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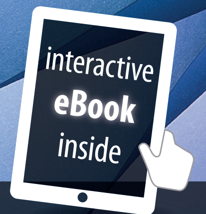
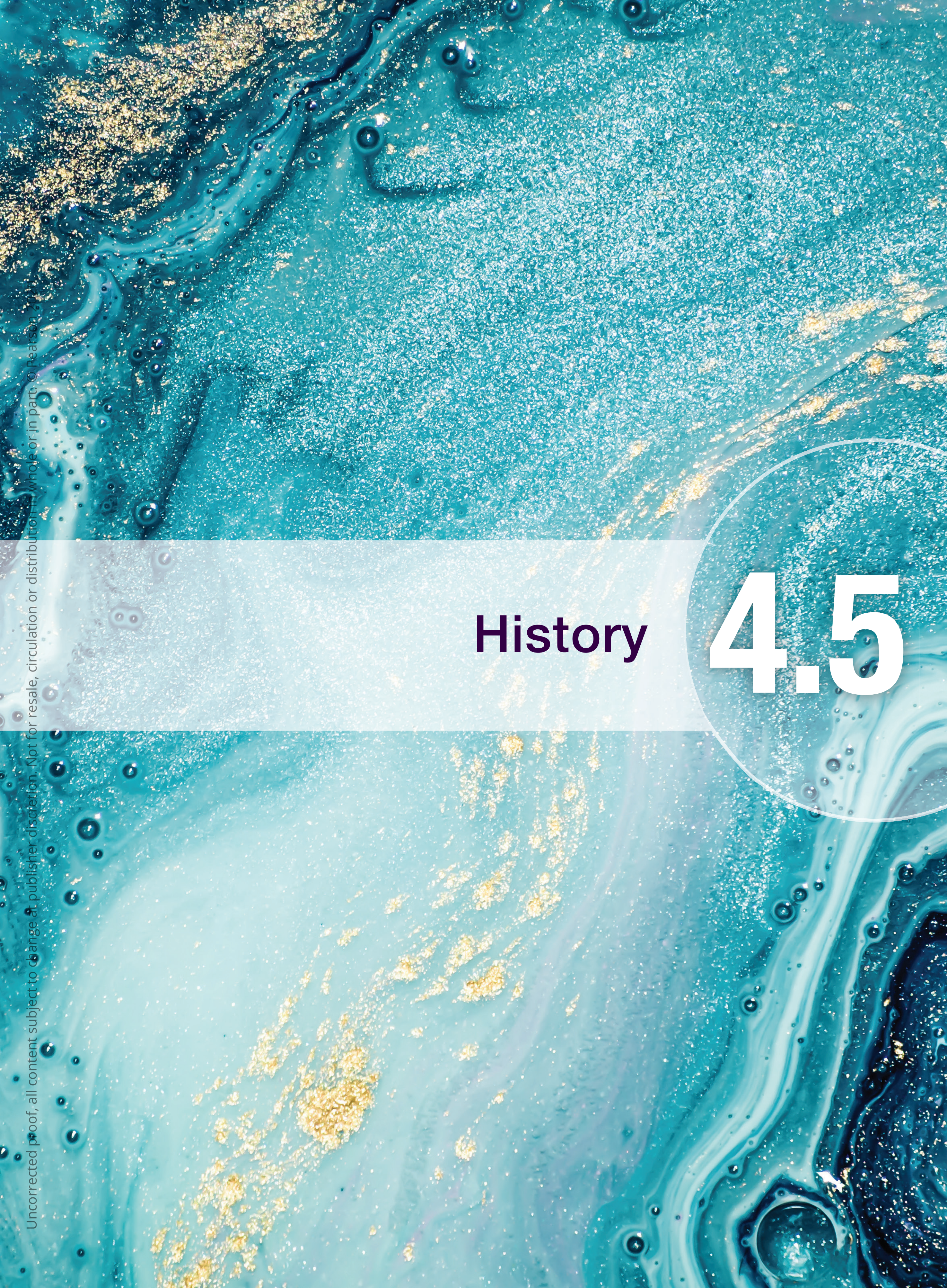


Theory of Knowledge

for the IB Diploma

3rd Edition

SUE BASTIAN
JULIAN KITCHING
RIC SIMS



History 4.5

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Introduction

'History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history that we make today.'

(Henry Ford, Chicago Tribune, 1916)

DP Coordinator: 'I think you should choose the History HL course.'
Prospective DP student: 'No way - it's all about remembering dates of pointless battles and listening to boring stories about dead people...'

What would it be like to live in a society where very little value was placed on recording or preserving knowledge of the past? Would it matter? What would be lost? How would we know the routes by which our current knowledge was produced? Lacking accounts of the struggles and achievements of our predecessors, how could we make sense of the present, or orient our quest for new knowledge? (Everything would seem new!) Some might say we would lose our guide to the future. We would not fully understand why or how we made the mistakes that we did, and hence would tend to repeat them. We would lack a context to appraise or even understand what part of our surroundings have endured, such as historical art works or possibly longstanding alliances or feuds with others – both political and cultural.

It is hard to see what knowledge we would be left with at all. Can you think of anything that you know that does not depend in some way on what you, or other people, knew before? Even the apparently simplest act of recognition of what you see in front of you relies on prior experience. If you were to claim some item of new knowledge that arrived as a 'bolt from the blue', how would you or anyone else be able to evaluate it?

Scope

History and the past

It seems rather too obvious to say that history as a discipline is about the past. Henry Ford's famous dismissal of the value of history is based on his perspective as an entrepreneur looking resolutely towards the future. In fact, we might find ourselves siding with his conclusion on the basis that the past is irretrievably gone, so how can it be an object of study? Yet if we agree that knowledge of the past is of great importance, we need to address how events from the past can actually be accessed and put into a form that gives us meaning *about the past* and, perhaps, a vision of the future.

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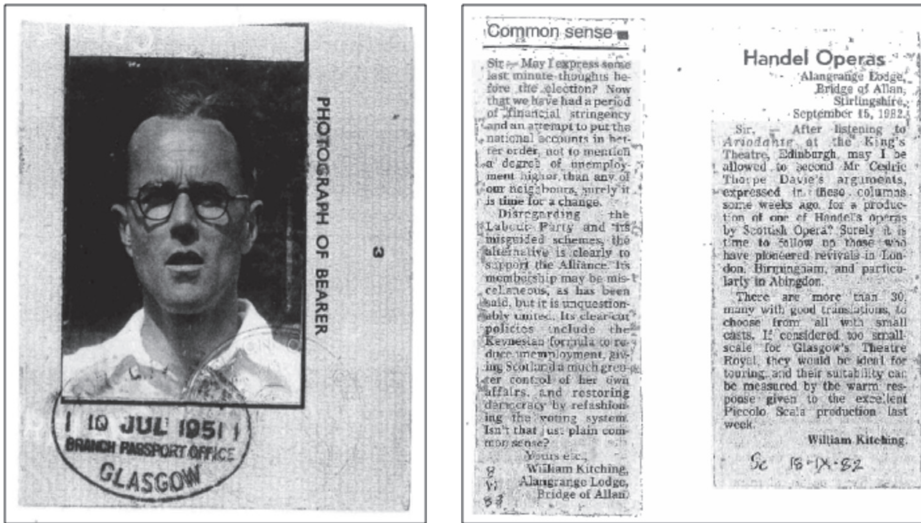

Common sense

Sir, — May I express some last minute thoughts before the election? Now that we have had a period of financial stringency and an attempt to put the national accounts in better order, not to mention a degree of unemployment higher than any of our neighbours, surely it is time for a change.

Disregarding the Labour Party and its misguided schemes, the alternative is clearly to support the Alliance. Its membership may be miscellaneous, as has been said, but it is unquestionably united. Its clear-cut policies include the Keynesian formula to reduce unemployment, giving Scotland a much greater control of her own affairs, and restoring democracy by refashioning the voting system. Isn't that just plain common sense?

Yours etc.,
William Kitching,
Alangrange Lodge,
Bridge of Allan.

Handel Operas

Alangrange Lodge,
Bridge of Allan,
Stirlingshire,
September 15, 1982.

Sir, — After listening to *Ariodante* at the King's Theatre, Edinburgh, may I be allowed to second Mr Cedric Thorpe Davie's arguments, expressed in these columns some weeks ago, for a production of one of Handel's operas by Scottish Opera? Surely it is time to follow up those who have pioneered revivals in London, Birmingham, and particularly in Abingdon.

There are more than 30, many with good translations, to choose from, all with small casts. If considered too small-scale for Glasgow's Theatre Royal, they would be ideal for touring, and their suitability can be measured by the warm response given to the excellent Piccolo Scala production last week.

William Kitching.

Sc 16-IX-82

Figure 1 Documents related to William Walrond Kitching.

The father of the author of this chapter was born in 1912. Neither he nor his contemporaries are around any more, but there are younger people who remember him. The author's house is full of documents and artifacts that are directly associated with him, and the author himself is replete with relevant memories. Yet, all of these sources about the past – about the man – lie in the present: the documents, the witness accounts, the memories, and so on. Thus, we seem to be forced to admit that history is actually some part of the present as a sort of proxy for the past. So, as a starting point could we say that history as written is about evidence at a step removed from its true object of study – the present stands simultaneously as a bridge and a barrier. This situation calls for some particular methods and approaches that we shall examine later.

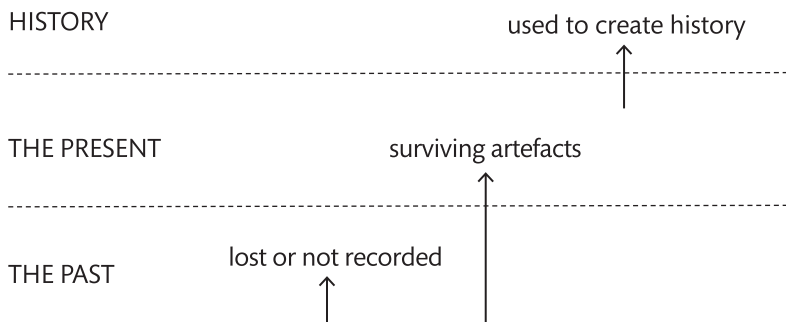

Figure 2 Relationship between the past, the present, and history.

Arguably, everything we know today is because of what we have known in the past. Past instances of present phenomena are needed to make sense of the world around us; remembered events and moments for sustained relationships with others; knowledge for building new knowledge. It is clear why illnesses that interfere with the functions of memory are such feared conditions.

Would you agree that all knowledge is in some sense historical knowledge? Not just personal knowledge being dependent on prior experience, but also knowledge produced across the range of disciplines and areas of knowledge, themes, and beyond. All of these fields have a historical background – think of the history of science, mathematics, or art; or of religion, technology, or politics.

