are examining seem to signal the end of a historical episode or era? Or is it a statement that shows a government unaware that it is on the eve of a crisis? Is the statement related to a forthcoming policy or shift in alliances or change in approach to an issue? Did the document seem to be a straightforward statement? Or did the document appear to be the tip of a historical iceberg of issues that became increasingly complex?

When you are assessing the impact of an official document, one of the best methods is to search for text that appeared in the original and that has been reproduced in subsequent documents. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, mentioned earlier, is the basis for prosecutions of war criminals by the United Nations following wars in **Yugoslavia** and **Rwanda** in the 1990s.

When the member states of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration in 1948 they intended its provisions to become the basis for such prosecutions, in particular under the category of “crimes against humanity.” The Tribunals dealing with the wars in Yugoslavia and Rwanda were the first instances of these provisions being invoked since the Nuremberg and Tokyo Tribunals following the Second World War.



If you read the **UN resolutions** setting up the Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, you will find some of the language of the *Universal Declaration* reproduced verbatim. You will also find changes in the way that the intent of the *Universal Declaration* has been applied to the Tribunals. Historians are always alert to both continuities and changes over time.

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The Nigerian Civil War and Its Documents

The document selected to illustrate this analytical approach is a routine announcement from one national government to all governments with which it maintains diplomatic relations. These communications represent the ongoing work of ambassadors—passing information back and forth between their governments and the governments to which they are assigned. It is an official, “authorless” document. How does a brief, initial reading reveal this point? The first sentence lists the author—the Military Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The next to last paragraph asserts that the military leaders comprise the legitimate government of Nigeria through a “voluntary transfer.” The last paragraph states that the document itself is directed toward other governments and assures readers that Nigeria’s new leaders plan no changes with other countries— “its foreign policy will continue to be based on non-alignment.” The only individual names mentioned in the statement are those of the military governors of different regions of Nigeria.



[Read the selected document](#)

One strategy for analyzing and discussing the document is to number each “thought” separately. If we do this ([see the modified document](#)), then the initial comments made above are easier to follow. The author of the document appears in [line #2](#) and the assertion of legitimacy occurs at both the beginning and the end of the document ([lines #4](#) and [#53](#)). The intended audience of the statement is presented in [line #56](#) and the list of regional commanders is offered in [line #38](#). Now apply the rest of the analytical questions to the document.

The document, in the restrained language of diplomacy, tells about a change of government in the nation of Nigeria in January 1966, as the result of a military takeover of a constitutional government. For example, [lines 5-12](#) describe growing civil unrest including rigged elections ([line #9](#)) and rioting ([line #11](#)) that made up the background of the events of January. [Lines 13-19](#) describe the actual January crisis (assassination of two regional Premiers, for example, [line #16](#)) while [lines 20-27](#) present the actual transfer of power to the military to save the nation and restore stability ([line #23](#)). Taken collectively, this first part of the message is the justification for a military coup by the loyal majority of the army ([lines 17-19](#)) to thwart a coup by “certain army officers” ([line #12](#)).

Lines 28-46 describe a number of internal governmental changes that make little sense to the reader without further analysis but were very important for Nigerians. **Lines 47** through the end of the document comprise the actual message from the new government to other governments around the world: That the coup has the support of all Nigerians (**line #54**) and that the military leaders envision no changes in their country's relationship to the rest of the world (**lines 49 and 50**). The Foreign Ministries, the agency that circulated this document to Nigerian embassies, is charged with carrying out their normal functions—with the added note that this group now reports directly to the Federal Military Government.

What is the historical context of this coup? In 1966, Nigeria was only a few years removed from colonial status. Although the British people or their government had intervened in the area that became Nigeria from the start of the slave trade era, Nigeria as a unified political and economic entity had only been established in 1914 with the merger of the very different regions of northern and southern Nigeria. Faced with a Nigerian colonial population comprised of almost 200 different ethnic groups loosely divided into Muslim, Christian, and traditional religions, the British resorted to a policy of "indirect rule" in the 1930s. This strategy involved working with multiple traditional leaders rather than imposing a direct British system administered by a blend of British and collaborating Nigerians.

After Britain's costly victory in World War II which left that nation financially strapped, the British moved relatively quickly to establish a less costly, independent Nigeria based on British institutions, the English language, and local control of many issues (a federal system) that might allow for both local ethnic autonomy and a centralized government. This history is clearly present in the diplomatic note. **Line #29** refers to a constitution that provided for both a parliament (suspended as a result of the coup) and a prime minister (also suspended) while the next line refers to the suspension of a wide range of provisions related to the regional governments that were more directly connected to the diverse peoples of Nigeria.

There are also broader issues of context. After much of Africa made the transition from colonies to independent states in the 1960s, had the European colonial powers adequately prepared the colonies for independence? Had these same powers provided only political power while continuing to control their economic interests? The 1960s were also a major decade of the Cold War; world events were analyzed for their impact on the global balance between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. These factors underlie the assurances in the note that Nigeria's "foreign policy will continue to be based on non-alignment" (**line #57**) and that it will honor all prior financial and diplomatic agreements (**lines 48-49-50**).

