

History always repeats itself. Discuss.

'Oceans Rise, Empires Fall' King George III, *Hamilton*¹

'The value of history is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.'

RG Collingwood²

The study of history is a task in making sense of events. There is perhaps nobody better equipped to link one situation to another than the historian. The practice of History calls for judicious selection of facts in order to identify pattern and repetition; our understanding is laid over timelines like a template, creating 'Rules To Live By' that politicians, journalists and commentators use to further their arguments. The habit of emphasising similarities in history deceives us into believing that events are repeating themselves. However, metaphysical philosophers will say that no event is ever the same as a previous one. There will always be striking similarities in history, but these are not a result of time bending over itself, but evidence of human strength and frailty over time. History – a 'humanity' subject, after all – might repeat itself, but events do not.

The idea that events go in cycles is seductive. There has always been convergence in history if we look at it through the prism of human behaviour. Jonathan Freedland's 'The Long View' radio programme, for example, presents an entertaining understanding of a current issue³ by comparing it with a historical event. The patterns of rise and fall of power, whether by intelligence of a leader, or by the overexpansion of civilisations, offer useful lessons. Humankind's constant balancing act of ambition and hubris leads to cycles of boom and bust in economies as well as empires. Physical constraints will have consistent bearing on outcomes, whether in siege tactics or failure to invade (Russia⁴). The weaknesses of humanity are seen repeatedly when outsiders are demonised and empathy fails. Whilst technology might advance in a linear direction – such as the Industrial Revolution – underlying human nature has remained

¹ Miranda, Lin-Manuel, 'Hamilton: An American Musical' (2015)

² Collingwood, R G., 'The Idea of History' (1946, Revised 1994). Collingwood also remarked in 'R.G. Collingwood: An 'Autobiography' (1983) that 'so long as the past and the present are outside one another, knowledge of the past is not much use in the present. But suppose the past lives on in the present; ... then the historian may very well be related to the non-historian as the trained woodsman is to the ignorant traveller.'

³ For example, cancel culture, abolition of statues, economic disaster.

⁴ The 1708 Swedish invasion of Russia, 1812 Napoleonic invasion of Russia, 1941 Nazi invasion of Russia all have elements in common: because Russia is so big, the Russian Army was able to keep retreating, destroying crops and farm animals to stop them falling into enemy hands. The enemy could not restock their supplies through the winter, so many died and they were defeated. It is this understanding of Russian geography that helps explain why the 'buffer zones' of Ukraine and Belarus along the Western border are so important to modern Russia.

constant over millennia. Machiavelli saw human nature as remarkably stable⁵, as had the Greek historian Thucydides⁶ – steady enough to create rules about history.

The terminology used amongst historians exacerbates the impression that ‘history’ repeats itself and that there is a wisdom of rules to be gained. The words of George Santayana⁷ resonate. For history students, there are many words to learn⁸: words to understand causality⁹; words for significance¹⁰; words to structure society¹¹; words to understand systems¹²; even words for different types of history¹³. This gives the illusion of a system. Yet it is human behaviour that repeats itself, not the events themselves, as we can see from briefly analysing some historical parallels.

Beyond the precise time-bound circumstances, there is no doubt that certain qualities of leadership prevail. William the Conqueror, although initially a rank outsider, was able to gain and hold the crown of England by a combination of military skill, good fortune and then cunning control by leveraging loyalty¹⁴, the feudal system and cultural power¹⁵. As the Battle of Hastings (October 1066) is an infamous historic event for British children, so is the momentous Battle of Sekigahara (October 1600) for Japanese, as it marked the pivot into the 250 year long Edo Period, a time of immense cultural strength and unification of power. Prior to the battle, unrest was widespread throughout Japan, and (just as with Godwineson and Hardrada) there were multiple factions. The samurai leader Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) studied military tactics with every bit of dedication as William of Normandy. He built up large personal landholdings, and learned the key values of loyalty and military power that enabled him to bring a period of unity to Japan. Tokugawa Ieyasu rose to the fore as shogun, and demonstrated the effective stability of a smooth succession, by cleanly passing on power to his son. Feudalism was central to this

⁵ Machiavelli, Niccolò, ‘Discourses on Levy’ (1517), as read in ‘The Discourses’ (Penguin, 2000): ‘Whoever considers the past and the present will readily observe that all cities and all peoples ... ever have been animated by the same desires and the same passions; so that it is easy, by diligent study of the past, to foresee what is likely to happen in the future in any republic.’

⁶ Thucydides, ‘History of the Peloponnesian War’ (431–404 BC)

⁷ ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’ (Santayana, George, *Reason in Common Sense, volume 1 of The Life of Reason* (1905))

⁸ J. Llewellyn et al, *History words* (2018) at Alpha History, <https://alphahistory.com/history-words/>, (accessed February 2022)

⁹ Such as ‘mobilised’, ‘controlled’, ‘stimulated’, ‘depleted’.

¹⁰ For ‘example’, ‘revolutionary’, ‘destabilising’.

¹¹ For example, ‘bourgeoisie’, ‘working class’, ‘intelligentsia’, ‘peasantry’, ‘military’, ‘proletariat’.

¹² For example ‘theocracy’, ‘Marxism’, ‘socialism’, ‘totalitarianism’, ‘fascism’, ‘communism’, ‘Naziism’. There is even an adage in popular culture – Godwin's Law – that states that as an online discussion grows longer (regardless of topic or scope), the probability of a comparison involving Nazism approaches 1.

¹³ Social, political, cultural or economic history.

¹⁴ William awarded loyalty with status and castles and land, and removed the same from those who were disloyal.

