

Official Eyes on History: Digital Access to *Foreign Relations of the United States*

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ACCESS TO PRIMARY SOURCES is one of the cornerstones of historical research. Primary sources include first-person accounts of events as recorded in the news media, letters, diaries, and official dispatches. Until the arrival of the Internet and digitization, many primary sources were available only in large research libraries and archives, and students and scholars had to travel to the institutions holding these sources in order to do research. This situation has changed since the arrival of the Internet and the efforts of research libraries, government agencies, and collaborative initiatives to digitize these sources and mount them on the Web. This article discusses the potential impact of digitization on scholarly research and uses one source—*Foreign Relations of the United States*—as an example of a primary source for first-person accounts of world events from the nineteenth century to the present. It highlights one series of events—the Moscow Purge Trials of the 1930s—to illustrate how this source, previously found only in the government documents collections of larger libraries, can be a useful primary source for students and scholars.

The Rise of Digitization

Prior to the electronic era, preservation of primary sources included microfilm, microfiche, photocopies, or other facsimile copies of periodicals and documents. According to a comprehensive article by David W. Lewis, digitization as a means of preservation and providing access to sources began in the 1980s with full-text electronic databases. In 1994, the U.S. Government Printing Office began providing digital copies of federal documents. The Library of Congress began the American Memory Project in the 1990s to provide Internet access to print documents, recordings, films, still photographs, maps, and sheet music.¹ Since that time, academic libraries, government agencies, and collaborative initiatives such as the Hathi Trust Digital Library have begun digitization projects to make their holdings accessible via the Internet.² Historical documents are being digitized for educational purposes in school settings. One of the National Archives projects—DocsTeach—is a collection of 4,000 digitized primary source documents that are searchable by topic. The purpose of DocsTeach is to give students a means of developing critical thinking skills using learning tools in researching primary sources in history. School settings with access to historical primary sources through the Internet help educators teach a well-rounded view of world history.³

According to the Association of Research Libraries, the advantages of the digitization of documents include high user satisfaction, increased distribution and access possibilities, and easy incorporation into the desktop environment. Digitization is not without its challenges, including funding and resources for converting documents to digital formats, setting priorities for which sources to digitize, copyright issues, and the potential for eventual obsolescence of any digitizing format.⁴

Foreign Relations of the United States

One massive primary source that has recently been digitized is *Foreign Relations of the United States*.⁵ According to the U.S. Department of State website:

The *Foreign Relations of the United States* series presents the official documentary historical record of major U.S. foreign policy decisions

and significant diplomatic activity. The series, which is produced by the State Department's Office of the Historian, began in 1861 and now comprises more than 450 individual volumes. The volumes published over the last two decades increasingly contain declassified records from all the foreign affairs agencies.

Foreign Relations volumes contain documents from Presidential libraries, Departments of State and Defense, National Security Council, Central Intelligence Agency, Agency for International Development, and other foreign affairs agencies as well as the private papers of individuals involved in formulating U.S. foreign policy. In general, the editors choose documentation that illuminates policy formulation and major aspects and repercussions of its execution....

The *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS)...series provides an indispensable resource for American citizens and others around the world who seek to understand U.S. foreign policy and strategic planning, international relations, economic affairs, and transnational social and cultural developments. The *Foreign Relations* series represents a longstanding effort to inform the public about governmental decision making while also protecting essential national security interests.⁶

Foreign Relations of the United States had differing titles in early years, but was generally entitled *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*. In 1931, it was finally entitled *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century volumes cover all parts of the world, and there are a few separate volumes on individual countries and specific issues (e.g., China and whaling and sealing claims against Russia) and several volumes devoted to World War I and the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Also in 1931, individual volumes were issued for different parts of the world (e.g., "The Far East") and covered specific time periods. Volumes include a table of contents, list of papers included, individual chapters—usually arranged by year—and an index. Some volumes include a "List of Persons"—an alphabetical list of people mentioned in the papers and their official titles or positions. Each volume includes official communiqués, reports on meetings with foreign officials, and accounts of current events as witnessed by U.S. diplomatic personnel.

