

Textbook Discussion Questions Chapter 2: The Past in the Present

What is History?

1. How do historians define history?
2. Why do different histories tell different accounts of the past?
3. The chapter listed several sub-categories within the field of historical study: name three of these types of historical research and say how they describe the past.
4. How does the chapter say that historical study can influence the future?

The Historical Tradition

1. What were the first types of histories, according to the chapter?
2. How old is written history?
3. What type of history has dominated written accounts up until the present century?
4. How did German historian Leopold von Ranke revolutionize the discipline? What kind of history did he want to be written?
5. What is the notion of post-modern history? What does this theory say about the possibility of writing an objective history?

Historians and Their Tools

1. When we speak of an historian's tools, what are we speaking of?
2. What is the difference between primary and secondary source material? Give three examples of each.
3. What are some of the problems inherent in trusting historical source materials?

Politics, Power, and History

1. Who have traditionally had access to writing histories—political victors or political losers? What does the chapter suggest is the result of that bias?
2. When did the “history of the oppressed” begin? When did it begin to be written? Is it more accurate than the history of the powerful?
3. How did the chapter say biased or inaccurate histories have affected political and military policies in harmful ways?
4. What was Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*? How did it affect the writing of Soviet history?

“National” Histories and International Studies

1. What do national histories champion?
2. How are opposing national histories often used? Give an example.
3. How does semantics (word choices, labels) play a role in the writing of national histories?
4. Give an example of conflicting national histories. How do the versions differ? On what does the conflict focus? What is at stake in these opposing narratives? Do you think either side is entirely right? Why or why not?

What Is “Good History”?

1. As history is always subjective, whose version of history can we trust? Put another way, whose stories are usually more reliable, whose less, and why?

Theories of History

1. The author writes that “Western historians have tried to explain the rise of Europe to global ascendancy” in recent centuries—what have been some of the explanations they have offered for this phenomenon?
2. The chapter lists three types of historical theories, each of which explains the events of the past with a different lens. What are the three theories, and what ideological lens does each espouse?
3. The book states that we want to believe in a certain theory of history because we are afraid of random events, especially random violence. Do you think that this is true? Do you ever find yourself trying to find meaning in the events you read in the newspaper or see on television news?

Are There “Lessons of History”?

1. Do historians believe that we can learn lessons from history that can accurately predict the course of future events? Why or why not?

Why Study History?

1. Why should we study history? What does the study of history call for students to be able to do?
2. The chapter suggests that students are often “turned off” to history because the class is often taught by teachers who are not trained to teach history. Therefore, the discipline has been associated with the memorization of names, places, and dates. Do you agree with this assessment? What was your experience with history in high school? Have you ever learned things about the past that surprised you, or interested you? Where did you learn them?
3. How do you think students could best learn history?