2024 Theme Narrative:
Turning Points in History

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The National History Day® (NHD) theme for 2024 is *Turning Points in History*. It is especially appropriate because National History Day is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. What better way to celebrate than for students to choose turning points in the past that interest them the most? As always, the theme is broad, so topics should be carefully selected and developed in ways that best use students' talents and abilities. Students should be careful to place their topics into historical context, examine the significance of their topics in history, and show development and change over time. Students should investigate available primary and secondary sources, analyze the evidence, and clearly explain the relationship of the topic to the theme, *Turning Points in History*.

But first, what's the point?

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a point as "an individual or distinguishing detail." For example, the point of a debate or a joke. A point might be the "end or object to be achieved: the purpose."

But what, exactly, is a turning point?

Merriam-Webster defines a turning point as "the point at which a significant change occurs," in other words, a decisive moment.

So, what is a turning point in history?

Well, a turning point in history is more than just an important event that happened a long time ago. It is more than a new idea or a particular action taken by an individual. A turning point is an idea, event, or action that directly, or sometimes indirectly, causes change. Sometimes a turning point has immediate repercussions, making its significance obvious to people at the time. Sometimes, however, the impact of an event or decision or person is clear only in retrospect. A turning point can be a personal decision in the life of one person or a political choice affecting millions. It can be an event or idea with global or local consequences, or it can be the life of a single person whose actions inspire or affect others. The effect of a turning point in history might be social, political, economic, or cultural. It might be a combination. History is often complicated.

Regardless of the topic selected, students must not only present a description of it, but also draw conclusions about how their topic affected individuals, communities, nations, or the world. **Simply put, what was it like before the turning point? What was the turning point? What was it like after the turning point?**

To understand the historical importance of their topics, students, like historians, must ask questions of time and place, cause and effect, change over time, and impact and significance:

› What factors contributed to the turning point?

› Why did the turning point develop? How did it create change?

› What were the immediate and long-term consequences?

› What impact did the turning point have on the people who experienced it? How did they, in turn, affect it?

Now, how does this apply to an NHD project?

Let's look at a topic that immediately comes to mind: war. From clashes limited to one nation to huge conflicts involving many countries, wars are among the most significant and obvious turning points in history. And there are so many to choose from: the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), the Crusades (1096–1291), the American Revolution (1775–1783), the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996), and many more. Much more than simply a collection of battles, a war can transform the world, a nation, or a local community socially, politically, culturally, and economically.

A painting of a scene from the Taiping Rebellion by artist Wu Youru, 1886. Wikimedia Commons.

However, choosing a particular war as a topic would not be wise for an NHD student, as it would be impossible to explain the significance of such a massive event within the limited confines of an NHD entry. Remember, NHD projects are limited in size and, therefore, must be limited in scope. For example, an NHD documentary is limited to ten minutes, and a paper is limited to 2,500 words. To research, collect evidence, and present an entire war's significance in history would take years and hundreds of pages. So, NHD students must choose a topic narrow enough to be presented within NHD project limits.

Still interested in war? A certain battle would be an obvious choice, but how about considering investigating the impact of World War II on a small village in Eastern Europe? What effects did it have on the people living there? What were the immediate and long-term consequences for that village or for a particular individual? Or, how did a political decision serve as a catalyst for war? How did the Bosnian people's decision to declare independence from Yugoslavia in 1992 lead to war? What were the consequences of the voters' decision? In what way can a vote on a single issue serve as a turning point and lead to immediate and long-term change?

Enough about war. Politics, laws, and court cases have served as turning points in history. How did the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (1917) or the Chinese Communist Revolution (1949) lead to some of the most convulsive changes the world has ever seen? How did laws like the Selective Service Act (1917), the Trade Expansion Act (1962), or the Voting Rights Act (1965) create turning points? In what ways did the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *McCullough v. Maryland* (1819) change the relationship between the U.S. federal government and the state governments?

Human inventiveness has changed business and human life in ways great and small. How were innovations such as the plow, reaper, or fertilizer turning points in farming?

Interested in social media?

STOP right there! That is a little too recent for an NHD study. What about earlier forms of communication, such as the development of cuneiform writing in ancient Sumer, the printing press in fifteenth-century Europe, or the invention of radio or television in the twentieth century? What were the consequences of such turning points?

The COVID-19 Pandemic is another event that has certainly had a great impact on human society. But, again, as with social media, it is too recent for students of NHD to focus on this year. Why not choose a fast-spreading disease of the more distant past, such as the Influenza Pandemic of 1918? Or, students might research the consequences of losing half of Europe's population to the Black Death between 1347 and 1352.

An emergency outdoor hospital in Brookline, Massachusetts, set up to care for influenza patients, October 1918. National Archives and Records Administration (NAID 45499327).

For all their successes, humans cannot overcome nature. Weather and natural events have been significant factors in history and are often the catalysts for major turning points. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius destroyed Pompeii in 79. A typhoon in 1281 destroyed a Mongol fleet as it prepared to invade Japan. Winds blew the Spanish Armada off course in 1588. In 1692, an earthquake caused the Jamaican city of Port Royal to slide into the sea. How were these turning points?

Sometimes turning points have symbolic as well as tangible impacts. In 1961, a wall was built in Berlin separating East and West Germany and remained in place until 1989. Why was it built and by whom? How was its construction a turning point in history, politically and socially? How was it a symbolic turning point for those outside of Germany? Why did it fall? What were the immediate and tangible consequences? What were the symbolic and long-term consequences?

A crowd of people from East and West Germany celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall at the Brandenberg Gate, November 9, 1989. Wikimedia Commons.

Students should think broadly and consider the various ways in which a topic influenced the course of events. The launch of the satellite Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957 was a catalyst for the Space Race. But in what ways did it have an impact on American education? What was the National Defense Education Act (1958) and how did it influence changes in the American school curriculum?

Thinking about turning points in technology, the television, radio, and computer come to mind. But what about refrigeration or frozen food technology? What impact did these have for families, restaurants, grocery stores?

These are only a few examples of the millions of historical turning points.

Regardless of the topic chosen, students must be sure to analyze and draw conclusions about their topic's significance as a turning point in history. How do historians determine historical impact—change and consequences? They do so by placing their topics into historical context, which is exactly what NHD students must do after choosing their topics. Historical context is the larger setting in which a topic took place. Students should consider the relevant economic, social, intellectual, religious, cultural, and political conditions of the place and time and pay attention to how their topic developed.

I could spend many more pages on topics and ideas for study related to all types of events, ideas, places, and people, from local to world history, but that would limit the fun of guiding students in discovering the past for themselves, which is, after all, the point.

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