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Here are two justifications for the special treatment of history in the TOK course:

1. **Methodology:** The need to recognise the particular **challenges of the subject matter** (the gap between evidence in the present and ultimate object of study in the past).
2. **Ubiquity:** the recognition that **every field of knowledge is the product of historical development**.

But how strong is the first justification? There are historical sciences ranging from palaeontology to cosmology that need to investigate the past. Fossils can be observed directly in the attempt to reconstruct evolutionary developments, but cosmologists are unable to access even many of the present traces of the past directly. Many disciplines labour under the challenges of dealing with indirect evidence, but at least in some cases, such as particle physics, the objects of investigation can be perturbed in some way in order to determine their nature or behaviour. Yet would you agree that no such access is permitted to the historian?

It is interesting also to acknowledge here that the methodologies of the historian are geared only to the subset of the past that is traditionally considered appropriate for the discipline – namely the history of (some) humans over time periods recent enough for there to be any surviving evidence. In the movement towards more interdisciplinary approaches to scholarship, we now have something called 'Big History'. This addresses every possible part of the past, from the Big Bang to modern civilisation, and so the traditional boundaries of history as a discipline may be overstepped.

Assuming some validity for the second justification – that every field of knowledge has a history – it would then be a logical extension to ask if you think there is enough emphasis in your other DP courses on the historical development of the knowledge you are being taught?

Perhaps there are those who would challenge this second justification. Is it possible to produce new knowledge in science without knowing the history of science? Do you need to know the history of art to be an artist or to enjoy art? Do you need to know how mathematics has developed in order to be a mathematician? Are the histories of areas of knowledge equally important for the production of knowledge in the present?

> 'If by some "big lie" we manage to eradicate knowledge of some of the laws of physics [...], it is possible that at a later date it can be recovered; the objective truth will be there waiting for us and we can reason our way back to it. But if we seek to eradicate from the world knowledge or memory of what happened in human affairs [...], if we suppress all witness and evidence of what happened [...] then there is no reasoning back to such knowledge. That is the thing about human freedom and human action – it need not have happened, but it did. Brute, contingent, unreasonable fact. Unless we keep alive the memory that it happened – that this contingency actually occurred – then it can be lost for ever.'
>
> (Jeremy Waldron: www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n01/jeremy-waldron/what-to-tell-the-axe-man)

- Are these comments more about knowledge of the past or knowledge accumulated from the past?
- Do you agree with the conclusion that the storage of knowledge is more important in some areas of knowledge than others?

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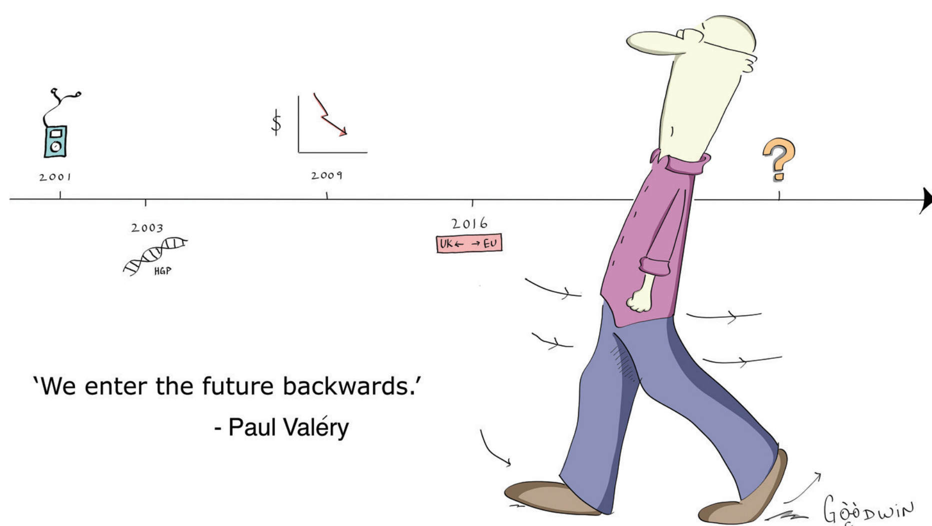
History in the IB diploma

The French poet Paul Valéry said: 'We enter the future backwards.' Without that backward gaze we forfeit an understanding of how we got here, we surrender the opportunity to empathise with our forebears and understand their perspectives. More simply, we are deprived of context for current affairs, and arguably of the ability to predict and even transform the future. We seem to be a long way from the dismissal by the hypothetical IB student created at the top of the chapter.



- Given the comments above, do you think it is defensible that history is an optional subject in the IB diploma?
- What arguments can be advanced for and against its status as a subject in Group 3?
- If you were the DP Coordinator at the start of this chapter, what arguments would you use in order to convince the hesitant prospective student to enrol in history?

History and the future

The foundation trilogy, a set of three science fiction novels by the American writer Isaac Asimov, is set in the far future at a time when humans have populated most of the galaxy. At the start of the first book, we are told of the existence of a discipline called 'psychohistory'. It has reached a level of maturity such that the future can be foretold to a high degree of accuracy through the manipulation of data concerning the past and present trends of a wide range of physical and psychological phenomena. The following extract is from *Foundation*. It is set on the planet Trantor, capital of the Galactic Empire, where the undisputed master of the subject, Hari Seldon, is discussing important matters with a young protégé.

> 'Before you are done with me young man, you will learn to apply psychohistory to all problems as a matter of course. - Observe.' Seldon removed his calculator pad from the pouch at his belt. Men said he kept one beneath his pillow for use in moments of wakefulness. Its gray, glossy finish was slightly worn by use. Seldon's nimble fingers, spotted now with age, played along the files and rows of buttons that filled its surface. Red symbols glowed out from the upper tier.

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He said, 'That represents the condition of the Empire at present.'

He waited.

Gaal said finally, 'Surely that is not a complete representation.'

'No, not complete,' said Seldon. 'I am glad you do not accept my word blindly. However, this is an approximation which will serve to demonstrate the proposition. Will you accept that?'

'Subject to my later verification of the derivation of the function, yes.' Gaal was carefully avoiding a possible trap.

'Good. Add to this the known probability of Imperial assassination, viceregal revolt, the contemporary recurrence of periods of economic depression, the declining rate of planetary explorations, the...'

He proceeded. As each item was mentioned, new symbols sprang to life at his touch, and melted into the basic function which expanded and changed.

Gaal stopped him only once. 'I don't see the validity of that set-transformation.'

Seldon repeated it more slowly.

Gaal said, 'But that is done by way of a forbidden socio-operation.'

'Good. You are quick, but not yet quick enough. It is not forbidden in this connection. Let me do it by expansions.'

The procedure was much longer and at its end, Gaal said, humbly, 'Yes, I see now.'

Finally, Seldon stopped. 'This is Trantor three centuries from now. How do you interpret that? Eh?' He put his head to one side and waited.

Gaal said, unbelievingly, 'Total destruction! But - but that is impossible. Trantor has never been –'

Seldon was filled with the intense excitement of a man whose body only had grown old, 'Come, come. You saw how the result was arrived at. Put it into words. Forget the symbolism for a moment.'

Gaal said, 'As Trantor becomes more specialized, it becomes more vulnerable, less able to defend itself. Further, as it becomes more and more the administrative center of Empire, it becomes a greater prize. As the Imperial succession becomes more and more uncertain, and the feuds among the great families more rampant, social responsibility disappears.'

'Enough. And what of the numerical probability of total destruction within three centuries?'

'I couldn't tell.'

'Surely you can perform a field-differentiation?'

Gaal felt himself under pressure. He was not offered the calculator pad. It was held a foot from his eyes. He calculated furiously and felt his forehead grow slick with sweat.

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He said, 'About 85%?'

'Not bad,' said Seldon, thrusting out a lower lip, 'but not good. The actual figure is 92.5%.'

Gaal said, 'And so you are called Raven Seldon? I have seen none of this in the journals.'

'But of course not. This is unprintable. Do you suppose the Imperium could expose its shakiness in this manner. That is a very simple demonstration in psychohistory. But some of our results have leaked out among the aristocracy.'

'That's bad.'

'Not necessarily. All is taken into account.'

(Asimov, 1951, pp. 18–19)

- Do you think that a discipline with the power of psychohistory is an achievable prospect? If so, what is it that confounds us from having that power now? If not, what is it that would prevent history from ever developing in this direction?
- Two possible applications of historical knowledge might be its use in (a) generating predictions, and (b) giving us the insights necessary to make transformative interventions in the present or the future. Which of these goals might be more realistic?
- Is psychohistory more about prediction or transformation?
- Are there other disciplines that are better equipped than history to predict the human future? If so, which and why?
- Is history
  (a) just about how things were/are
  (b) also about how things will be
  (c) also how things ought to be?

In Asimov's story, the collapse of the Galactic Empire cannot be prevented but Seldon sets out to use psycho-historical knowledge in order to shorten the period of barbarism that will precede the formation of a new civilisation. To do this, he has to plan a series of interventions that will produce more favourable outcomes; for these interventions to be successful, the findings of psychohistory must not be known to anyone other than the psychohistorians themselves. As the passage above shows, those who can predict may be empowered to transform the future, but if those predictions are widely known they can alter the course of events and undermine the attempts at transformation.

In a milder form, these issues connect with the world of the 'real' historian. The attempt to make sense of the past can lead to speculations about the future that form the basis for attempts by politicians and others to control it.

As for psychohistory, you will have to read the books to find out what happens! Of course this is fiction, and one must be careful with such examples as illustrations of real processes. But we can regard it as a stimulating thought experiment.

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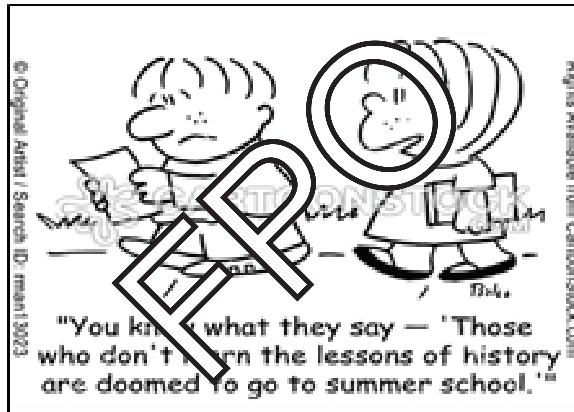

We might argue that, for historical knowledge to be applicable to the present or the future, factual accuracy is a pre-requisite. The ancient Greek historian Thucydides was perhaps one of the first scholars that we know of to pursue the objective search for facts about the past. But for the purposes of extrapolation or application, it is tempting to give the past a shape, such as a story of progress or decline. Whether this is possible or desirable is a controversial matter among historians. And even if historians succeed in applying a shape, there remains the question of whether it is being recognised because it is a genuine aspect of the past, or imposed on the account of the past produced by the historian as a result of their particular perspective. This is a theme to which we will return.