¹⁵ William commissioned the Domesday Book and established considerable manors and estates across England and ensured the building of many castles and churches, many of which retain their mark on the English landscape even today.

power hold, whereby a leader could wield great power and control through the daimyos and their samurai warriors. Just as William kept his barons close by, daimyos were asked to spend alternate years in the capital of Edo. Uprisings for both leaders were suppressed ruthlessly and elite bureaucracy was also pivotal¹⁶.

In 410 CE Rome fell to an army of nomadic Germanic peoples who pillaged the city over the course of three days. Roman Imperial authority had already thinned out and weakened itself. Changes known as the Migration Period were taking place with great movements and displacements of people. Romans adopted a 'them and us' construction to term the Germanic newcomers as 'Barbarians', although actual boundaries were blurred culturally and politically; the Roman army was composed mostly of these very same 'barbarians', with hundreds of different ethnicities. The violent sack sent shockwaves across the world. On 11 September 2001, a group of Islamic extremists launched an attack against the USA, using hijacked planes to devastating effect in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. Twenty years later, on 6 January 2021, the Capitol building was violently ransacked by pro-Trump protesters. Modern writers have compared the both events to the Sack of Rome¹⁷. Both 'empires' had become big, wasteful and unwieldy, attempting to spread the culture and political thought to new territories, whilst being led by insubstantial leaders. Some have argued there is a weak attempt at 'American autocracy', which leads to resentment and revolt by marginalised people who are both used and reviled by the leadership of the empire. Both empires attempted to fight wars by subcontracting the fighting to the poor and immigrants. In the case of the Capitol attack, inequality of wealth and status made citizens of the empire disenfranchised, angry and wishing for change. In the case of the Sack of Rome and the Capitol attacks, their anger was fuelled by the prevalence of political gossip.

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 was a result of overconfidence and reckless investment. The boom in production and economic output saw a prosperity in the US that was seductive. Newspapers were filled with stories of people becoming rich overnight by dabbling in the stock market, and thousands of ordinary Americans bought shares, inflating their value. Although confidence outweighed fact, people continued to invest until suddenly a dramatic correction in price led to global panic, mass unemployment and ultimately political discontent. The populist political systems, seen in 1930s Spain, Italy, Austria and Germany, seem to have thrived most in countries where people felt the most deprivation¹⁸. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 strongly echoes these events. Many countries enjoyed historically low interest rates, with subprime mortgages considered a safe investment. Complex financial instruments masked debt levels incurred by banks, until the level of default mortgages soared. Banks risked collapse. There was

¹⁶ Tokugawa improved road networks, education, standardised currency, and expelled foreigners; William built a strong centralised government, organised church and lay justice, and commissioned the Domesday Book.

¹⁷ Hahn, Gina and Murphy, Cullen 'As the Romans Did', *The Atlantic* (June 2007) and Murphy, Cullen, 'No Really, Are We Rome?' *The Atlantic*, (April 2021) and Murphy, Cullen, 'Are We Rome?: The Fall of An Empire and the Fate of America' (2007)

¹⁸ USA was saved from this fate by Roosevelt's New Deal 1932–1939, a programme of social welfare, but without the violent demonising of outsiders that the populist regimes fell upon.

a global crisis because of the tight interlinking of financial markets. The world was plunged once again into great depression. Economic recessions occur throughout history, but many historians argue both of these historic events were avoidable disasters caused by failures in regulation and heedless risk taking. The question remains whether cycles of humanity's greed and risk-taking are ever avoidable.

The Siege of Leningrad (1941–44) and the Siege of Sarajevo (1992–96) have parallels. Both were intentional acts of war that cut off the cities' fuel and food supply for years, with artillery bombardment, leading to mass starvation and appalling suffering¹⁹. The intention by the perpetrators was bullying of civilians on a systematically genocidal scale, to create an unbearable situation of total insecurity. Leningrad's history repeated itself in Sarajevo due to the adoption of uncompromising finality. According to Hitler's directive, [they] 'can have no interest in maintaining even a part of this very large urban population'. Stalin's plan to starve Western Berlin into surrender during the Berlin Airlift (1948) had a different outcome. Over 14 months of blockade, Western nations used aeroplanes to drop supplies into Berlin in 278,288 relief missions. A difference in technology and external support, perhaps, but Stalin's objective was not *annihilation*; he valued West Berlin's surrender to his ideology. The psychology of annihilation drives a similar outcome in sieges.

Perhaps the most important lesson of all is that of the consequences of dehumanising outsiders, until atrocities are seen as justifiable. In 'Humanity', Jonathan Glover addresses a litany of shameful events that includes the Holocaust, Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and what went differently when crises such as Cuban Missile Crisis were averted. He looks at the roots of human nature to discover why so many atrocities were perpetuated and how we can create a social environment to prevent their recurrence. There are common elements in those who are complicit: tribal hatred, diminished personal responsibility, blind adherence to ideology. These repeat themselves throughout history, and Glover presents a compelling case for this being a psychological phenomenon²⁰.

Fundamentally, history teaches us how to search out the underlying dynamics of problems, and create 'recipes' for the future. History is a process rather than a series of unconnected events, and in attempting to discover universal truths, we invent universal, repeatable stories. This is because what shapes events is human nature, or psychology. History remains the fundamental discipline for anyone who believes that 'the proper study of Mankind is Man'²¹.

¹⁹ Dowdall, Alex and Horne, John, (ed.) 'Civilians Under Siege from Sarajevo to Troy' (2018)

²⁰ 'The psychology of the human species can be seen as having a strong propensity both for getting trapped into conflict and also for cruelty and mass killing. Twentieth-century wars, massacres and genocides come from combining psychology with technology ... it's too late to stop the technology. It is to the psychology that we should now turn.'

²¹ Pope, Alexander, 'An Essay on Man: Epistle II' (1734)

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