Performance Task – Periodization: 20th and 21st c. Political Conflict

Goal of task

Target Concept: In this Building Block, you are asked to analyze how and why historians have periodized the 20th and early 21st centuries through the lens of political conflicts. In your analysis of these diverse historical interpretations, you will be asked to evaluate how historical interpretations change over time.

For this task you will be evaluated on your ability to:

- Evaluate a historian’s interpretation/periodization of the era from 1900 to 2001, based on political conflict.
- Analyze how and why historians have periodized the era from 1900 to 2001, based on political conflict.
- Analyze the viability of alternative periodization models not based on political conflict.

Task summary

In Task 1, you will participate in a Socratic Seminar to explore the challenges and decisions associated with creating a specific periodization model.

In Task 2, you will read, summarize, and explain a particular historian's interpretation of the 20th century as reflected in a particular periodization model. As part of this task, you will create a visual organizer which illustrates your understanding of a particular periodization model.

Task 1: Socratic Seminar (Individual or group)

You will participate in a Socratic Seminar based on an excerpt from “In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th Century History” which your teacher will provide. As always in a Socratic Seminar, your careful and thoughtful reading of the text as well as your willingness to deeply explore the text creates the best learning experience for everyone.

Read the excerpt below and then consider the following: What criticism or questions might this author have with models of periodization? Why might an historian want to avoid periodizing world history? Why might an historian find it useful to periodize world history?

“The whole question of whether a master narrative for history is necessary or desirable is much contested. For post-modern philosophers, the very core of post-modern thought consists of modernist total 'grand narratives' being continually repudiated by different forms of post- modern skepticism. However, recent discussions stress the multiplicity of grand-narratives and the necessity to accept divergent ways of writing history in the context of different cultures.” –From Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik. "In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th Century History," The China Quarterly. No. 188, The History of the PRC (1949-1976) (Dec., 2006), pp. 1070-1091.
Check your understanding

☐ Can you explain the value of a periodization model for historians and students?

☐ Can you explain why the AP World History periodization model is useful or how it could be improved?

Task 2: Periodization Model Jigsaw (Small groups)

Working in small groups, you will read and summarize one of three different approaches to periodization tied to state-building at the end of the 20th century: one by Peter Stearns, one by David Lesch, and one by Keith Suter. Once you have read and summarized the passage, develop a title for the periodization model used by the historian, create a list of at least three examples from the 20th century that support the periodization model, and explain how those examples support the model. Finally, you will share your model with the entire class. A graphic organizer has been provided to assist you.


Recently, historians have begun talking... about a “long 20th century,” a conversation that takes account of the clear pre-1914 origins of enduring trends and structures, plus the fact that basic contemporary themes easily survive the shorter-term oscillations of world war, cold war, and post-cold war. The term is not well-chosen in one clear sense: we don’t know when the period will end--and world history periods tend to last a fair amount of time, so pinning a numerical label is probably miscast. But the idea that a clear, ongoing era started not with the Great War, but with deeper trends a century and a half ago, is truly appealing. There are, to be sure, partisans of a different, even more novel approach, that call for a “new global history” periodization in the later 20th, rather than later 19th centuries, sometimes seeing the whole span of 1500-1970s as a basically uniform “pre-global” period. Their ideas deserve attention as well. At this juncture, the main point is to urge that a new debate be opened... I believe that the opportunity exists to do rather more, to use world history and globalization to provide the same breadth of analytical fresh air that has been applied so successfully, by world historians, to earlier eras like the postclassical.


There are also a number of individual years in modern Middle East history that “speak volumes.”. In each of these years, war, realignment, and/or the establishment of frameworks for peace have occurred; that is, some event or series of events engendered a dramatic and lasting period of change by causing shifts in the balance of power and/or ideological and perceptual transformations in the region that frequently also had extraregional reverberations. However, at no time in the post-World War II era was dramatic and all-encompassing change more apparent in the Middle East than in 1979 – so much so that, in my opinion, future Middle East historians and social scientists will conclude that the year 1979 constituted a main watershed, if not the major watershed, in modern Middle East history... 1979 was both an end and a beginning.

The century ended much as it began, with guerrilla struggles in sprawling empires, imperial powers having difficulty beating small guerrilla forces fighting on a terrain the guerrillas knew well and with the support of the local population. The century may have begun and ended with guerrilla warfare but the largest casualties were created with conventional warfare, especially in the two world wars. One explanation for the dramatic increase in firepower is the mobilization of the scientific community to produce ever more destructive weapons. A second explanation is the pendulum effect in defense and offense and the role of extra firepower as the key to breaking the deadlock. A culture of peace is needed to replace the culture of war. This would mean unlearning the culture of violence that has pervaded human existence in thousands of ways. It would mean questioning the institutions, priorities and practices that undergird the culture of violence.

**20th Century Periodization Model**

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**Discussion Questions**

1. What are some challenges to consider when creating a periodization model?
2. What are some similarities and differences between 20th-century periodization models?

**Check your understanding**

- Can you explain the different periodization models offered by Stearns, Lesch, and Suter?
- Can you provide examples from the 20th century to support the models offered by Stearns, Lesch, and Suter?
Task 3: Apply your understanding

Review the three models of periodization you explored in the previous two tasks; consider what decisions those historians made to select and justify their periodization models.

1. Now, it's your turn to develop a periodization model of the first 15 years of the 21st century. Create a list of the 10 most important events for understanding the world today that took place between 2000 and the present. Once you have selected the 10, develop a name and symbol for your periodization model.

2. Once you have completed your list, it is time to apply your understanding of periodization as a historical thinking skill. Write a thesis statement which demonstrates your ability to develop a periodization model for the early 21st century. You may draw from any of the periodization models you have seen in this lesson, or develop one on your own. What is most important is that your thesis includes an argument which can be supported with historical evidence.