History and the present

> 'History is the projection of ideology into the past.'
>
> (Anon)

Beyond its core academic aims, history plays a role in the formation and reinforcement of political viewpoints and policies. History can be presented to citizens in forms that bolster a sense of identity, pride, and belonging to a particular state or other community. As the French philosopher Ernest Renan put it, 'getting its history wrong is part of being a nation'. At its crudest, such revisionism can take the form of outright falsification, as in Figure 3:

▲

Figure 3 Left: Lenin addressing the troops, 5 May 1920. Right: Leon Trotsky and Lev Kamenev removed by censor.

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If prediction from history is too hard, if attempts to transform the future are easily undermined, and if history is sometimes hijacked by others (such as politicians) for their own purposes, perhaps we should look for more modest applications for history. Nevertheless, the fact that history plays a role in the educational curriculum of almost every country in the world suggests that the applications of the discipline are considered to be important. The examples and arguments that arise from this section may provide some enlightenment as to not only the proper reach of history, but also the ways in which history can be put to use.

Things to think about

- 'History is part hope, part myth, and part reality.' (Sue Bastian) Would you agree?
- Is 'Big History' all really history? Offer arguments on both sides for this question.

Knowledge questions

- Is it possible to have knowledge of the past?
- Is knowledge about the past different from other kinds of knowledge?
- Are all areas of knowledge concerned with knowledge of the past to some extent?
- Why does history enjoy a privileged position as its own dedicated area of knowledge in the TOK curriculum?

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- Is all knowledge in some sense historical knowledge?
- Is truth the goal of all historical inquiry?
- Is certainty about the past more difficult to attain than certainty about the present or the future?
- What counts as a fact in history?

Perspectives

'In our final history lesson of the year, Old Joe Hunt, who had guided his lethargic pupils through Tudors and Stuarts, Victorians and Edwardians, the Rise of Empire and its Subsequent Decline, invited us to look back over all those centuries and attempt to draw conclusions.

"We could start, perhaps, with the seemingly simple question, What is History? Any thoughts, Webster?"

"History is the lies of the victors", I replied, a little too quickly.

"Yes, I was rather afraid you'd say that. Well, as long as you remember that it is also the self-delusions of the defeated. Simpson?"

"History is a raw onion sandwich, sir."

"For what reason?"

"It just repeats, sir, It burps. We've seen it again and again this year. Same old story, same old oscillation between tyranny and rebellion, war and peace, prosperity and impoverishment."

"Rather a lot for a sandwich to contain, wouldn't you say?"

We laughed far more than was required, with an end of term hysteria.

"Finn?"

"History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation."

"Is it indeed?"'

(Barnes, 2011, pp. 16–17)

History: the lies of the victors?

'History is the lies of the victors.' Here in Julian Barnes's novel, *The sense of an ending*, **Webster** repeats a line much beloved of TOK students and others, and one which Hermann Göring, definitely on the wrong side of history, seemed to endorse: 'We will go down in history either as the world's greatest statesmen or its worst villains.'

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But to what extent is the claim true? Is history disproportionately written by 'victors' and is what they have written deliberately false? Such a sweeping claim would need some powerful support. More broadly, to what extent does history reflect the circumstances of the historian, and does the historian permit those circumstances to govern what they write?

There are certainly examples where the volume of historical literature seems skewed towards 'winners' and hence the balance seems to favour the side that came out on top after some military, economic, social, or other series of events. In recent times, one might cite triumphalist accounts from Western sources of the end of the Cold War – accounts that are only now exhibiting some underestimation of the extent of Russian humiliation and patronising of formerly captive nations in the Warsaw Pact. But at the same time, we have counterexamples – Roman historical accounts (from the losing side) of the demise of the Byzantine Empire by Ottoman invasion of Constantinople allegedly cast the Ottomans in a sharply negative light that remained dominant for centuries. Some unreliable American military and government accounts of the Vietnam War have successfully found their way into mainstream historical perspective. More fundamentally, who gets to decide who the 'winners' and 'losers' are?

It is probably wise to conclude that the categorisation of the actors of history into winners and losers is deeply simplistic and a very blunt tool for assessing history in the context of its authors. The conclusion here seems to be that Webster's claim is unconvincing at best.

While the identity of the historian is a key variable that can affect deeply the perspective from which history is produced, let's focus for now on the products of the perspectives themselves. Here are four accounts of modern African history which were written by my colleague, John Kamau, a TOK teacher. They were inspired by four accounts of British history written by Professor Margaret Macmillan, which can be found at news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8097607.stm.

Version A

'The colonial powers' adventure and civilising mission were finally over. The African continent, once considered the white man's graveyard, finally had functioning roads, vibrant churches, railways, and growing economies. There was no more work left for the European in the continent for he had successfully lifted his burden and developed Africa. While independence restored power in Africa to Africans, the new rulers proved incapable of sustaining the new institutions. In the first two decades after independence, there were 40 successful military coups and many failed ones. It was clear that Africa was too important to be left to Africans. The French, in an attempt to bring a semblance of peace and economic prosperity back to Africa, created a new currency, the CFA. The British created the Commonwealth. Some Francophone countries wanted to remain part of the French empire. The Europeans had voluntarily given power to Africans, but were forced to take it back when Africans proved incapable of governing themselves. Africa was independent in name only.'

Version B

'African nationalist leaders brought about African independence. Different leaders, scattered across the African continent, demanded the end of colonial rule by

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organising meetings in Western and African capitals. Out of this emerged the most important body, the Pan African Congress, made up of African intellectuals who made demands for the end of colonial rule and racial discrimination. Individuals such as Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Hastings Banda of Malawi, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Obafemi Awolowo from Nigeria inculcated a sense of nationalism and desire for independence in their citizens. European countries had no choice but to let go of subjects who no longer wanted them as masters. Africa gained independence from the West because their leaders had demanded independence. African nationalist leaders brought about the 'wind of change' of which Harold McMillan had spoken that was blowing across the African continent.'

Version C

'African independence, like her partition in the first place, had nothing to do with Africa or Africans. It came as a result of the geopolitical realities of the time. The Second World War had devastated Europe, with France and Britain especially losing their glory and global dominance. Though France and Britain were on the winning side of the war, they became wrecked countries, unable to administer their empires effectively due to high costs. Africa was to all intents and purposes a business arrangement for the colonial powers. Private and semi-public companies such as the British South Africa Company, German East Africa company, and many others that had been absorbed into the European states were no longer viable entities and were a drain to the European taxpayer. Decolonisation was the next logical step. Similarly, the Second World War led to the emergence of superpowers: America and the Soviet Union. African countries found new allies in the newly created body, the United Nations. The superpowers wanted global dominance by finding proxies in their new war, the Cold War, and free African countries were vital in this endeavour. The geopolitical realities of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in African countries becoming independent.'

Version D

'African independence was attained by the African masses. For hundreds of years, the European had hidden behind a cloak of invisibility. The African did not have access to the Berlin Conference and the division of his continent, where the main aim was to avoid Europeans fighting each other. To the African, the European had been superior. This all changed with the advent of the Second World War. 375,000 Africans fought on behalf of Europe, with the aim of defeating the Germans, who were painted as fascist and intent on taking over the whole world. 50,000 Africans died in Burma, Japan, India, France, and many other countries defending European democracy and way of life. Back in Africa, there was abject poverty. When Africans returned home, the superior image of the European way of life was challenged. The African had seen the white man die in battle; he was human after all. Africans became fully aware of the irony of the Second World War: they were fighting for European democracy, but they were a colonised people. This is when Africans started fighting for independence in earnest. African independence was as a result of grass root movements by the masses who wanted to address the paradoxes of the time.'

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Activity 1

Is each of these histories written from a coherent perspective?

If so, from what perspective does each derive? Give each perspective a name.

Speculate on the circumstances of historians who would be likely to write from each of these perspectives.

Why must we be careful with such speculations?

On what concepts is each perspective built? Identify four or five for each.

In what ways does each viewpoint alter the significance accorded to various historical events?

Can (or should) we judge any of these histories to be in some way better than the others? If so, on what basis? If not, does this mean that all historical accounts are as good as each other?

Is it the case that we can more or less write history however we like – impose whatever shape appeals to us according to whim, or to whichever facts we happen to encounter first? Should we be seeking to minimise the role of perspectives in history in an attempt to narrow the range of interpretations, gravitating towards something that we can agree on as an approximation to the truth, or should we encourage or at least celebrate the diversity as a positive feature of historical scholarship? Can we learn more about modern African history by taking the trouble to read all these different accounts or does it lead us into confusion?

History: the past has a shape?

'History just repeats – the same old story.' It is important to note that **Simpson**, in his response to Old Joe Hunt's question (page 320), is referring to the subject matter of history rather than the discipline itself here. He means that there are patterns in past events that seem to recur. Once you've studied one bit of history you will not be much surprised by any other part. Is it possible to support such a claim? Like Webster's response, maybe it needs to be toned down – are there any recognisable patterns and, if so, what shape do these patterns describe? Consider the graphs in Figure 4.

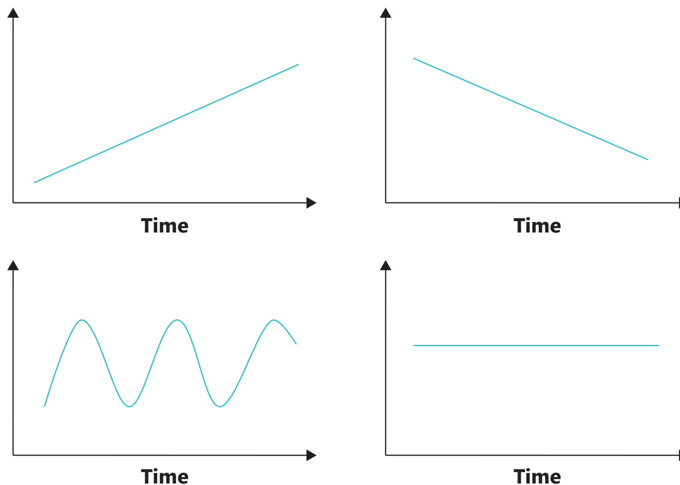

Figure 4 What variable could we put on the vertical axis?

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The horizontal axis represents time, but what variable could we put on the vertical axis? How would we know what to measure as a benchmark for progress or decline? How could we agree on it? We might decide to pick something quite easily defined, such as life expectancy or some quantifiable aspect of technology; but even here there will be difficulties in constructing a scale. To get an acceptable measure for the past as a whole at any given time would seem to be a very daunting task.

