

Unit **1** History



Introduction

Most of us would agree that history itself can be interpreted or even written in various ways. In other words, history is invariably approached with much personality. Historians are believed to be more perceptive and insightful in their observation of the mechanism of the world, and expected to present us with better advice on how to view history from proper perspectives and on sound grounds. However, historians differ in their interpretations or views of history, hence forming different theories or schools of historiography, such as Empiricists, Marxist Historiography, Psychohistory, Annales School, to name only a few. There was even a tendency in the latter half of the 20th century towards the interdisciplinary convergence of historical and social sciences, which provoked a profound influence on ensuing schools of historiography. Whatever specific perspectives or approaches they may employ, historians all strive to probe into the nature of history, help to ground us in our roots, inspire us to learn more and better understand the present world we live in.

Pre-reading Tasks

- 1 How much do you know about Graeco-Roman history?
- 2 How can people solve the problem of the cultural inequality in extant societies?
- 3 How much do you know about the geneses of civilizations?

My View of History

(Excerpts)

Arnold J. Toynbee¹

- 1 My view of history is itself a tiny piece of history; and this is mainly other people's history and not my own; for a scholar's life-work is to add his bucketful of water to the great and growing river of knowledge fed by countless bucketfuls of the mind. If my individual view of history is to be made at all illuminating, or indeed intelligible, it must be presented in its origin, growth, and social and personal setting.
- 2 There are many angles of vision from which human minds peer at the universe. Why am I a historian, not a philosopher or a physicist? For the same reason that I drink tea and coffee without sugar. Both habits were formed at a tender age by following a lead from my mother. I am a historian because my mother was one before me; yet at the same time I am conscious that I am of a different school from hers. Why did I not exactly take my mother's cue?
- 3 First, because I was born by my mother into the next generation to hers, and my mind was, therefore, not yet set hard when history took my generation by the throat in 1914; and, secondly, because my education was more old-fashioned than my mother's had been. My mother—belonging as she did to the first generation, in England, of university women—had obtained an up-to-date education in modern Western history, with the national history of England itself as the principal guideline. Her son, being a



1 Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975): a British historian whose twelve-volume analysis of the rise and fall of civilizations *A Study of History*, was a monumental synthesis of world history. Books by Toynbee include *Greek Historical Thought* (1924), *History of the World* (12 volumes, 1925–1961), *War and Civilization* (1951), *Hellenism: The History of a Civilization* (1959), and *Hannibal's Legacy* (1965).

boy, went to an old-fashioned English public school and was educated, both there and at Oxford, almost entirely on the Greek and Latin classics.

4 For any would-be historian and especially for one born into these times—a classical education is, in my belief, a priceless boon. As a training-ground, the history of the Graeco-Roman world has its conspicuous merits. In the first place, [Graeco-Roman history](#) is visible to us in perspective and can be seen by us as a whole, because it is over—in contrast to the history of our own Western world, which is a still-unfinished play of which we do not know the eventual ending and cannot even see the present general aspect from our own position as momentary actors on its crowded and agitated stage.

5 In the second place, the field of Graeco-Roman history is not encumbered and obscured by a surfeit of information, and so we can see the wood—thanks to a drastic thinning of the trees during the interregnum between the dissolution of the Graeco-Roman society and the emergence of our own. Moreover, the conveniently manageable amount of evidence that has survived is not overweighted by the state papers of parochial principalities, like those which, in our Western world, have accumulated, ton upon ton, during the dozen centuries of its pre-atomic-bomb age. The surviving materials for a study of Graeco-Roman history are not only manageable in quantity and select in quality; they are also well-balanced in their character. Statues, poems, and works of philosophy count here for more than the texts of laws and treaties; and this breeds a sense of proportion in the mind of a historian nursed on Graeco-Roman history; for—as we can see in the perspective given by lapse of time more easily than we can see it in the life of our own generation—the works of artists and men of letters outlive the deeds of business men, soldiers, and statesmen. The poets and the philosophers outrange the historians; while the prophets and the saints overtop and outlast them all. The ghosts of Agamemnon and Pericles haunt the living world of today by grace of the magic words of Homer and Thucydides; and, when Homer and Thucydides are no longer read, it is safe to prophesy that Christ and the Buddha and Socrates will still be fresh in the memory of (to us) almost inconceivably distant generations of men.