This document was written in the midst of a moment when many issues were uncertain in Nigeria. Note the verb tenses in this document: the structure of the Executive Council "will be announced later" (**line #32**); the foreign ministries will be responsible to "the Federal Military Government when constituted" (**line #33**); that the government "is determined to suppress" unrest (**line #44**); that the government "will declare martial law" if needed (**line #45**); and that it is the "intention" of the government "to maintain law and order" (**line #46**). Obviously the new government has a lot of work to do in order to establish internal stability in Nigeria.

The purpose of the document is ostensibly to assure the world outside Nigeria that events inside the country are moving toward stability and that relations with the outside world are not going to change and, therefore, outside powers should not

fear a sudden change in the global balance. Support for this generalization rests in the assurances of the widespread acceptance of the military government within Nigeria: the military was invited into power (line #4 and again in line #26) because the vast majority of the military remained loyal to the constitutional government (line #18); leaders from all segments of society have expressed their support for the new arrangement (lines 54 and 55). Collectively this list of assertions presents the image of the rebels as isolated from the core of society and on the verge of being neutralized.

The purpose of a document often points toward its true audiences. In the first place, this document serves a basic diplomatic purpose. The assertion that the Federal Military Government is firmly and clearly in charge is prerequisite for diplomatic recognition of a new government. The military government claims its power derives from the invitation from the constitutional government to take over the administration of Nigeria. If this group can show that it has a legitimate claim to power and is actually in control of the internal situation, then it can expect continuing diplomatic recognition from other nations. If the government is not regarded as legitimate or not in control of the territory of Nigeria, then outside governments could consider intervention or covert support for one faction or another within Nigeria.

The message was also directed specifically toward the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain. The reaffirmation of non-alignment (line #57) told the Cold War powers that Nigeria would continue its policy of not taking sides in this conflict. Nigeria was also very reliant on foreign, primarily British, economic investment. It sought to reassure investors with the statement that it continues to seek outside investment (line #51) and that it will not nationalize the industries of Nigeria (line #52). Of course this assurance was tempered by the statement that if nationalization were to occur, investors would be properly compensated (also line #52). [Nationalization of an industry occurs when the government seizes an industry from the private investors who own it. This action frequently involves no payment to the former owners.]

The core assertion of this diplomatic message is that all is (almost) well in Nigeria: The central government is in good hands and widely supported even though aspects of the national constitution have been suspended by military leaders. The ethnic diversity of Nigeria—the basis of the division of the nation into the regions repeatedly mentioned in this document—appears to be less significant than the overall control provided by the central government. Is this document a record of a momentary “youthful indiscretion” of a young Nigeria on its path toward full independence in a world of nation-states? Or is it a harbinger of future disorder for the country?

In fact, the litany of challenges presented and dismissed in this message to world governments actually represent the outlines of Nigerian history for at least the following 30 years. The nation was immersed in a civil war within a year as the Eastern Region of Nigeria proclaimed its own independence and attempted to secede from Nigeria. This effort came to an unsuccessful end in January 1970. In the years since, Nigeria has moved from a nation of four regions to one of almost 50 regions in the effort to give diverse ethnic groups a “home” that they can govern at the local level. Furthermore the nation has alternated between long-term military dictatorships and short-lived attempts at representative government.

This document had no author. We don't know if the Foreign Ministry acted on its own or if the message was initiated by military leaders. Still, a close reading of the document coupled with some references to the context of the times transforms this routine example of diplomatic correspondence into a window on Nigerian history and its ongoing challenges.



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Nigeria

Kirk-Greene, A. H. M. *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, 2 vols. Ibadan, Nigeria: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Professor Kirk-Greene collected a wide variety of authorless and other documents related to the secession of Biafra and Nigeria's civil war. It is an excellent repository of sources for the further study of the issues analyzed as part of this section.

Osaghae, Eghosa E. *Crippled Giant Nigeria Since Independence*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998.

This work starts with Nigerian independence and the civil war that followed almost immediately after the events explained in the military government's message to Nigeria's embassies around the world. It is an excellent source for "what happened next?" in Nigeria.

Using Official Documents

Allen, William Sheridan. *The Nazi Seizure of Power The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922-1945*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1984.

Originally published in 1965, this book combines the documents of both the local government and the local Nazi party to present a rare view of the inner workings of Nazism within a community.

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This is an extensive collection of documents produced during the French Revolution (1789-1799) including many that were produced by governments and other "authorless" sources.



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David Trask is Professor of History at Guilford Technical Community College in Jamestown, North Carolina where he teaches world civilization and western civilization. He was co-editor of a special issue of *The History Teacher* (November 1999) on teaching history at two-year colleges and served as contributing editor for the Teaching column of *Perspectives, the Newsletter of the American Historical Association*. Trask has worked on a variety of projects that address cross cultural comparisons and perspectives. His current project compares Episcopal missionary work among the Lakota with Anglican efforts in eastern Nigeria from the 1890s to the later 1930s. This study includes the examination of official, "authorless," documents against developments within the mission field and requires the extraction of intent from these writings.



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