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, 'History is a gallery of pictures in which there are many copies and few originals.' Just as in many other areas of knowledge, metaphors are powerful tools in the attempt to create order and understanding in history. Many historians who detect traces of recurrence in the events of the past have been attracted by the metaphor of the seasons, with cultures or civilisations following a sequence analogous from spring to winter. The German historian Oswald Spengler employed a biological metaphor in likening history to the periods of a human life, such as childhood, youth, maturity, and old age. The title of his master work – *The decline of the west* – indicates his view as to the stage of life now reached – by what he called 'culture in the ascendant phase, and civilisation in the descendent'. Both of these metaphors help to suggest that series of events recur in principle but do not repeat in detail, as sets of annual seasons and human lives are never identical. Perhaps the most alluring shape for the past is not recurrence or decline, but progress.

For example, Whigs were members of one of the two dominant political parties in Britain during the 18th and 19th century. Their perspective on Britain's past was one influenced by a recognition of British dominance in the world at that time, viewed as a manifestation of progress. Whig history then became a term that represented the view that things continually got better over time. This perspective can not only obscure other interpretations of the past but also be used to put the present state of affairs on a pedestal and glorify those who wish to be seen to have established them. Marxist accounts of history have been used to justify the manifest imperfections of socialist societies by presenting them as merely a stage on a timeline ending in a glorious future. There is often a tendency to see the present as culmination of the past, or a milestone on the road to salvation. This way of thinking can have a backwash effect on the construction of history itself. Here is an example, with reference to the events at the end of the Cold War.

> 'Every writer on 1989 wrestles with an almost unavoidable human proclivity that psychologists have christened "hindsight bias"—the tendency, that is, to regard actual historical outcomes as more probable than alternatives that seemed real at the time (for example, a Tiananmen-style crackdown in Central Europe). What actually happened looks as if it somehow had to happen. Henri Bergson talked of "the illusions of retrospective determinism." Explanations are then offered for what happened. As one scholar commented a few years after 1989: no one foresaw this, but everyone could explain it afterward. Reading these books, I was again reminded of the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski's "law of the infinite cornucopia," which states that an infinite number of explanations can be found for any given event.'
>
> (Timothy Garton Ash: www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/nov/05/1989/)

Support for this thesis has taken many forms: from early anthropology that offered racist interpretations of human culture; to the claim by Francis Fukuyama that humanity was reaching a final successful method of governance (see optional Chapter 2.1 **Knowledge and politics**); to Steven Pinker's 2011 book *The better angels of our nature*, in which he lays out evidence to show a continuous decline in violence.

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Historians looking for patterns can of course make distinctions between places and cultures rather than risk universal assertions. Scottish historian Niall Ferguson refers to certain historical developments, such as the scientific revolution and the so-called Protestant work ethic, as peculiarly Western inventions. He refers to them as 'killer apps' that have made the difference between the 'Westerners' and others, and suggests that they may be 'downloaded' by 'Resterners' as he labels everyone else. Interestingly, he, like Oswald Spengler, has much to say about a possible decline of the West, but in contrast takes the view that this is an avoidable outcome.

- How might dividing the world into the 'West' and the 'Rest' shape thinking about the world? Does such a dichotomy help in gaining new insights into world history or does it entrench existing perspectives on it?
- 'History does not repeat but it does rhyme.' To what extent would you agree?

'History is just one damn thing after another' (obscure origin). It is ironic that this quotation is often attributed to the British historian Arnold Toynbee given that it is something with which he wholeheartedly disagreed (perhaps there is a lesson to be learned about history right here). His was one of the most comprehensive attempts in modern times to bring the past into a single overarching structure. Over a period of 20 years, he published a set of 12 volumes of *A study of history*, in which he set out his grand theoretical vision; this was based on the idea that history could be organised in terms of the rise and fall of civilisations – such as those he named the Egyptian, Sumerian, Mayan, Western, Far Eastern, Arabic, Hindu, Mexican, and so on – according to their record in responding to challenges of various kinds. He claimed to recognise a common pattern in these challenges and responses, which took the form outlined in Figure 5:

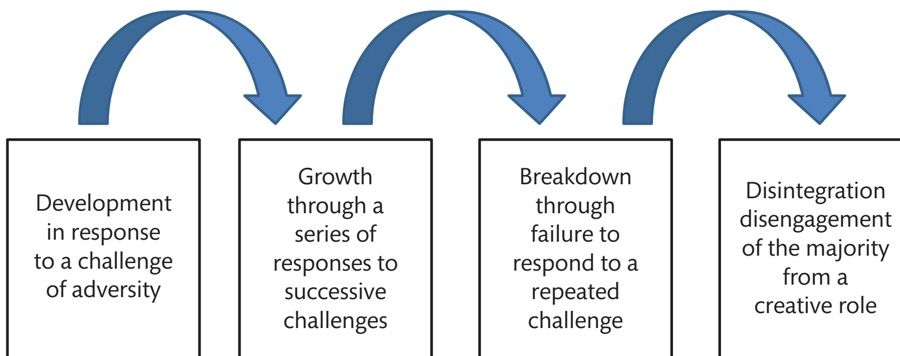

Figure 5 Arnold Toynbee recognised a common pattern in the rise and fall of civilisations.

Within this macro-structure, Toynbee elucidated a large number of what he called *laws of history*. Here are a few of them.

- The stimulating effect of breaking new ground is greatest when the new ground can only be reached by crossing the sea.
- The instability in a balance of power varies inversely with the number of contending states.
- The birth of civilisations requires creative contributions from more than one race.
- Spiritual achievement and material achievement are antithetical.

(Toynbee, 1960, pp. 32–54)

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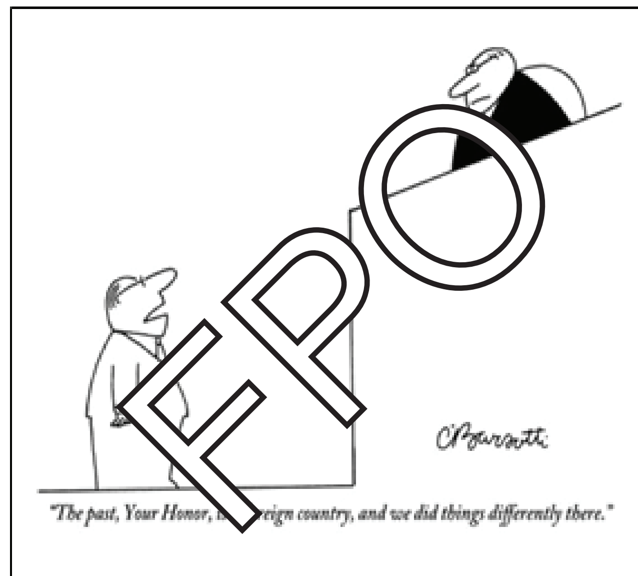
Of the more than 20 civilisations that he identified, only a few remained in existence during the period in which he was writing, with Western civilisation earmarked as the current dominant example.

- What is your first reaction to these laws of history?
- Do you think they can be used effectively in order to structure knowledge about the past?
- Assuming that these laws are accurate representations of the past, do you think they have predictive value? Or do they merely guide the responses we make to contemporary challenges?

'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' (LP Hartley)



"The past, Your Honor, is a foreign country, and we did things differently there."

'Doing things differently' might be taken to refer to changes in things such as technology and the pace of globalisation, or it might mean something more fundamental about human nature. What would be the implications of each of these two readings of the quotation for the usefulness of historical knowledge for prediction and transformation?

History: the historical development of the discipline

We have discussed in a previous section the shape of the past; but we can also consider the historical development of history as a discipline, which is a different thing. Although there were differences between the approaches to history of ancient Greek historians such as Thucydides and Herodotus, the dominant themes until modern times have been the role that history can play in providing moral guidance. History's

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remit was to provide description of the influence of the divine on the Earth, and the successful defeat of evil by the forces of good. In many ways, this placed history very close to the category of literature.

A towering figure of 19th-century history was the German Leopold von Ranke, who tried to remove the prejudices of the present and insist on the study of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* – on its own terms and as it actually was for those living at the time. To do this, he imported the methods of philology – careful evaluation of source text in order to establish the veracity of what was written. Thus von Ranke came to place a great emphasis on primary sources and the hard work of analysis at the expense of the more elaborate flights of imagination for which some of his predecessors were famous. History was not the same as literature or philosophy – this has been recognised as a crucial pivot in the historical development of history.

Von Ranke's insistence on the primacy of the sources had a similar effect in some ways to the shift to an emphasis on empirical investigation in the sciences during the Scientific Revolution; history was now a matter of reaching inductive conclusions from data. This optimistic outlook for method and outcome was punctured to some extent in the early 20th century. The prospects for sound historical knowledge came under an intellectual cloud from the influence of troubling developments in physics (relativity and quantum physics), which seemed to undermine the validity of a straightforward empirical and inductive approach to knowledge. In this case it is developments in the scientific field that played some part in a turning point in thinking about history.

The expansion of the domain of history in the 20th century was, to a point, the outcome of the increasing availability of source material of different kinds, and it inevitably led to a certain amount of fragmentation and specialism. A growing appreciation of the two-way and somewhat blurred interaction between theory and fact – to some extent acquired from the human sciences – encouraged some historians to embark on the project of converting history into a scientific discipline itself, with mixed results. So there is a tension at the heart of modern historical scholarship – between the proliferation of sub-fields and the drive to unify the discipline through established protocols from the human sciences. We will return to this issue in the next part of this chapter.

History: dealing with uncertainty

'Certainty, memory, documentation…?' **Finn's** answer to Old Joe Hunt (page 320) demands some consideration of the methods of the historian, so it's time to move on to the next element of our knowledge framework.

Things to think about

- In the IB diploma history course, historical enquiry is not supposed to include the last ten years. For more recent events, the term *retrospective journalism* is sometimes used. What do you think is the purpose of the ten-year rule, and why might we need the retrospective version of journalism rather than just the regular variety?

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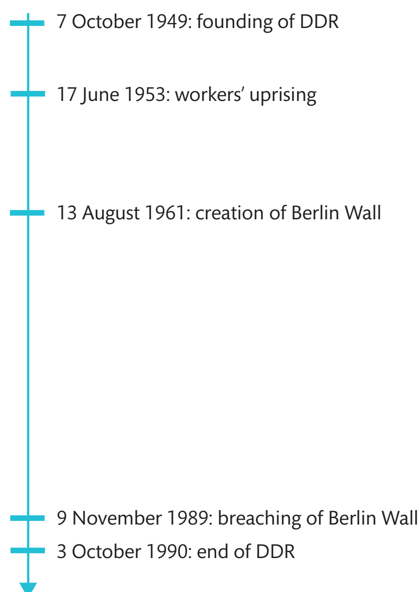
Knowledge questions

- If it is difficult to establish proof in history, does that mean that all versions are equally acceptable?
- Are historians' accounts necessarily subjective?
- Is empathy more important in history than in other areas of knowledge?
- How might the existence of different historical perspectives be beneficial to historical knowledge?
- Can the historian be free of bias in the selection and interpretation of material?
- Is it inevitable that historians will be affected by their own cultural context?
- How can we gauge the extent to which history is being told from a cultural or national perspective?
- Are we more prone to particular cognitive biases (such as hindsight bias) in some disciplines and areas of knowledge than others?

