

6.1 Historical concepts

Historians use seven concepts to help them investigate and understand the past. At times you will use several of these concepts at once; at other times you may focus on just one. As you learn to apply each concept, you will begin to think like a historian. The seven key concepts in history are:

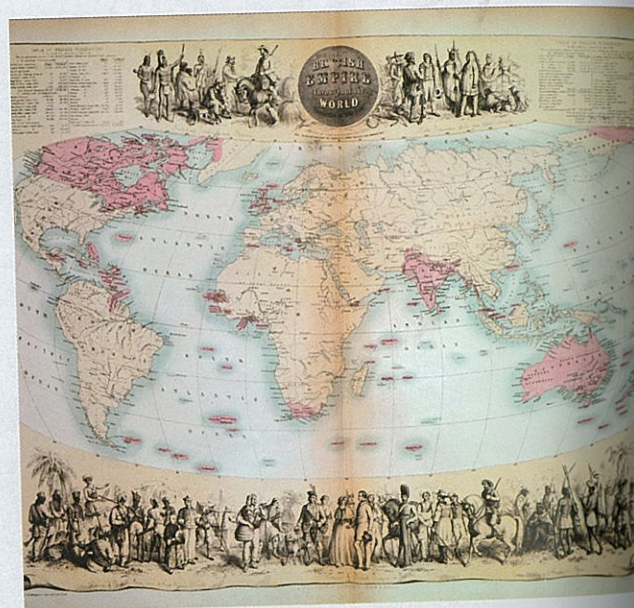
- perspectives
- continuity and change
- cause and effect
- evidence
- empathy
- significance
- contestability.

Perspectives

The concept of perspectives is an important part of any historical inquiry. A person's perspective is their point of view – the position from which they see and understand events going on in the world around them. People often have different points of view (or perspectives) about particular events, historical figures, civilisations or artefacts depending on their age, gender, social position and their beliefs and values. Just like anyone else, historians have perspectives, which can influence their interpretation of the past and the ways in which they write about it. Regardless of their own perspectives (and what they may think about something personally), historians must try to understand the different values and beliefs that shaped and affected the lives of people who lived in the past.

For example, the period from 1750 to 1914 was a time when the European powers competed with each other to expand their territories and influence around the world by acquiring colonies. This was known as **imperialism**. The European powers spread their reach over Asia, Oceania and Africa, desperate to get hold of the valuable natural resources found in these countries. By the beginning of the 20th century, most of Asia and Africa were ruled by foreign powers.

European **colonies** were forced to adopt the laws, languages, customs and religions of their imperial masters. Over time, Europeans also shared new technologies with their colonies. They established roads, railways and communication networks, modernising many of these nations.



Source 1 By the beginning of the 20th century, the British Empire covered one-quarter of the world's total land mass and ruled over around one-fifth of the world's total population. For these reasons it became known as the 'empire on which the sun never sets'.

From the perspective of most Europeans at the time, the Indigenous cultures of Asia, Oceania and Africa were inferior. They saw it as their right and duty to bring European culture and belief systems to the 'backward' societies they colonised.

From the perspective of the Indigenous populations in these regions, the arrival of Europeans was seen as an invasion of their lands that resulted in the devastation of their traditional ways of life. In the worst instances, as with Belgian rule in the Congo, the Indigenous population was subjected to a brutal, violent rule with a great loss of life.

Continuity and change

Historians recognise that, over time, some things stay the same, while others change. This concept is referred to as continuity and change. Examples of continuity and change can be seen across every civilisation at any given period of time.

Historians refer to aspects of the past that have remained the same over time as continuities. Aspects of the past that do not stay the same are referred to as changes. Change can occur within a certain civilisation or specific time period, but also across different civilisations and time periods.

Many aspects of history influence how we act and live today. For example, during the **Industrial Revolution**, a number of companies began producing products that have now become household names all around the world. One of these brands is Coca-Cola. This syrupy, carbonated cola drink made to a secret recipe was first produced by a pharmacist named Dr John S Pemberton in the United States city of Atlanta. The Coca-Cola logo (see Source 2) has been used in a distinctly recognisable form since 1885. This is an example of historical continuity.

However, Coca-Cola also provides many examples of historical change:

- During the first year, sales averaged a modest nine servings per day in Atlanta. Today, daily servings of Coca-Cola beverages are estimated at 1.8 billion globally.
- The first servings of Coca-Cola were sold for 5 cents per glass, whereas today a can of Coke generally retails for around 2 dollars.
- In the early years, Coca-Cola also contained cocaine from coca leaves. When cocaine became a restricted drug in the United States, the coca leaves used in the recipe were changed to be cocaine-free.
- In 1985, the company introduced a new formula and branded it 'new Coke', but a consumer backlash forced a return to the traditional recipe.
- Recent awareness about the dangers of a high consumption of sugar has seen the introduction and success of sugar-free options such as Diet-Coke and Coke Zero.



Source 2 A Coca-Cola delivery driver and his truck, New Orleans, 1929



Source 3 Today, Coca-Cola is available in more than 200 countries and is one of the world's most recognisable brands. It is also available in a number of different varieties to suit the changing wants of customers.