



World history is both very new and very old: new because it entered high school and college classrooms only in the last fifty-five years, and old because it dates back to the first historians' attempts to answer an age-old question—"How did the world get to be the way it is?"—in a different, more adequate way. The most obvious answer was a creation story, and creation stories were probably universal among our remotest ancestors, since they sufficed to explain everything—as long as people believed that the world continued as it began, with only seasonal and other cyclical repetitions such as birth and death.

But in the second half of the first millennium BCE, in three different parts of the world, social and political changes became so swift and unmistakable that a few individuals in Israel, Greece, and China pioneered what we call historical writing. The historical books of the Jewish scriptures, as edited after the return from exile in Babylonia (subsequent to 539 BCE), recorded in some detail God's universal jurisdiction over history from the time of Abraham—and more generally from the moment of creation in the Garden of Eden. Soon afterward, the Greek historian Herodotus (484–425 BCE) set out to award "a due meed of glory" to the deeds of Greeks and barbarians within a wide circle extending from Egypt in the south to Scythia (modern Ukraine) in the north, touching on India to the east, and extending throughout the Mediterranean coastlands to the west. About three centuries later, the Chinese historian Sima Qian (c. 145–85 BCE) brought Chinese historical records, already voluminous, into comprehensible order by

writing a comparably far-ranging account of China's ruling dynasties from their beginnings, including their relations with a wide circle of adjacent barbarians. Faint traces of contact between the Chinese and Mediterranean worlds have been detected in Herodotus's remarks about mythical peoples living somewhere beyond Scythia, but for all practical purposes the historiographical traditions of China, Greece, and the biblical scriptures remained independent of one another for many centuries.

By the fifth century CE Saint Augustine (354–430) and others had given the Christian version of world history an enduring form, building on Jewish precedent, modified by faith in human redemption through Christ's sacrifice, and anticipating a Day of Judgment when God would bring the world to an end. This remained standard among Christians through succeeding centuries and soon was matched by a Muslim version of the same story, starting with Creation and ending in the Day of Judgment as freshly set forth in Muhammad's revelations.

In China the structuring of world history around the rise and fall of imperial dynasties, pioneered by Sima Qian, remained unchallenged among Confucian scholars until the twentieth century. But in the Western world, as early as the fourteenth century, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious narratives began to compete with the revived interest in ancient and pagan Persian, Greek, and Roman historians. Accelerating social change that did not fit easily with religious expectations also disturbed older ideas. This provoked a handful of thinkers to propose

new views of world history. Among Muslims, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) stands pre-eminent; he developed a thoroughly secular, cyclical and strikingly original theory of social change. Among Christians, Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), perhaps the most provocative thinker, set out to fuse the Christian and pagan traditions of historiography into what he called a “new science” of social change that also featured cyclic repetition. But such radical new ideas remained exceptional. Nearly everybody remained content with at least lip service to familiar religious accounts of God’s plan from Creation to the Day of Judgment—even when Muslim poets revived the Persian language as a vehicle for celebrating ancient pagan chivalry, and among Christians the study of Greek and Roman classical authors, including historians, began to infiltrate schools and universities.

In the early nineteenth century, however, when medieval and modern history first entered the curriculum of leading German universities, liberal and nationalist ideas dominated the minds of those who set out to discover “what really happened” by investigating state archives and medieval chronicles. These scholars hoped to discard superstitions and other errors by careful source criticism and, intent on detail, assumed that all the true and tested facts of history would speak for themselves. And speak they did, shaped as they were by questions about the national past from eager researchers who wanted to understand why German states had come to lag so far behind the French in modern times.

Simultaneously, source criticism began to challenge the Christian version of history as never before by treating biblical texts as human handiwork, liable to error just like other ancient, often-copied manuscripts. This style of historical research soon spread from Germany to the English-speaking world, even infiltrating France after 1870. Detail and more detail often became an end in itself, and the enormity of

available source materials grew steadily as new sub-themes for investigation proliferated. Nonetheless, by the close of the nineteenth century Lord Acton (1834–1902) and others—drawing largely on classical precedents—created an overarching liberal interpretation of history: it flattered French, British, and U.S. national sensibilities so well that it soon dominated schooling in those countries.