Methods and tools

Consider the following timelines:



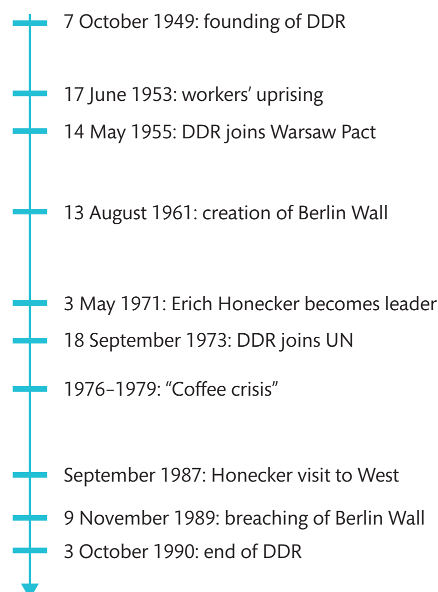


Figure 6 Two versions of the same period in history.

Common knowledge *vs* history

A simple and sparse chronology, such as Timeline A in Figure 6, affords us a very limited window into a piece of history. It is a useful contribution to knowledge, but much too simple. Even the more elaborate version on the right gives us little insight until we bring to bear what we already know. The Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR, colloquially 'East Germany', or more correctly 'GDR' in English) was born from the Soviet occupation zone of Germany after the Second World War. It existed for just over 40 years until the collapse of European communism and the reunification of Germany that it made possible. These facts belong to common knowledge and are the most rudimentary backdrop to the work of historians whom we expect to bring less well-known material and insightful interpretation to our attention.

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The amount of available source material

The methods of the historian involve digging deeper than common knowledge on a topic, and rely to a great extent on the source material that is available. But during the Cold War, those researching the DDR and the Soviet bloc more generally had to contend with a dearth of such source material as a result of the tight grip on information characteristic of these regimes. Accordingly, accounts of the development and state of the DDR from its formation through to the 1980s tended to be built on rather narrow foundations of personal experience and official statistics. For example, here is what the British journalist John Ardagh wrote in 1987.

> '... the vast majority [of East German citizens] have now come to terms with their destiny: they find that life under socialism is perfectly liveable and even has some advantages...' (p. 319)
>
> 'One undoubted achievement of the GDR, dating from the 1960s, has been its economic progress. Capitalist West Germany is of course far wealthier: but the more valuable comparisons are to be made with the East. The GDR is economically and industrially much the strongest country in the Soviet bloc [...] and by as early as 1970 it had become the world's tenth leading industrial power. This can be attributed above all to the innate German qualities of efficiency, thoroughness, technical flair and so on.' (p. 326)
>
> 'People have come to identify with the GDR and to see it as their home [...] Many people have even come to be vaguely proud of the GDR, and they resent being patronised by affluent visitors from West Germany who tell them how unfortunate they are. Such people are proud of their country's sporting success, of its economic progress in the face of such odds, and of some cultural achievements such as the restoration of old towns. Some of them, without necessarily liking the regime, will even take some pride in the GDR as a society less violent, permissive and over-competitive than the West and one that has better preserved some of the old German values.' (p. 338)
>
> (Ardagh, 1988, pp. 319–338)

Then, with little warning, a rapid sequence of events led to the end of the Cold War. Well within a year of the breaching of the Berlin Wall, the DDR had ceased to exist. The collapse of communist authority was accompanied by a torrent of previously classified documents – most conspicuously from the Ministry for State Security (informally known as the Stasi), which, according to the German historian Klaus-Dietmar Henke, generated a quantity of files the size of which amounted to 'the equivalent of all records produced in German history since the middle ages' (Funder, 2003, p. 5). The implications for historians of this massive change of circumstances, as described by Professor Mary Fulbrook in 1995, are not to be underestimated.

> 'Writing a book about the GDR at this time has not been easy. I first conceived the idea for this book in the early 1980s, when – as many historians took a delight in informing me – there was too little material to do more than hypothesise. Then came an entirely unexpected reversal of the situation: with the fall of the Wall and the opening of the abundant documentation of the East German archives, there is almost too much material to do more than hypothesise.
>
> With truly Prussian zeal and efficiency, the East German communists observed, collected and collated the most extraordinary mountains of information in the interests of having total overview, total control, in a state where there was no open forum for gauging patterns of public opinion. As a result – and despite a number of problems of interpretation – there are fascinating sediments of unexpectedly rich material for the historian to explore. It will take decades of detailed archival research before the historiography of the GDR begins to attain the well-defined contours of debate which characterise earlier periods of German history.'
>
> (Fulbrook, 2002, p. v)

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As the French poet and essayist Charles Péguy once quipped: 'it is impossible to write ancient history because we do not have enough sources and impossible to write modern history because we have too many.' In the case of the DDR, historians found their object of study transported from 'ancient' to 'modern' world in the blink of an eye.

Figure 7 Erich Mielke: Stasi head 1957–1989.

Figure 8 Hand-sorting of shredded document fragments.

The nature of available source material

The collapse of the DDR revealed the true extent of the grasp with which the Stasi held the whole country.

> 'According to internal records, in 1988 [...] the Ministry for State Security had more than 170,000 "unofficial collaborators". [...] The ministry itself had over 90,000 employees [...] Setting the total figure against the adult population in the same year, this means that about one out of fifty adult East Germans had a direct connection with the secret police. Allow one dependent per person, and you're up to one in twenty-five.'
>
> (Garton Ash, 1997, p. 74)

The tendrils of espionage threaded through workplaces and into family homes where husbands and wives, and even sometimes their children, informed on one other to the secret police and provided the content for many millions of secretly stored documents. Accounts of extra-judicial killings and incarcerations filled file after file, alongside mundane observations about everyday lives. And so, as the regime disintegrated, urgent measures were taken to deal with the tonnes of paper from Stasi activity.

> 'Stasi officers were instructed to destroy files, starting with the most incriminating [...]. They shredded the files until the shredders collapsed [...] so they had to send out agents under cover to West Berlin to buy more [...]. When the Stasi couldn't get any more machines, they started destroying the files by hand, ripping up documents and putting them into sacks. But this was done in such an orderly fashion – whole drawers of documents put in the same bag – that now [...] it is possible for the puzzle [workers] to piece them back together.'
>
> (Funder, 2003, p. 67)

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However, it soon became clear that the sheer volume of files meant that it would take centuries to complete the task in this way. The introduction of software that can do the re-assembly many times faster has taken over the bulk of the work.

In 1991, the government of unified Germany decreed that everyone had the right to know if the Stasi had kept a file on them, and if so, they had the right to read it. 'Puzzle women' were employed to reconstitute shredded documents, piece by piece, in a painstakingly slow task that has now been taken over by scanners and software that can match fragments on screen.

Activity 2

Given the recruitment of collaborators and the priorities assigned to the destruction of the documentation, what do you think some of Fulbrook's 'problems of interpretation' might be?

How might historians attempt to overcome these problems?

This example of the DDR illustrates some basic relations between history and the past. Despite the best efforts of the Stasi, much activity went unrecorded and is consigned to the unknowable. Of those facts and events that were recorded, some were lost – such as material shredded beyond repair. But in this case a vast quantity has been retrieved and is also now available to the historian, who is of course working in the present, selecting material of interest and relevance to research, and adding their own inferences and interpretations to it. These processes are summarised in the elaborated diagram in Figure 9.

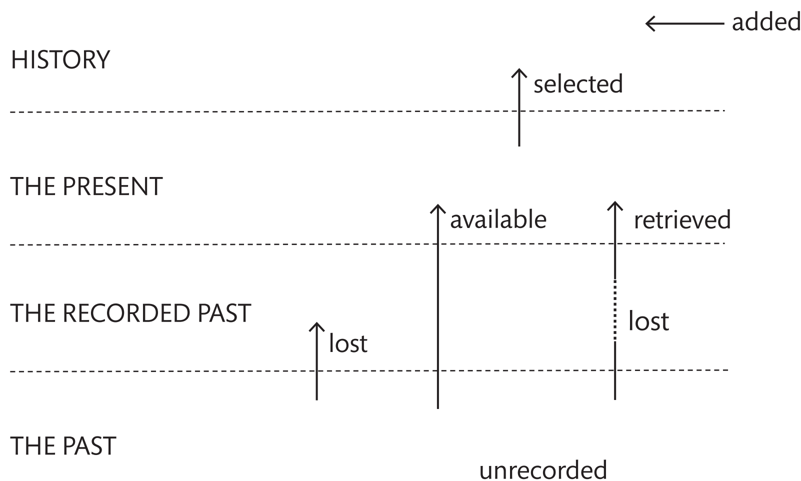

Figure 9 Some basic relations between the present, past, and history.

As we have noted already, the present is always wedged between history and its object of study, and the diagram in Figure 9 is set out in a way that tries to make this clear. How might the diagram help to clarify what George Orwell meant when he said: 'who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past'?

Historians are dependent on source material for their trade; without it history fades into myth, and thence to fiction. The DDR example shows how both a dearth and a glut of material can present serious challenges for historians, and in either case there is the further imperative of evaluating quality and reliability. The example also shows

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how the historian often works in fields that are politically and morally charged – perhaps illustrating the importance of maintaining a sufficient span of time between the object of study and the study itself.

Using sources

If the subject matter of history is the recorded past of humanity, then the methods of history must in the first instance focus on those records themselves. For the modern historian, there are some general principles that are accepted as to their nature and how they should be approached.

The most obvious way of classifying those records is to distinguish between original authorities (as in eye-witness accounts) and derivative authorities (as in those accounts written afterwards by others). Nowadays we would call these *primary* and *secondary* sources. We could further distinguish between secondary and *tertiary* sources, and so on, depending on the length of the chain through which accounts have passed.

We could generalise and say that primary sources are more reliable than secondary sources, which are in turn more reliable than sources even further down the chain; but there may well be exceptions to this principle. However, the number of independent sources that offer more or less the same message about something is usually proportional to the confidence with which we should accept that message. We could also say that the difference between witting and unwitting sources is crucial – think about who in the DDR example intended their testimony to be made public one day and those who certainly did not.

- How can we know that sources are independent? How can we tell if a source intended their contribution to be examined and incorporated into the historical record?
- Can you think of an example in which a secondary source may be more reliable than the primary sources from which the secondary source worked?