Until the advent of the Internet, older volumes of *Foreign Relations of the United States* were only found in the government

The screenshot shows the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the logo 'UWDC' and the text 'University of Wisconsin Digital Collections'. To the right, there are two search boxes: 'VISIT A COLLECTION' with a dropdown menu and 'SEARCH THE COLLECTIONS' with a search input field. Below the navigation bar, there are tabs for 'HOME', 'COLLECTIONS', 'NEWS', 'LEARNING RESOURCES', 'ABOUT US', and 'CONTACT US'. The main content area is titled 'Foreign Relations of the United States' and includes a breadcrumb trail: 'Home > Collections > Foreign Relations of the United States > Collection Home'. There are links to 'Browse Foreign Relations of the United States', 'About the collection', and 'Search only the full text'. A copyright notice is also present. On the right, there is a box with the text 'To access or cite this collection: http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS'. Below the text, there is a large image of the Seal of the Department of State, United States of America. At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with the text 'University of Wisconsin Digital Collections Center • UW-Madison Libraries' and 'Technical Assistance • Content/Navigation Questions • Privacy Policy • Usage Statistics • Staff Access' and 'Copyright © 2011 Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System'.

Figure 1: The University of Wisconsin Digital Collections site for *Foreign Relations of the United States*, <<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS>>.

documents collections of larger academic and research libraries that had the means of collecting and housing such an extensive collection. However, in 2001, the University of Wisconsin mounted a digitized version of the series as part of its extensive Digital Collections series (**Figure 1**). According to the Digital Collections website:

This digital facsimile of *Foreign Relations of the United States* is a project of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries in collaboration with the University of Illinois at Chicago Libraries. This is an incomplete run from 1861-1960 with missing volumes being added as they can be acquired and processed.⁷

Comprising 375 volumes, the digitized version of *Foreign Relations of the United States* is in chronological order, beginning with 1861, and is in several formats, including PDF. There are links to individual volumes, and within the webpage for each volume are individual links to title pages, contents pages, individual chapters, indexes, etc. There are navigation arrows at the bottom of each screen in order to leaf through each page. If the researcher or student knows the specific date of an event or the beginning date of a series of events, it is possible to find diplomatic communiqués and

eyewitness accounts within the individual chapters. In addition to the University of Wisconsin's website, the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Historian has mounted volumes from 1945 through 1980 on its website.⁸ Between these two websites, volumes from the Civil War to the Carter Administration are now available online.

An Example of an Eyewitness Account: The Moscow Purge Trials

As an illustration of the usefulness of *Foreign Relations of the United States* as a primary source of historical information, the authors chose the eyewitness accounts of American diplomats for one of the most infamous series of events from the first part of the twentieth century—the Moscow Purge Trials. From 1936 to 1938, four trials were held in Moscow to purge veteran Communist Party members, current high-ranking Party members and high-ranking Soviet government officials, leading members of the intelligentsia, and high-ranking military officers. The four main trials (three public trials and one secret trial of the military) were part of an upheaval that reached all parts of the Soviet Union and reached all aspects of Soviet society, becoming known as the Great Terror. The purges affected millions of Russians, citizens of non-Russian Soviet republics, and foreigners residing in the U.S.S.R. The accused in the Moscow purge trials were charged with being counter-revolutionaries (including plotting assassinations), agents and sympathizers of the exiled Leon Trotsky, spies for foreign powers, and saboteurs (called “wreckers”) of Soviet industry and agriculture. The accused were denounced publicly, stripped of Party membership, imprisoned, threatened, and tortured into confessing. They were vilified in court and were characterized as “mad dogs” by the prosecution. All defendants were either summarily shot or sent to the “corrective” labor camps in central Asia and in the far north (the Gulag). The families of the accused were also arrested, imprisoned, exiled to the labor camps, or shot. All of this was done at the behest of Joseph Stalin to eliminate any potential rivals and to create a climate of fear through state-run machinery that ensured his rule over the Communist Party and the vast U.S.S.R.

The U.S. had severed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution, but relations were restored in 1933 by the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Thus, the

Foreign Relations
of the
United States
Diplomatic Papers

The Soviet Union
1933-1939



FRUS
1933-1939
Soviet Union

United States
Government Printing Office
Washington : 1952

Figure 2: Digitized title page from *Foreign Relations of the United States: Soviet Union, 1933-1939*, retrieved from <<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1933>>.

U.S. had a diplomatic presence in Moscow during the purge trials. Preserved in *Foreign Relations of the United States: Soviet Union, 1933-1939* (**Figure 2**) are accounts of the public show trials, as witnessed by U.S. Embassy officials. This volume includes official communiqués on the conduct of the trials, reactions to the verdicts, and the climate of fear that came to pervade the U.S.S.R. during this time. This volume was initially published in 1952, when Joseph Stalin was still alive and in power and before Nikita Khrushchev's "secret speech" condemning Stalinism in 1956.⁹

The diplomatic dispatches sent from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow include the eyewitness accounts of embassy secretaries who spoke Russian and the American ambassador. They were among the few foreign diplomats and journalists allowed to attend the public trials. In lengthy communiqués, they expressed some skepticism as to the conduct of the trials, the Soviet legal system, and the degrees of guilt of the defendants. While the secret trial of the high-ranking military officers (including Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, the hero of the Russian civil war) had no official observers, after the verdicts were published, Loy W. Henderson, a chargé on the embassy staff, sent a telegram to the Secretary of State, which stated:

