

Reading Lives at Scale: Narrative and Lived Experience from the Transatlantic Slave Trade to Occupied Ukraine

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Abstract :

This paper explores the conceptual and methodological challenges and opportunities of building a large data repository, bringing historical and contemporary archival sources into dialogue at scale, in order to understand the evolution and dynamics of slavery in wartime contexts around the world from 1791 to the present.

Launched in 2025, the Leverhulme Centre for Research on Slavery in War is the world's first large-scale research initiative focused on understanding the slavery/war nexus. The centre's interdisciplinary team is working to expand and deepen our pilot "Contemporary Slavery in Armed Conflict" dataset, blending historical and archival methods with data analytics and machine learning, seeking to build a 'spine' of research data that can generate novel insights into where and why enslavement has manifested in different conflict types and scales throughout modern history. Source material includes archival and published primary documents, including qualitative narrative and oral histories linked to wars, and incorporates sources as diverse as geospatial and forecasting data, legal documents and case law, visual imagery and footage, and the reports of international organisations and NGOs.

This paper reflects upon the foundational stages of this work, and in particular on the use of narrative sources and lived experience accounts. Taking two examples—a body of nineteenth century service records of coercively conscripted men and boys, and a series of individual narrative accounts of enslavement in occupied Ukraine—it explores some of the methodological and other considerations around working with large volumes of individual narrative sources in this way.