As for the content of the documentation itself, there are some guidelines for treatment. The American historian Gilbert Garraghan (Garraghan, 1946), for example, offers the following list of guidelines for criticism of sources:

1. Date: when was the source, written or unwritten, produced?
2. Localisation: where was it produced?
3. Authorship: by whom was it produced?
4. Analysis: from what pre-existing material was it produced?
5. Integrity: in what original form was it produced?
6. Credibility: what is the value of its contents?

Students of DP history are likely to be more familiar with the OPVL method, in which an evaluation is made of the origins, purposes, value, and limitations of documentary sources. So one might ask:

- Origins: Who wrote it? Where did it come from and when?
- Purposes: What does it mean in its historical context?
- Value: Bearing in mind its origins and purpose, to what extent is it a worthwhile source?
- Limitations: What is there about its origins and purpose that limits its value?

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There seem to be some differences here.

- How has the emphasis changed between Garraghan's advice and the standard current OPVL?
- Compare the OPVL method with those outlined in this book for other areas of knowledge.

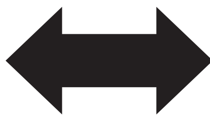
History and the proliferation of data

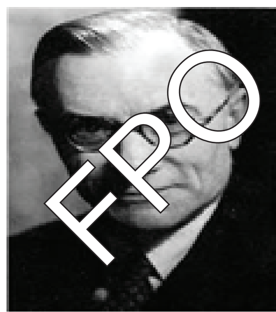
It would be easy to leave the case study of the DDR above to historians with a special interest in it, but we are all living in an age in which huge amounts of data about our lives and times are generated and stored with far less effort than was required on the part of the Stasi officers and unofficial collaborators of the 1970s and 1980s. Witness the trails of information that we produce with our mobile phones and web searches. Now we have 'life-cams' and 'life-logging', and we are entering the age of the 'internet of things', with everyday devices all seamlessly networked to each other. The question of what happens to this data (now all in digital form, and therefore much easier to manipulate) touches on many moral issues, but the form of storage and the ease with which connections can be made across it will also have deep implications for the ways in which the history of the 21st century is constructed.

- What methods do you think historians should adopt in response to these changes in the form, quantity, and availability of source material?

Facts, evidence, and interpretations

Much of the debate about the nature of history in the middle years of the 20th century was dominated by two British figures and the interplay between their views. As with many aspects of the study of history, they had their differences with respect to one of the most important concepts in the discipline – what are historical facts and what roles do they play in the production of history?





Sir Geoffrey Elton
'Historical method is no more than a recognised and tested way of extracting from what the past has left the true facts and events of that past, and so far as is possible their true meaning and interrelation.'

Edward Hallett (EH) Carr
'The facts of history never come to us pure since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form; they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder. [...] our first concern should not be with facts which [the work of history] contains but with the historian who wrote it. Study the historian before you begin to study the facts.'

Figure 10 Sir Geoffrey Elton (left) and Edward Hallett (EH) Carr (right).

- Summarise in a single sentence the difference between Elton and Carr here. Can you give an example that could illustrate the difference?

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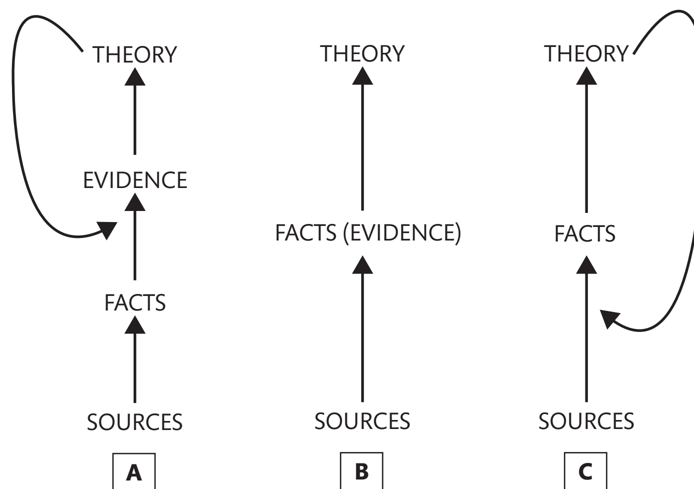
> 'A historical fact is something that happened in history and can be verified as such through the traces history has left behind. Whether or not the historian has actually carried out the act of verification is irrelevant to its factuality. [...] Where theory and interpretation come in is where facts are converted into evidence [...] The historian formulates a thesis, goes looking for evidence and discovers facts.'
>
> (Richard Evans)

Try to connect each of the following diagrams to the views of the Elton, Carr, and Evans as presented in this section:



For each of the following two examples (both adapted from Rayner and Stapley, 2002), decide which statements to recruit in order to reach an answer to the question.

Historical question: Who was responsible for starting the Cold War?

1. From the start, Stalin had a poorer relationship with Truman than Roosevelt.
2. Stalin drained his sector of Germany of supplies and machinery from 1945 on.
3. The Allies failed to take Stalin fully into their confidence during the Second World War.
4. The Americans refused to grant Stalin a much-needed loan in 1945.
5. Truman ordered the atomic bombing of Hiroshima without informing the Soviets.
6. Churchill was a keen supporter of intervention against the Bolsheviks in 1918.
7. Marshall Aid was provided to Western Europe from 1947.

Historical question: When did South African apartheid start?

1. In his victorious campaign in the 1948 election, Malan proposed apartheid as a means of consolidating White wealth and power.
2. The Immorality Act of 1926 banned sexual relations between people of different races.
3. Political power was reserved for Whites from the founding of the Union of South Africa in 1910, except for Black voting in the Cape and Natal.
4. In the 1930s, the Black franchise was diminished to allow only limited voting, and only for White candidates.

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5. Widespread legislation was passed in 1948 to establish apartheid.
6. Areas where non-Whites were forbidden to live were specified by an act of parliament in 1923.

Let's consider your answer to be an interpretation. With regard to this process, try to decide which of the three models above you followed. What were you doing?

- Arranging facts in a balanced and dispassionate way in order to reach your interpretation?
- Adopting an interpretation and collecting facts in a balanced and dispassionate way to see if they provide convincing evidence for that interpretation?
- Adopting an interpretation and looking for facts that will provide evidence for that interpretation?

Did you reject some of the statements? If so, was this because:

- you didn't think they were reliable
- you didn't think they were relevant
- they didn't fit in with the interpretation you had already reached?

Are there differences between the two examples that make it difficult to reach an opinion about how the historian operates? Are there any important implications that arise from the choice of models?

The relationship between the individual facts and the interpretation that orders them and binds them together is an important topic in several areas of knowledge (in the natural and human sciences we might call the 'binding agent' a theory). In addition to summarising the issue of selection in history, Evans here captures the debate (first introduced under **Scope** on page 312) as to whether that order originates in the facts themselves, or is imposed by the interpretation that we apply to them.

> 'As I write this, I can hear the click of my fingers on the word-processor, the faint whine of the computer in the background, the dull but constantly varying roar of the traffic in the main road across the garden, the twittering of the birds outside, the light ticking of the clock on my desk, the soft padding of my cat as he comes up the stairs, the sound of my own breathing, and so on: all this is a handful of seconds, and already it is gone beyond any hope of complete or accurate reconstruction, least of all in the exact sequence in which these noises have come to my ears. So we all pull out from the seamless web of past events a tiny selection which we then present in our historical account. Nobody has ever disputed this. The dispute arises when some theorists believe that the selection is largely determined by the narratives and structures which occur in the past itself, and those who think it is imposed by the historian.'
>
> (Evans, 1997, [e-book])

The influences of other areas of knowledge in history

In Chapter 4.1 **Areas of knowledge**, we discussed CP Snow and his lament that intellectual life tended to fracture into the two camps of the sciences, and the humanities and arts. You may by now have developed an opinion about whether he had a worthwhile point that still persists today. Might history occupy some middle position or draw from both ends? The historian George Macaulay Trevelyan described

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his discipline thus: 'History is a mixture of the scientific (research), the imaginative or speculative (interpretation) and the literary (presentation).'

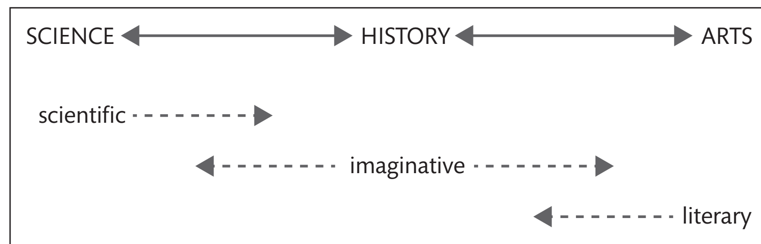

Figure 11 Areas of knowledge related to Trevelyan's description of history.

Comparative approach

Let's try to use Trevelyan's description to steer the following discussion. For a start, there are traces of scientific **methodology** when the historian adopts a **comparative approach** to research. In the DP history course, one might, for instance, wish to draw some general conclusions from a study of a range of civil wars. Is it possible to extract common features from experiences in Russia around 1917, China from the 1920s onward, Spain in the 1930s, and perhaps Nigeria in the 1960s? In a sense, this is an attempt to limit the variables under consideration by selecting comparable events.

- To what extent do you think such comparisons can rank with those made in a scientific investigation?
- There is the possibility of confirmation bias in such an exercise – the tendency to lean towards evidence that supports a researcher's prior interpretation or belief. Perhaps the historian is predisposed to a theory that greed is uppermost in such conflicts, or alternatively a sense of grievance – how serious is this danger as compared with similar difficulties in the sciences?

Counterfactual approach

One problem with the comparative method is that the items under comparison are unlikely to be simultaneous, and so there are other factors at work that cannot be controlled or removed. So a second method – controversial among historians but appealing to the venerable tradition of thought experiments – goes by the name of *counterfactual history*. We know that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor marked the entry of the United States into the Second World War. But what if that attack had never taken place? Perhaps isolationist views in the USA would have prevailed and kept the country out of the conflict. In the absence of American forces in Europe, perhaps Nazi Germany would have succeeded in subduing the continent and the Japanese gained complete control of the Pacific theatre. Although this is a very simplistic analysis, the intention of placing the Pearl Harbor attack at a fork between what happened and what might otherwise have happened allows us to try to evaluate its historical importance. Here are some other examples for you to try:

- What if Napoleon had triumphed in Russia in 1812?
- What if Archduke Franz Ferdinand had not been assassinated in Sarajevo in 1914?
- What if the terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 had been different?

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- What if Hitler had won at Stalingrad in 1942?
- What if Kwame Nkrumah had not been overthrown by military coup in Ghana in 1966?
- What if British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had been assassinated by the bomb set by the Irish Republican Army in 1984?
- What if Al Gore had won the 2000 presidential election in the USA?

By invoking such scenarios, we are 'running history in parallel' and attempting to draw comparisons between the real past and one that never took place – all arising from the different possible outcomes of a single event.

- Is this a more reliable sort of comparison that the one in the previous (civil war) case?
- What is the central problem with counterfactual history and how might historians overcome it?

