

What Is History?

History is the story of the human past. Like all stories, whether told orally or written down, history is full of characters acting their parts within story lines in a wide range of settings. Given the vast diversity and range of human life over thousands of years since people have been recording their experiences, the varieties of history are almost infinite. Generally, however, histories vary according to four characteristics: time frame, setting, subjects, and themes.

The present is considered contemporary time. People record contemporary time by living through it. We mark the passing of time by our physical and mental development and our living each day as part of a story line of experiences. We create a meaningful story line by placing each experience in the context of our memories of past experiences. Historians consider past time from a broader perspective than we have on contemporary time. Some historians do examine the past over very short periods, telling the story of human activity over the course of a few months, days, even hours or minutes. But the pastness of that time fixes it in place, allowing a perspective that no one has on the present. Most historians take advantage of historical perspective to examine events or processes that occurred over longer periods, ranging from years to decades or generations. Still other histories follow patterns of human activity across centuries or millennia. By creating stories that encompass long passages of time, historians place human activity in a new perspective, giving it meaning that couldn't be appreciated as people lived through it.

Historians do more, however, than understand events within the context of the passage of time. They also examine and understand past events within a specific setting. Indeed, understanding events and developments within their specific time and place is what fundamentally defines the study of history. Moreover, the scope of the places historians study is as varied as the time frames they tackle. Some histories examine the activities of people in very precise places—a town or city, a village, a section of a town, a neighborhood, a house, or, in the most specific cases, a single room. But most analyze regions, nations, continents, and even the world, placing the events of specific places, including our own, in a broader perspective. Similarly, the number of subjects historians consider can be as diverse as the places they inhabit. Traditionally, historians have studied the people who make up a state, a region, a nation, groups of nations, a civilization, a culture, or even humanity as a whole. But historians also study people as individuals, as well as families, small groups, and large groups based on occupational, social, ethnic, racial, or gender identity.

Thematically, all histories focus on human activity within at least one of the four major themes or aspects of human life: economic, social, political, or cultural activity. Economic activity involves all human actions and behaviors directed toward or motivated by the human impulse to physically survive and maintain oneself. How people have done this, what returns or gains they made from it, and how they have employed those gains to alter their standard of living are all encompassed within economic activity. Social history focuses on the ways in which people have organized themselves in relation to one another in order to facilitate their chances of survival and maintenance. History written from a social perspective tells stories of how individuals, groups, or a mass of people in a past time and place went about the business of living their lives and influencing the lives of others. How people grew up, socially interacted

with others, formed families, had and reared children, and assumed adult roles in families are central concerns. How people formed small and large social groups based on family ties, occupational status, level of wealth, cultural values, or ethnic, racial, or gender identity and employed these points of reference to achieve the social goals of survival, protection, socialization, and reproduction are questions at the center of most social history.

Such social agendas usually involve some effort to influence or interact with political activity and government. Thus political history studies the negotiation, competition, and struggle among people of various families, clans, groups, classes, parties or sections, and countries for power and control. Traditionally, political history has examined how leaders, politicians, and government officials acquired power and formulated both domestic and foreign policies. It also studies the various ways in which leaders implemented policy, executed laws, and exerted control through leadership over their own people. From another perspective, political history studies how people interacted with government. Sometimes people were removed from government, had little say in its operations, and did not try to exert any influence over it. At other times, people affected government by gaining a voice in choosing leaders, organizing groups, parties, or institutions to influence or change the nature or focus of government policy, or exerting personal influence to affect government. How people and social groups acted politically to influence or respond to their own government's policies or the policies of another country is a central theme of political history. War is the broadest, most violent activity in the national or international realm of politics.

Finally, cultural histories tell stories of how people in past times and places, as they pursued and acted upon their various economic, social, and political goals, interpreted their activities in oral, artistic, material, spiritual, or intellectual ways to themselves and to others. Stories of people in the past formulating a theory of the cosmos, founding or reinvigorating or reforming a religious theology or practice, expressing themselves in a certain language, celebrating an event or entertaining themselves or others in a particular behavioral or material way, presenting the human body — male or female — in a specific way and clothed in a specific style, producing art or literature in a certain style with certain subjects and themes, or building, designing, or decorating homes, public buildings, and places of work in certain ways are all stories of people acting and behaving culturally. Indeed, the capacity to express culture seems to be what primarily defines people as human beings and distinguishes them from more advanced species of animal life.

History, therefore, is as varied and diverse as the endless range of possible varieties of time frames, setting themes, and subjects about which one could write in studying people who lived in the past. One of the most powerful aspects of history is trying to discern some of the common patterns and themes in the infinite variety of stories within the human experience. By identifying patterns in history, we fit the many pieces into a comprehensive story or narrative that has relevance to us and thus gives meaning to our own lives. However various and diverse, all these stories are part of the broad canvas, or story of the human past, that is history.

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