At risk of caricature, this liberal-nationalist version of world history can be summarized as follows. What mattered in the past was the history of liberty, since free men, acting voluntarily, were more efficient both in war and in peace and thus acquired collective power and wealth, as well as all the satisfactions of personal freedom. So Europe, and more specifically western Europe, was where history—significant history, that is—happened, and elsewhere endless repetition of insignificant routines prevailed. Thus Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), the most revered German historian of his time, could say in his nine-volume *World History* (1882–1888) that history ended for Muslims in 1258 with the Mongol sack of Baghdad, since by then they had fulfilled their world historical role of transmitting important Greek texts to medieval Europeans!

Those texts were important because they helped to show how ancient Greeks and republican Romans pioneered the history of liberty. But ancient liberty did not last and had to be refreshed in western Europe by barbarian invasions in the early Middle Ages, followed by slow and precarious constitutional and legal innovation, punctuated by sporadic revolutionary upheavals, all aimed at restraining tyrannical government and dogmatic religion. By the end of the nineteenth century, the principles of liberty embodied in representative government and religious freedom had become clear, and their fruits were apparent in the superior power and wealth that Great Britain, France, and, *in potentia*, the United States enjoyed.

But Germany and Russia were also eager aspirants to greatness, and clashing national ambitions in due course provoked World War I.

This was the view of history to which I was apprenticed in the 1920s and 1930s, even though my teachers had half forgotten the reason for the distribution of attention that prevailed in their classrooms. Yet World War I had already profoundly challenged the theme of progress toward constitutional perfection upon which this naive and ethnocentric version of human history rested. Freedom to suffer and die in the trenches was a questionable climax to liberal progress; the prolonged depression that set in after 1929, followed by World War II, cast still further doubt on the idea that the recent emergence of constitutional government, as exercised in a few nation-states in a small part of the world, was what gave meaning to the whole human past.

As usual, a few restless thinkers responded. The most notable were Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) in Germany and Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) in Great Britain, both of whom elaborated on classical notions of cyclical rise and fall by treating western Europe as one of several parallel civilizations that followed similar, perhaps even identical, patterns of growth and decay. Spengler and Toynbee both attracted many readers by offering a new explanation for the shifting currents of world affairs, but academic historians paid scant attention, busy as they were pursuing ever more numerous hotly debated questions about specific times and places in the past.

Their investigations expanded literally around the globe after World War II, when Asia, Africa, and every other part of the world started to attract the efforts of professional historians. Simultaneously, archaeologists and anthropologists were exploring the deeper, unrecorded past as well. The resulting very rapid advance in general information about diverse local pasts soon allowed a few ambitious

world historians to develop more inclusive, more nearly adequate versions of the whole human career. In the United States serious efforts to teach world history also began to invade high school classrooms after World War II, as U.S. entanglements abroad became more and more obvious. Colleges and universities lagged behind, but of late many have also begun to teach the subject.

What to emphasize and what to exclude remained a critical question, for, like other scales of history, an intelligible world history requires selective attention to the confusion of knowable facts. Some world historians chose to organize their books around the rise and fall of civilizations, as Spengler and Toynbee had done; others took a continent-by-continent approach. A school of Marxists emphasized a world system in which better-organized core states exploited peripheral peoples for their own enrichment. But the debate about whether such world systems were very ancient, or dated only from the rise of modern capitalism, divided this school into clashing factions. Others argued that cooperation was more significant than exploitation and that communication, allowing the spread of new techniques and ideas within geographical and ecological limits, was the governing pattern of world history.

No single recipe for writing and studying world history has yet emerged and none ever may, since different peoples, with different heritages and different local conditions, are sure to remain at odds with one another, even if globalization persists and intensifies in times to come. But it seems certain that as long as entanglements with the rest of the world remain as inescapable as they are today, national and local history will not suffice to explain how things got to be the way they are. In that case, that age-old question will surely continue to require teachers and scholars to provide some sort of world history for an answer.