'Outside' approach

A different attempt to forefront the scientific dimension of Trevelyan's description of history would be to take a strongly empirical approach. To do this, some historians have focused on the 'outside' of events – scrutinising the past from an angle that emphasises the physical and geographical environments in which they took place. Ian Morris, a British historian writes as follows.

> '[I]t is geography which explains why one part of world – the nations we conventionally call "the West" – now dominates the rest. Geography determined that when the world warmed up at the end of the Ice Age a band of lucky latitudes stretching across Eurasia from the Mediterranean to China developed agriculture earlier than other parts of the world and then went on to be the first to invent cities, states and empires. But as social development increased, it changed what geography meant and the centres of power and wealth shifted around within these lucky latitudes. Until about 500 CE the Western end of Eurasia hung on to its early lead, but after the fall of the Roman Empire and Han dynasty the centre of gravity moved eastward to China, where it stayed for more than a millennium. Only around 1700 did it shift westward again, largely due to inventions – guns, compasses, ocean-going ships – which were originally pioneered in the East but which, thanks to geography, proved more useful in the West. Westerners then created an Atlantic economy which raised profound new questions about how the world worked, pushing westerners into a Scientific Revolution, an Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. By the mid-19th century, the West dominated the globe.'
>
> (Morris, 2010)

This has been coined the 'latitudes not attitudes' approach. It is somewhat back in fashion after many years of obscurity as a result of how 19th-century scholars tended to use environmental determinism as a justification for the 'hierarchy of success' enjoyed by different peoples and societies around the world.

- Researchers such as Morris have been accused of providing the 'how?' but not the 'why?' that is necessary in history. Do you think this might be a fair criticism?
- What counts as an historical 'event' can range from a very specific occurrence to a broad panorama of change. What kinds of events from the past do you think Morris's approach might fail to deal with satisfactorily?

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Cliodynamics

Attempts to focus on empirically verifiable data as key to historical scholarship can be taken further. Led by the Russian-American scholar Peter Turchin, a field called *cliodynamics* has attained prominence, in which big quantifiable data is used in order to detect trends and correlations. This approach brings techniques from mathematics into play.

> 'I have nothing but deep respect for the giants of historical thought from Polybius and Ibn Khaldun to Fernand Braudel and William McNeill. But I argue that it is not enough. In addition to admirable research already performed by historians, we need a systematic effort addressed at translating verbal theories into mathematical models, putting together large collections of historical data, and testing model predictions on this empirical material. Contrasting predictions of rival theories with data will allow us to reject some theories in favor of others. This is one of the best measures of scientific progress, but rarely happens in history.'
>
> (peterturchin.com/cliodynamics/why-do-we-need-mathematical-history/)

Turchin claims to have discovered historical cycles for variables such as 'political instability' that are replicated in different societies at different times. Figure 12, for example, is a presentation of data showing levels of violence in the United States over the last two centuries, with a distinct 50-year cycle.

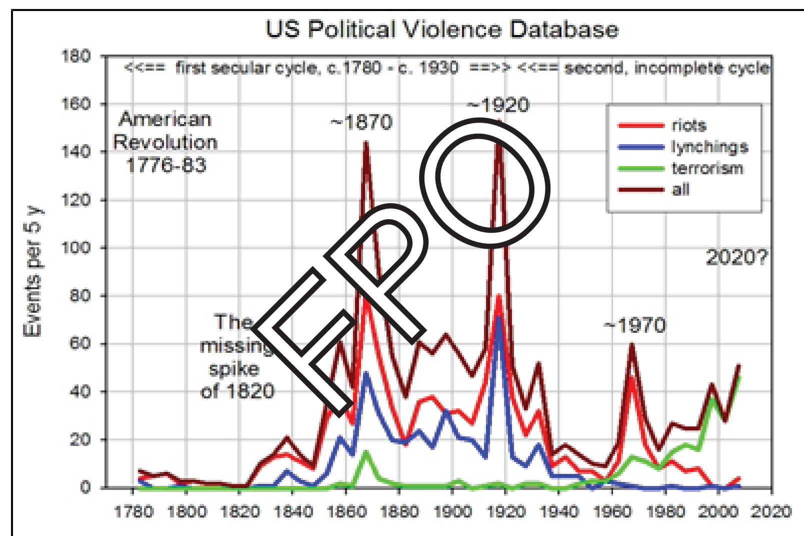

Figure 12 US political violence database graph.

Worryingly, Turchin suggests from his data that there will be a spike in violence in the 2020s at least as severe as that of the 1970s, and possibly even as large as that of the 1920s.

Activity 3

The *cliodynamic* approach to history is audacious, whether or not it yields the quality of results that advocates hope for – but what are some of the problems that immediately arise through this kind of method?

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Do you think that Turchin and his followers will succeed in binding history more deeply into Group 3 of the IB diploma alongside the other subjects found there?

If so, would we be able to do away with history as a dedicated area of knowledge?

Do you think the prospects for the acceptance of cliodynamics as a valid approach in history might be affected by the fact that Turchin is trained as a population ecologist rather than as a historian? If so, how?

In examining cliodynamics, have we basically just encountered a primitive version of psychohistory? Is cliodynamics as a method any more of a realistic proposition than psychohistory?

Interestingly, Turchin claims that our ability to predict the outcomes of our interventions is more important than our ability to make the original predictions on which the interventions would be based. We can connect these observations about prediction and transformation back to the questions about Asimov's psychohistory earlier in this chapter. But essentially Turchin's agenda in promoting cliodynamics is rooted in his criticism of traditional historical methods that produce alternative interpretations:

'What caused the collapse of the Roman Empire? More than 200 explanations have been proposed, but there is no consensus about which explanations are plausible and which should be rejected. This situation is as risible as if, in physics, phlogiston theory and thermodynamics coexisted on equal terms. This state of affairs is holding us back. ... [W]e need a historical social science, because processes that operate over long timescales can affect the health of societies. It is time for history to become an analytical, and even a predictive, science.'

(Peter Turchin: www.nature.com/nature/journal/v454/n7200/full/454034a.html)

'Inside' approach

In summary, we've so far looked at some approaches that emphasise the first (scientific) element of Trevelyan's three-part description of history – the effort to make comparisons between similar events, a focus on empirical evidence, and a drive towards quantification that brings mathematical techniques into play. We can contrast these resolutely 'outside' approaches to history with the work of the English historian RG Collingwood, for whom a very different approach was key.

'The historian, investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an event. By the outside of the event I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements : the passage of Caesar, accompanied by certain men, across a river called the Rubicon at one date, or the spilling of his blood on the floor of the senate-house at another. By the inside of the event I mean that in it which can only be described in terms of thought: Caesar's defiance of Republican law, or the clash of constitutional policy between himself and his assassins. The historian is never concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other. He is investigating not mere events (where by a mere event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside) but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event. He is interested in the crossing of the Rubicon only in its relation to Republican law, and in the spilling of Caesar's blood only in its relation to a constitutional conflict. His work may begin by discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent.'

(brocku.ca/MeadProject/Collingwood/1946_1.html)

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Collingwood goes on to contrast the investigation of history with that of the natural world, in which events have no 'inside' in the sense that historical events do. While historians search for the 'inside' of events, scientists seek to compare events with other events in order to establish patterns that lead to theories and laws. Perhaps history is a harder discipline because of the need to imagine thoughts and motivations that are not directly accessible; perhaps easier because there is no imperative to seek general laws. Collingwood appeals to our common humanity in order to show that imaginative re-enactment is not mere fantasy but rather the 'insides' of events are partially accessible through our understanding of how people behave.

Literary approach

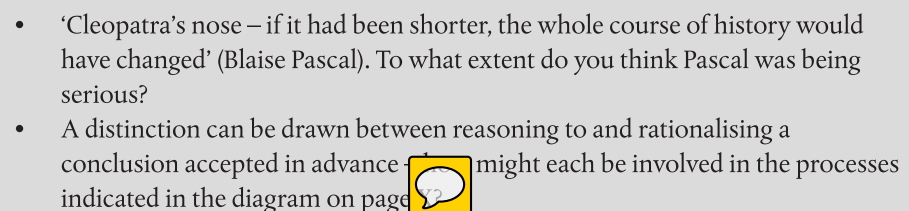
Collingwood's ideas add the second element of Trevelyan's 'formula' for history – we need the **imagination** as well as a **scientific** mindset. But what about the third element – the **literary**? Trevelyan couched this part as about presentation, but there are historians who see the use of language and literary structure as playing a more fundamental role. For instance, the American historian Hayden White was persuaded that the similarities between history and literature are greater than their differences. Richard Evans summarises the approach.

> 'For Hayden White, researching and writing a history book is much the same as researching and writing a novel. Both are made up of elements of real human experience. Both have to meet the demands of correspondence to that experience and coherence in the way they present it. Both use language as their means of representing reality. Just like novelists, historians, says White, prefigure their field of enquiry by selecting and evaluating the evidence with the very linguistic and imaginative tools that will be used in the construction of the resulting narrative.'
>
> (White, 1975, pp. xi-xii, 5–7, in Evans, 1997, (e103))

And White expands on this view of history.

> 'Readers of histories and novels can hardly fail to be struck by their similarities. There are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories, considered in purely formal (or, I should say, formalist) terms. Viewed simply as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history.'
>
> (libquotes.com/hayden-white/quote/lbj9b2h)

In the **Scope** section we identified the historical dimension of other disciplines as a justification for giving history an elevated priority in TOK. Here we see that history itself draws on the traditions and protocols of some of those other disciplines, such that they have influence on the methods employed by the historian.



Things to think about

- 'Cleopatra's nose – if it had been shorter, the whole course of history would have changed' (Blaise Pascal). To what extent do you think Pascal was being serious?
- A distinction can be drawn between reasoning to and rationalising a conclusion accepted in advance – [illegible] might each be involved in the processes indicated in the diagram on page [illegible]

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Knowledge questions

- What methods do historians use to gain knowledge?
- What is unique about the methodology of history compared to other areas of knowledge?
- On what criteria can a historian evaluate the reliability of their sources?
- If our senses are sometimes unreliable, does this mean that eyewitness testimony is an unreliable source of evidence?
- Have technological developments enabled us to observe the past more directly?
- What challenges does archive-based history emphasise about how knowledge is shared and preserved?
- Is there less emphasis on collaborative research in history than there is between researchers in other areas of knowledge? How do the methods and conventions of historians themselves change over time?

Ethics

As with all other areas of knowledge, history is concerned with the discovery of the truth. We have seen many of the obstacles that stand in the way of the historian and some of the methods employed to overcome them. In this final section of the chapter, we will focus on the obligations that apply to historians and those who supply the materials on which they rely in this endeavour.

Literal *vs* literary truth

'Journalism is the first rough draft of history.'

