

# Guideposts to Historical Thinking

## Historical Significance *How do we decide what is important to learn about the past?*

- Guidepost 1** Events, people, or developments have historical significance if they **resulted in change**. That is, they had deep consequences, for many people, over a long period of time.
- Guidepost 2** Events, people, or developments have historical significance if they are **revealing**. That is, they shed light on enduring or emerging issues in history or contemporary life.
- Guidepost 3** Historical significance is **constructed**. That is, events, people, and developments meet the criteria for historical significance only when they are shown to occupy a **meaningful place in a narrative**.
- Guidepost 4** Historical significance **varies** over time and from group to group.

## Evidence *How do we know what we know about the past?*

- Guidepost 1** History is **interpretation** based on **inferences** made from primary sources. Primary sources can be accounts, but they can also be traces, relics, or records.
- Guidepost 2** **Asking good questions** about a source can turn it into evidence.
- Guidepost 3** Sourcing often begins before a source is read, with questions about **who** created it and **when** it was created. It involves inferring from the source the author's or creator's **purposes, values, and worldview**, either conscious or unconscious.
- Guidepost 4** A source should be analyzed in relation to the **context of its historical setting**: the conditions and worldviews prevalent at the time in question.
- Guidepost 5** Inferences made from a source can never stand alone. They should always be **corroborated**—checked against other sources (primary or secondary).

## Continuity and Change *How can we make sense of the complex flows of history?*

- Guidepost 1** Continuity and change are **interwoven**: both can exist together. **Chronologies**—the sequencing of events—can be a good starting point.
- Guidepost 2** Change is a **process**, with varying paces and patterns. **Turning points** are moments when the process of change shifts in direction or pace.
- Guidepost 3** **Progress and decline** are broad evaluations of change over time. Depending on the impacts of change, progress for one people may be decline for another.
- Guidepost 4** **Periodization** helps us organize our thinking about continuity and change. It is a process of interpretation, by which we decide which events or developments constitute a period of history.

## Cause and Consequence *Why do events happen, and what are their impacts?*

- Guidepost 1** Change is driven by **multiple causes**, and results in **multiple consequences**. These create a complex web of interrelated short-term and long-term causes and consequences.
- Guidepost 2** The **causes** that lead to a particular historical event **vary in their influence**, with some being more important than others.
- Guidepost 3** Events result from the interplay of two types of factors: (1) **historical actors**, who are people (individuals or groups) who take actions that cause historical events, and (2) the social, political, economic, and cultural **conditions** within which the actors operate.
- Guidepost 4** Historical actors cannot always predict the effect of conditions, opposing actions, and unforeseen reactions. These have the effect of generating **unintended consequences**.
- Guidepost 5** The events of history were **not inevitable**, any more than those of the future are. Alter a single action or condition, and an event might have turned out differently.

## Historical Perspectives *How can we better understand the people of the past?*

- Guidepost 1** An ocean of **difference** can lie between current **worldviews** (beliefs, values, and motivations) and those of earlier periods of history.
- Guidepost 2** It is important to avoid **presentism**—the imposition of present ideas on actors in the past. Nonetheless, cautious reference to universal human experience can help us relate to the experiences of historical actors.
- Guidepost 3** The perspectives of historical actors are best understood by considering their **historical context**.
- Guidepost 4** **Taking the perspective of historical actors** means inferring how people felt and thought in the past. It **does not mean identifying with** those actors. Valid **inferences** are those **based on evidence**.
- Guidepost 5** Different historical actors have **diverse perspectives** on the events in which they are involved. Exploring these is key to understanding historical events.

## The Ethical Dimension *How can history help us to live in the present?*

- Guidepost 1** Authors make **implicit or explicit** ethical judgments in writing historical narratives.
- Guidepost 2** Reasoned ethical judgments of past actions are made by taking into account the **historical context** of the actors in question.
- Guidepost 3** When making ethical judgments, it is important to **be cautious about imposing contemporary standards** of right and wrong on the past.
- Guidepost 4** A fair assessment of the ethical implications of history can inform us of our **responsibilities to remember and respond** to contributions, sacrifices, and injustices of the past.
- Guidepost 5** Our understanding of history can help us make **informed judgments** about contemporary issues, but only when we **recognize the limitations** of any direct “lessons” from the past.