6 The third, and perhaps greatest, merit of Graeco-Roman history is that its outlook is oecumenical rather than parochial. Athens may have eclipsed Sparta and Rome Samnium, yet Athens in her youth made herself the education of all Hellas, while Rome in her old age made the whole Graeco-Roman world into a single commonwealth. In Graeco-Roman history, surveyed from beginning to end, unity is the dominant note; and, when once I had heard this great symphony, I was no longer in danger of being hypnotized by the lone and outlandish music of the parochial



history of my own country, which had once enthralled me when I listened to my mother telling it to me in instalments, night by night, as she put me to bed. The historical pastors and master of my mother's generation, not only in England but in all Western countries, had been eagerly promoting the study of national history in the mistaken belief that it had a closer bearing on their countrymen's lives and was, therefore, somehow more readily accessible to their understanding than the history of other places and time (although it is surely evident that, in reality, Jesus' Palestine and Plato's Greece were more potently operative than Alfred's or Elizabeth's England in the lives of English men and women of the Victorian age).

7 Yet, in spite of this misguided Victorian canonization—so alien from the spirit of the father of English history, [the Venerable Bede](#)—of the history of the particular country in which one happened to have been born, the unconscious attitude of the Victorian Englishman towards history was that of someone living outside history altogether. He took it for granted—without warrant—that he himself was standing on *terra firma*, secure against being engulfed in that ever-rolling stream in which Time had borne all his less privileged sons away. In his own privileged state of being emancipated, as he supposed, from history, the Victorian Englishman gazed with curiosity, condescension, and a touch of pity, but altogether without apprehension, at the spectacle of less fortunate denizens of other places and periods struggling and foundering in history's flood—in much the same way as, in a mediaeval Italian picture, the saved lean over the balustrade of Heaven to look down complacently at the torments of the damned in Hell. Charles the First—worse luck for him—had been in history, but Sir Robert Walpole, though threatened with impeachment, had just managed to scramble out of the surf, while we ourselves were well beyond high-water mark in a snug coign of vantage where nothing could happen to us. Our more backward contemporaries might, perhaps, still be waist-high in the now receding tide, but what was that to us?



8 I remember, at the beginning of a university term during the Bosnian crisis¹ of 1908–1909, Professor L. B. Namier, then an undergraduate at Balliol and back from spending a vacation at his family home just inside the Galician frontier of Austria, saying to us other Balliol men, with (it seemed to us) a portentous air: “Well, the Austrian army is mobilized on my father's estate and the Russian army is just across the frontier, half-an-hour away.” It sounded to us like a scene from *The Chocolate Soldier*, but the lack of comprehension was mutual, for a lynx-eyed Central European observer of international affairs found it hardly credible that these English undergraduates

1 **Bosnian Crisis:** In October 1908, a new round in the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire began when Bulgaria declared independence and Austria-Hungary proclaimed the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both acts violated the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, with Austria's actions in particular inflaming relations with Russia and Serbia.

should not realize that a stone's-throw away, in Galicia, their own goose, too, was being cooked.

9 Hiking round Greece three years later on the trail of Epaminondas and Philopoemen and listening to the talk in the village cages, I learnt for the first time of the existence of something called the foreign policy of Sir Edward Grey². Yet, even then I did not realize that we too were still in history after all. I remember feeling acutely homesick for the historic Mediterranean as I walked, one day in 1913, along the Suffolk coast of a grey and uneventful North Sea. The general war of 1914 overtook me expounding Thucydides to Balliol undergraduates reading for *Literae Humaniores*, and then suddenly my understanding was illuminated. The experience that we were having in our world now had been experienced by Thucydides in his world already. I was re-reading him now with a new perception—perceiving meanings in his words, and feelings behind his phrases, to which I had been insensible until I, in my turn, had run into that historical crisis that had inspired him to write his work. Thucydides, it now appeared, had been over this ground before. He and his generation had been ahead of me and mine in the stage of historical experience that we had respectively reached; in fact, his present had been my future. But this made nonsense of the chronological notation which registered my world as “modern” and Thucydides’ world as “ancient”. Whatever chronology might say, Thucydides’ world and my world had now proved to be philosophically contemporary. And, if this were the true relation between the Graeco-Roman and the Western civilizations, might not the relation between all the civilizations known to us turn out to be the same?