It is the practice of the Kremlin to stretch into heinous crimes certain known views of persons whom it has decided to destroy....The character and reputation for professional integrity of the condemned are such that it does not seem possible that all of them could have been guilty of the crimes for which they have been condemned. Their intelligence and experience made them extremely valuable and their loss is a severe blow to the efficiency and morale of the Red Army.... It seems more likely that the real reason for their downfall was that Stalin had become suspicious of them; that he had been led to feel that they and other army officers were becoming too independent in their attitude and that he could not be sure of their unconditional loyalty to himself.¹⁰

This painful episode in Russian history is thoroughly documented in Robert Conquest's classic work, *The Great Terror*.¹¹ *The Great Terror* was first published in 1968, revised in 1990, and later republished with a new preface reflecting recently opened Soviet archives. From its initial publication, *The Great Terror* is considered to be the most comprehensive and definitive work on this era. While U.S. diplomats barely rate a mention in this massive work, excerpts

from one 1938 communiqué from the ambassador to the Secretary of State after the last public trial sums up what Conquest related in over 400 pages of text:

The Terror here is a horrifying fact. There are many evidences here in Moscow that there is a terrifying fear that reaches down into and haunts all sections of the community. No household, however humble, apparently but what lives in constant fear of a nocturnal raid by the Secret Police....Once the person is taken away, nothing of him or her is known for months and many times never thereafter.... The popular psychology in this situation and the extent of this Terror is again indicated by the fact that, almost daily through the kitchen and servants' quarters, there come reports of whispered and fearful confidences of new arrests, new hardships, new apprehensions and new fears among their friends. The activities of the Secret Police have extended and reached down to the arrest of Soviet employees of foreign missions, including our own.

It is commonly alleged that the Secret Police of this Proletarian Dictatorship are as ruthless and as cruel as any during the old Tsarist regimes. It seems to be an old Russian custom. This particular purge is undoubtedly political. From expressions that I have heard from some of the leaders of the Government it is deliberately projected by the Party leaders, who themselves regretted the necessity for it, but who nevertheless will not permit themselves to be sentimental or weak in the performance of what they regard as their duty. They believe that great revolutions cannot be projected by spraying perfume; that previous movements in the interests of the proletariat have been destroyed by weakness and false sentimentality. They recognize and regret that there must needs be many innocent who suffer in this situation, but they take the position that they must do this to save their cause, which is supreme and that the successful elevation of the condition of life of the proletariat will, in historical perspective, justify their present course. They wrap themselves about in the mantle of the angels to serve the devil. They are undoubtedly a strong, able group of ruthless idealists. But tyranny is tyranny, whatever be its government.¹²

Conclusion

For historians, researchers, and students, *Foreign Relations of the United States* includes eyewitness accounts of such diverse

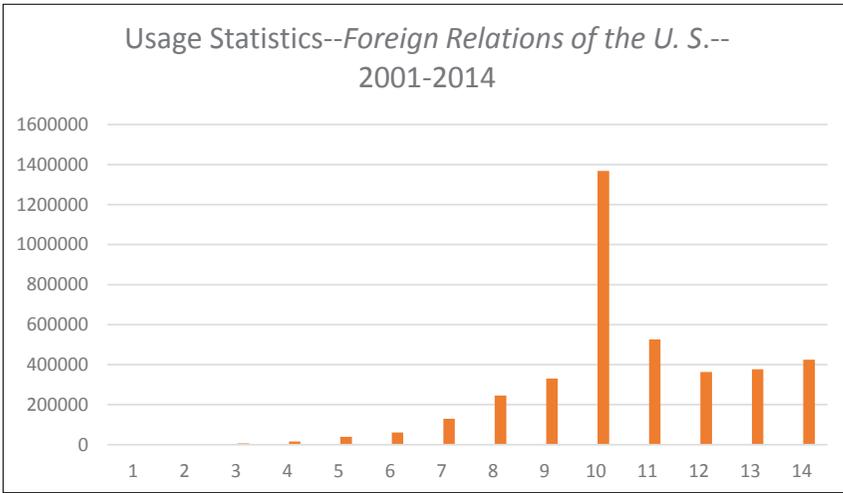


Figure 3: Usage statistics for the *Foreign Relations of the United States* digitized volumes.