(origin unclear)

'When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.'

(St. Augustine)

While more of a correspondent than a historian, the journalistic output of Ryszard Kapuściński has been praised for its unique value – given that Kapuściński visited places and conversed with people that few other correspondents managed to do, and wrote about all of it with such style. Indeed, there was talk at one stage of Kapuściński as a candidate for the Nobel prize for literature. In one of his most famous books, he writes about his experiences in Ethiopia immediately after the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, in conversing with some of the royal courtiers as primary witnesses.

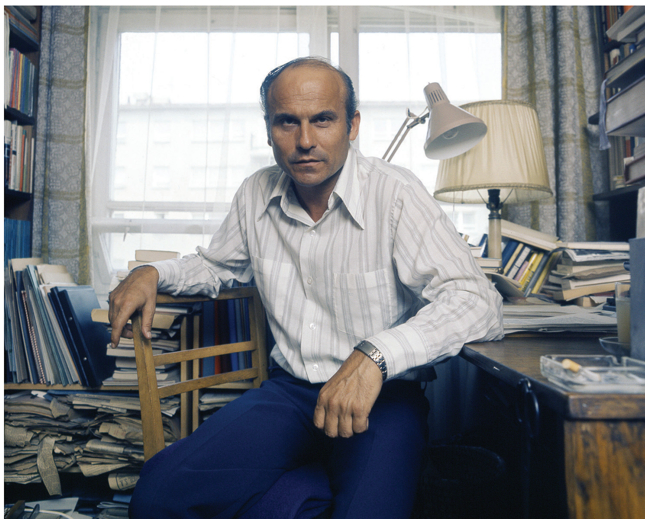

Figure 13 Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński.

Figure 14 Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.

Eulogies for Kapuściński's work were widespread and effusive – for example, this one from *The Wall Street Journal*.

> 'When our children's children want to study the cruelties of the late 20th century; when they want to read of murderous tyrants and drunken soldiers; when they wonder why revolution after revolution betrayed its promises through greed, fear and confusions, they should read Ryszard Kapuściński.'
>
> (www.edwardtufte.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg?msg_id=0002fo)

Here are two extracts from *The emperor* (Kapuściński, 1983).

> 'The Emperor began his day by listening to informers' reports. The night breeds dangerous conspiracies, and Haile Selassie knew that what happens at night is more important than what happens during the day. During the day he kept his eye on everyone; at night that was impossible. For that reason, he attached great

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importance to the morning reports. And here I would like to make one thing clear: His Venerable Majesty was no reader. For him, neither the written nor the printed word existed; everything had to be relayed by word of mouth. His Majesty had had no schooling. His sole teacher – and that only during his childhood – was a French Jesuit, Monsignor Jerome, later Bishop of Harar and a friend of the poet Arthur Rimbaud. This cleric had no chance to inculcate the habit of reading in the Emperor, a task made all the more difficult, by the way, because Haile Selassie occupied responsible administrative positions from his boyhood and had no time for regular reading.

But I think there was more to it than a lack of time and habit. The custom of relating things by word of mouth had this advantage: if need be, the Emperor could say that a given dignitary had told him something quite different from what had really been said, and the latter could not defend himself, having no written proof. Thus the Emperor heard from his subordinates not what they had told him, but what he thought should be said, his Venerable Highness had his ideas, and he would adjust to them all the signals that came from his surroundings. It was the same with writing, for our monarch not only never used his ability to read, but he also never wrote anything and never signed anything in his own hand. Though he ruled for half a century, not even those closest to him knew what his signature looked like.'

(Courtier YM, pp. 7–8)

'It was a small dog, a Japanese breed. His name was Lulu. He was allowed to sleep in the Emperor's great bed. During various ceremonies, he would run away from the Emperor's lap and pee on dignitaries' shoes. The august gentlemen were not allowed to flinch or make the slightest gesture when they felt their feet getting wet. I had to walk among the dignitaries and wipe the urine from their shoes with a satin cloth. This was my job for ten years.'

(Courtier F, p. 5)

Some years after the publication of the book, American scholar Harold Marcus protested.

'...Mr. Richard, as he is called by several raconteurs, reported that the emperor had a little dog that was permitted to urinate on the shoes of courtiers and that there was a servant whose sole duty was to wipe the offending shoes dry [...] but he never would have permitted any animal to humiliate his courtiers... Haile Sellassie was, by all reports, a sedulous reader in Amharic, French, and, later, in English. He not only perused books but also reports, newspapers, and magazines. Furthermore, he wrote instructions and orders, giving the lie to Kapuściński's absurd statement: "Though he ruled for half a century, not even those closest to him knew what his signature looked like." ...those of us who take Amharic and its usage seriously are insulted by the artistic license taken by Kapuściński when he ostensibly replicates conversations with informants...'

Harold Marcus; History in Africa 17 (1990), pp. 373–78. 374

Do you think it matters what behaviour the emperor permitted his dog, or what facility the emperor enjoyed in different languages, when recording the history of 20th-century Ethiopia? In recent years, and particularly since his death in 2007, the veracity of Kapuściński's work has come in for greater scrutiny.

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'The division between "literature" and "reporting" won't hold; we believed his books because "reportage" is how they were billed. Remove a fictional brick or two and the wall of "authenticated" reality begins to crumble. What will remain to us is his imagination, which is already displacing in our own memory the real world he tried so artfully to describe.'

(Ian Jack: www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/mar/06/ian-jack-ryszard-Kapuściński)

Is there a distinction between 'reporting' and 'history' that would make a difference to your response to the quotation above? Kapuściński's response to earlier criticisms of this nature was as follows.

'You know, sometimes the critical response to my books is amusing. There are so many complaints: Kapuściński never mentions dates, Kapuściński never gives us the name of the minister, he has forgotten the order of events. All that, of course, is exactly what I avoid. If those are the questions you want answered, you can visit your local library, where you will find everything you need: the newspapers of the time, the reference books, a dictionary.'

(Ryszard Kapuściński, quoted by Jack Shafer: www.slate.com/id/2158315)

Activity 4

What is your view on this example? Was Kapuściński ethically obliged to report exactly what the courtiers told him (the 'literal truth'), or could he be justified in putting words into their mouths in the interests of conveying a deeper 'literary truth'?

There are strong indications that much of Kapuściński's work was allegorical in nature – he wished to comment discreetly on the situation in his native Poland which, as a communist state at the time, would not tolerate direct dissent. Perhaps he was drawing parallels between the court of Haile Selassie and the Polish politburo of the 1970s. If so, does that make Kapuściński's rather liberal attitude to facts more or less ethically justifiable? Consider the motivations for his work and the possible effects of it on those who read it.

Kapuściński's last book was called *Travels with Herodotus*. Do some research on the approach to historical scholarship that was taken by Herodotus, and then speculate on what message Kapuściński might have been trying to convey about his own work at the end of his career.

The intimate relationship between history and language (sources in language; product in language) forces historians to consider with particular care how they express their findings. It might not just be a matter of studiously avoiding emotion-laden terms in the way that scientists are trained to do, as Mary Fulbrook explains:

'Although in the more extreme cases, [...] loaded language is quite evident and easily discounted, it is often more subtle and persuasive [...] as in the case of the "developing countries" with all that this label implies. Conversely, in what may be held to be extreme situations (the Holocaust), the attempt to use neutral or non-loaded language may itself be seen as part of an attempt at sanitizing, rendering non-problematic, acceptable, "normal".'

(Fulbrook, 2002)

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What might be the ethical implications of the use, or the avoidance, of 'loaded' language by the historian?

Fulbrook offers a number of solutions to these language problems for the historian, including trying to restrict discourse to the language and concepts current to the period under investigation, or developing a specialised vocabulary for history just as scientists have successfully achieved in their domains.

The integrity of the historian

Alongside the quality of source material lies the integrity of the historian. Discredited historian David Irving was shown not only to have made mistakes, as all scholars do, but to have breached expected professional norms. This has focused attention on the desirability of a common code of conduct for historians. This might include items such as the following, offered by Suzannah Lipscomb (www.historytoday.com/archive/code-conduct-historians)

- Use evidence to support your interpretation and seek to understand that evidence correctly.
- Do not cite evidence from sources that you elsewhere discount.
- Triangulate; search ardently for evidence that might undermine, as well as corroborate, your hypothesis.
- Avoid assumption creep: do not allow assertions to move from 'possibly' to 'probably' to 'definitely'; do not build more elaborate layers of interpretation on a foundation that is rocky.
- Do not rely on the secondary assertions of other historians. Go back to the original sources.
- Guard against confirmation bias; interrogate the 'facts' anew and bring a fresh analysis to them; do not mould the facts to your interpretation.
- Root out and resolve any internal inconsistencies in your argument.

Things to think about

- Have you ever sat in a room during a social event, not being asked about your past? How does it feel to be 'beneath notice'?
- Watch the film *Hidden Figures* about the work of Katherine Johnson and other female mathematicians in the NASA space programme of the 1960s. Who is responsible for the lack of recognition that they received for their contributions?

Knowledge questions

- Is it unfair to judge people and actions in the past by the standards of today?
- Should terms such as *atrocity* or *hero* be used when writing about history, or should value judgements be avoided?
- Do historians have a moral responsibility to try to ensure that history is not misused and distorted by people for their own ends?
- On what criteria could we decide whether people in the past have a right to privacy in the present?
- Do historians have an ethical obligation not to ignore contradictory evidence?

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Conclusion

History is often abused by TOK students as the definitive example of a discipline riddled with 'bias' and uncertainty. But this view is often based on a set of misunderstandings. These include the idea that different perspectives on the past constitute a weakness, that each historian is locked into a set of prejudices that stem from their own background, and a confusion between history as an academic project and the past that it seeks to investigate. It is hoped that this chapter has dispelled some of these matters.

It would be hard to improve on the following heartfelt description of the inspiration for the calling of the historian from George Macaulay Trevelyan. It is hoped that it may inspire not only the hesitant prospective student of history who appeared at the start of this chapter, but also you as the reader of this book.

> 'The appeal of history to us all is in the last analysis poetic. But the poetry of history does not consist of imagination roaming at large, but of imagination pursuing the fact and fastening upon it. That which compels the historian to "scorn delights and live laborious days" is the ardour of [her] own curiosity to know what really happened long ago in that land of mystery which we call the past. To peer into that magic mirror and see fresh figures there every day is a burning desire that consumes and satisfies [her] all [her] life, that carries [her] each morning, eager as a lover, to the library and the muniment room. It haunts [her] like a passion of terrible potency, because it is poetic. The dead were and are not. Their place knows them no more, and is ours today. Yet they were once as real as we, and we shall tomorrow be shadows like them ... The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.'
>
> (Trevelyan (in Evans [e247]): wildcatisland.blogspot.com/2009/05/finals-filler-appeal-of-history.html)

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