10 This vision—new to me—of the philosophical contemporaneity of all civilizations was fortified by being seen against a background provided by some of the discoveries of our modern Western physical science. On the timescale now unfolded by geology and cosmogony, the five of six thousand years that had elapsed since the first emergence of representatives of the species of human society that we label “civilizations” were an infinitesimally brief span of time compared to the age, up to date, of the human race, of life on this planet, of the planet itself, of our own solar system, of the galaxy in which it is one grain of dust, or of the immensely vaster and older sum total of the stellar cosmos. By comparison with these orders of temporal magnitude, civilizations that had emerged in the second millennium B. C. (like the Graeco-Roman), in the fourth millennium B. C. (like the Ancient Egyptian), and in the first millennium of the Christian era (like our own) were one another’s contemporaries indeed.

2 Sir Edward Grey: British statesman whose 11 years (1905–1916) as British foreign secretary, the longest uninterrupted tenure of that office in history, were marked by the start of World War I, about which he made a comment that became proverbial: “The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.”

11 Thus history, in the sense of the histories of the human societies called civilizations, revealed itself as a sheaf of parallel, contemporary, and recent essays in a new enterprise: a score of attempts, up to date, to transcend the level of primitive human life at which man, after having become himself, had apparently lain torpid for some hundreds of thousands of years—and was still, in our day, so lying in out-of-the-way places like New Guinea, Tierra del Fuego and the north-eastern extremity of Siberia, where such primitive human communities had not yet been pounced upon and either exterminated or assimilated by the aggressive pioneers of other human societies that, unlike these sluggards, had now, though this only recently, got on the move again. The amazing present difference in cultural level between various extant societies was brought to my attention by the works of Professor Teggart of the University of California. This far-going differentiation had all happened within these brief last five or six thousand years. Here was a promising point to probe in investigating, *sub specie temporis*, the mystery of the universe.

12 What was it that, after so long a pause, had so recently set in such vigorous motion once again, towards some new and still unknown social and spiritual destination, those few societies that had embarked upon the enterprise called civilization? What had roused them from a torpor that the great majority of human societies had never shaken off? This question was simmering in my mind when, in the summer of 1920, Professor Namier—who had already put Eastern Europe on my map for me—placed in my hands Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes*. As I read those pages teeming with firefly flashes of historical insight, I wondered at first whether my whole inquiry had been disposed of by Spengler before even the questions, not to speak of the answers, had fully taken shape in my own mind. One of my own cardinal points was that the smallest intelligible fields of historical study were whole societies and not arbitrarily insulated fragments of them like the nation-states of the modern West or the city-states of the Graeco-Roman world. Another of my points was that the histories of all societies of the species called civilizations were in some sense parallel and contemporary; and both these points were also cardinal in Spengler's system. But when I looked in Spengler's book for an answer to my question about the geneses of civilizations, I saw that there was still work for me to do, for on this point Spengler was, it seemed to me, most unilluminatingly dogmatic and deterministic. According to him, civilizations arose, developed, declined, and foundered in unvarying conformity with a fixed time-table, and no explanation was offered for any of this. It was just a law of nature which Spengler had detected, and you must take it on trust from the master: *ipse dixit*. This arbitrary fiat seemed disappointingly unworthy of Spengler's brilliant genius; and here I became aware of a difference in national traditions. Where the German *a priori* method drew blank, let us see what could be done by English empiricism. Let us test alternative possible explanations in the light of the facts and see

how they stood the ordeal.

- 13 Race and environment were the two main rival keys that were offered by would-be scientific nineteenth century Western historians for solving the problem of the cultural inequality of various extant human societies, and neither key proved, on trial, to unlock the fast-closed door. To take the race theory first. What evidence was there that the differences in physical race between different members of the *genus homo* were correlated with differences on the spiritual plane which was the field of history? And, if the existence of this correlation were to be assumed for the sake of argument, how was it that members of almost all the races were to be found among the fathers of one or more of the civilizations? The black race alone had made no appreciable contribution up to date; but, considering the shortness of the time during which the experiment of civilization had been on foot so far, this was no cogent evidence of incapacity; it might merely be the consequence of a lack of opportunity or a lack of stimulus. As for environment, there was, of course, a manifest similarity between the physical conditions in the lower Nile valley and in the lower Tigris-Euphrates valley, which had been the respective cradles of the Egyptian and Sumerian civilizations; but, if these physical conditions were really the cause of their emergence, why had no parallel civilizations emerged in the physically comparable valleys of the Jordan and the Rio Grande? And why had the civilization of the equatorial Andean plateau had no African counterpart in the highlands of Kenya? The breakdown of these would-be scientific impersonal explanations drove me to turn to mythology. I took this turning rather self-consciously and shamefacedly, as though it were a provocatively retrograde step. I might have been less diffident if I had not been ignorant, as I was at that date, of the new ground broken by psychology during the war of 1914–1918. If I had been acquainted at the time with the works of C. G. Jung, they would have given me the clue. I actually found it in Goethe's *Faust*, in which I had fortunately been grounded at school as thoroughly as in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.