events as natural disasters and pleas for U.S. emergency aid (e.g., the Tokyo earthquake of 1923¹³) and unfolding political upheavals (e.g., the Nazis coming to absolute power in Germany in 1933¹⁴). These examples demonstrate the potential of making primary resources accessible to everyone through digitization, a development that has been recognized by historians. According to Professor Barbara Weinstein, former president of the American Historical Association:

Like most historians, I readily acknowledge the benefits of having journals, books, and primary sources available online. Not only does this make our work process easier, but it also opens up new possibilities for research in historical documents by undergraduate and graduate students, and is a godsend for scholars working in countries where there is precious little funding available for libraries or research collections.¹⁵

Usage statistics for *Foreign Relations of the United States* reveal the potential of these digitized documents. As stated on the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections website, usage of the digitized volumes rose from 1,384 usages in fiscal year 2001 to 425,144 usages in fiscal year 2014, with a spike in usage in fiscal year 2010 (**Figure 3**).¹⁶

In a comprehensive article on teaching historical research in the digital age, Dominique Daniel has written:

Computer technology has not only made resources available in unprecedented ways to facilitate teaching and research, it is transforming teaching and research themselves. I would predict that libraries and historical scholarship would expand and change dramatically in coming decades.¹⁷

Joshua Sternfeld, a senior program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities, has termed the digitization of primary sources to be part of a new field that he has named digital historiography.

[Digital historical documents] generate new interdisciplinary collaborations among scholars and practitioners. Academic and intellectual boundaries separating humanists, information specialists, and computer scientists fade away as members of the various fields rush to make use of the new technologies.¹⁸

Having the documents in such an extensive source as *Foreign Relations of the United States* available online makes a rich primary source available to students, teachers, and researcher, who until now may not have had access to a large research collection. Educators who teach about the importance of primary sources in historical research should find *Foreign Relations of the United States* to be a useful collection of official eyewitness accounts of international events for over 100 years. While there are always uncertainties about new forms of the preservation of documents, digitized sources from such reliable sources as the U.S. Department of State offer increased opportunities for teaching and research in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. David W. Lewis, "From Stacks to the Web: The Transformation of Academic Library Collecting," *College & Research Libraries* 74, no. 2 (March 2013): 160, <<http://crl.acrl.org/content/74/2/159.full.pdf>>.

2. Hathi Trust Digital Library, <<http://www.hathitrust.org/>>.

3. Michael Hussey, "Teaching with Online Primary Sources: Documents from the National Archives: 'I Still Have No Peace,' an African American World

War I Veteran's Letter to President Calvin Coolidge, October 16, 1923," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 36 (March 2012): 34.

4. *Recognizing Digitization as a Preservation Reformatting Method* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 2004), 7-8, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/links/pdf/preserving/8_34a.pdf>.

5. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1861-1960), <<http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/FRUS>>.

6. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "About the *Foreign Relations of the United States* Series," <<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/about-frus>>.

7. University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, "About *Foreign Relations of the United States*," <<http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/FRUS/about>>.

8. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Historical Documents: *Foreign Relations of the United States*," <<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments>>.

9. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Soviet Union, 1933-1939* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952), <<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1933>>.

10. Loy W. Henderson, "The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Henderson) to the Secretary of State," in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Soviet Union, 1933-1939* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952), 384, <<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1933>>.

11. Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

12. U.S. Department of State, *The Soviet Union, 1933-1939*, 546.

13. U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1923*, vol. II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938), 465-472, <<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/Browse.html>>.

14. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1933. The British Commonwealth, Europe, Near East and Africa*, vol. II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 183-543, <<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1933v02>>.

15. Barbara Weinstein, "Doing History in the Digital Age," *Perspectives on History* 45, no. 5 (May 2007), <<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2007/0705/0705pre1.cfm>>.

16. University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, "UW Digital Collections and Digital Library Projects Summary Statistics," <<http://uwdcc.library.wisc.edu/usageStats/>>.

17. Dominique Daniel, "Teaching Students How to Research the Past: Historians and Librarians in the Digital Age," *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (February 2012): 277, <<http://www.societyforhistoryeducation.org/pdfs/Daniel.pdf>>.

18. Joshua Sternfeld, "Archival Theory and Digital Historiography: Selection, Search, and Metadata as Archival Processes for Assessing Historical Contextualization," *The American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2011): 548.

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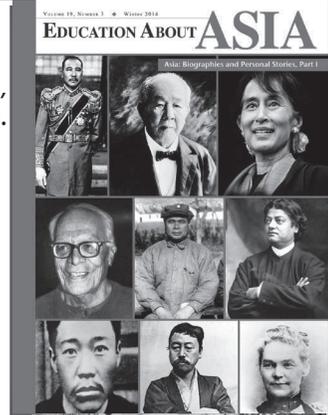


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