

Theories of History Essay

Background:

The way we think about history in general has a tremendous influence on how we record, understand, and in fact *create* history. The job of the historian is to seek truth and make sense of the past. However, over the centuries, different historians have developed different approaches to make sense of the vast amount of information. As history is inherently subjective, the way an historian views events usually has a large effect on what he or she actually writes. As historians-in-training, your job is to argue which one of the major theories of history best matches your own views.

Question:

Which theory of history do you think is most accurate? (see “The Theories of History” sheet)

Assignment:

Write a two to three page essay in which you answer the above question. Your paper must have:

- an introductory paragraph with a thesis statement as well as the topics you are going to use to defend your thesis.
- concrete, specific, historical evidence to support your thesis from 9th grade history, earlier history classes, and/or your own understanding of history.
- body paragraphs for each of your topics that begin with clear topic sentences introducing the main idea of the paragraph, and end with strong concluding sentences that tie the evidence presented back to your thesis.
- a concluding paragraph that revisits the argument and connects it to the broader historical context.

Your essay must be typed, double-spaced, in 12-point font, with one inch margins. You should include your name, the Block, my name, and the date, justified right at the top of the first page.

Your final paper is due on by 10:00pm on **Wednesday, September 10, 2014** via Turnitin.com.

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The Theories of History:

1) “Cyclical Theory:”

History repeats itself; there is no real “progress.” This theory holds that history is a series of *patterns* that recur in different forms around the world. Civilizations rise and fall, often for similar reasons. Understanding history is about understanding patterns. For example, this is a traditional model for understanding dynastic history in Asia.

2) “Linear Theory:” History is about progress. The world is constantly *improving* and heading in an ultimate direction. There are no real repetitions in history, although they may appear to exist every once in a while. This theory is heavily based on the idea of cause and effect: “this happened, and then that happened; that happened because this happened first.”

3) “Great Man Theory”:

Individual people and/or small groups of people, through the power of their character or intellect, determine the course of history. This view of history was popular in the 19th century. It is summarized by Thomas Carlyle’s quote, “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.”

4) “Everyman Theory”:

The world is shaped by the efforts of ordinary people, not small elite groups or individuals. This theory holds that social groups and everyday people (e.g. farmers, merchants, religious figures) shape history. To fully understand history, you must also understand the everyday lives of these groups.

5) “Geographic Theory”:

Geography is destiny. The natural environment is a major determinant of history, determining the potential and needs of groups of people. This theory is often associated with Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which argues that certain peoples are destined for greater success based on their geographic location and access to resources.

6) “Marxist Theory”:

History is fundamentally a struggle between different social classes: powerful groups that control wealth and resources, and the powerless groups who struggle to survive. In other words, “it’s all about the money” – economics determines everything. People, leaders, and nations act out of economic self-interest.