- 14 Goethe's "[Prologue in Heaven](#)" opens with the archangels hymning the perfection of God's creation. But, just because His works are perfect, the Creator has left Himself no scope for any further exercise of His creative powers, and there might have been no way out of this impasse if [Mephistopheles](#)—created for this very purpose—had not presented himself before the throne and challenged God to give him a free hand to spoil, if he can, one of the Creator's choicest works. God accepts the challenge and thereby wins an opportunity to carry His work of creation forward. An encounter between two personalities in the form of challenge and response: Have we not here the flint and steel by whose mutual impact the creative spark is kindled?

- 15 In Goethe's exposition of the plot of the *Divina Commedia*, Mephistopheles is

created to be diddled—as the fiend, to his disgust, discovers too late. Yet if, in response to the Devil’s challenge, God genuinely puts His created works in jeopardy, as we must assume that He does, in order to win an opportunity of creating something new, we are also bound to assume that the Devil does not always lose. And thus, if the working of challenge-and-response explains the otherwise inexplicable and unpredictable geneses and growths of civilizations, it also explains their breakdowns and disintegrations. A majority of the score of civilizations known to us appear to have broken down already, and a majority of this majority have trodden to the end the downward path that terminates in dissolution.

(2,852 words)



EXERCISES

Cognitive Reading

I. Summarize the text in no more than 100 words.

II. Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F) according to the text.

- | | T | F |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. A classical education for any would-be historian is not important. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. The greatest merit of Graeco-Roman history is parochial. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Unity is the dominant note in Graeco-Roman history. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. The smallest intelligible fields of historical study were arbitrarily insulated fragments of them like the nation-states of the modern West or the city-states of the Graeco-Roman world. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. The working of challenge-and-response can explain the breakdowns and disintegrations of civilizations. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

III. Answer the following questions according to the text.

- What does the author think of the differences between his education and his mother’s education?
- What are the merits of Graeco-Roman history?
- What’s the author’s view of history?
- What’s Spengler’s point about the geneses of civilizations?

5. What were the two main rival keys that were offered by would-be scientific nineteenth century Western historians for solving the problem of the cultural inequality of various extant human societies?

IV. Paraphrase the following sentences.

1. First, because I was born by my mother into the next generation to hers, and my mind was, therefore, not yet set hard when history took my generation by the throat in 1914. (Para. 3)
2. In the second place, the field of Graeco-Roman history is not encumbered and obscured by a surfeit of information, and so we can see the wood—thanks to a drastic thinning of the trees during the interregnum between the dissolution of the Graeco-Roman society and the emergence of our own. (Para. 5)
3. Statues, poems, and works of philosophy count here for more than the texts of laws and treaties; and this breeds a sense of proportion in the mind of a historian nursed on Graeco-Roman history. (Para. 5)
4. Yet, in spite of this misguided Victorian canonization—so alien from the spirit of the father of English history, the Venerable Bede—of the history of the particular country in which one happened to have been born, the unconscious attitude of the Victorian Englishman towards history was that of someone living outside history altogether. He took it for granted—without warrant—that he himself was standing on *terra firma*, secure against being engulfed in that ever-rolling stream in which Time had borne all his less privileged sons away. (Para. 7)
5. It sounded to us like a scene from *The Chocolate Soldier*, but the lack of comprehension was mutual, for a lynx-eyed Central European observer of international affairs found it hardly credible that these English undergraduates should not realize that a stone's-throw away, in Galicia, their own goose, too, was being cooked. (Para. 8)

Critical Reading

I. Answer the following questions according to the text.

1. Facts and evidence are essential for historical studies. Do you support the idea of “the more materials, the better” in the study of history? Why or Why not?
2. How do you understand the concept of “philosophical contemporaneity of all civilizations”?
3. What do you think of the author's attitude towards Oswald Spengler's historical view?