Sources and the prescribed subject

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · History · HL

History: sources and the prescribed subject

IB Diploma Programme History HL (the guide first assessed in 2017). This topic prepares Paper 1, the **source paper**, which SL and HL students both sit. Schools choose one **prescribed subject** from five, and each has two **case studies** from different regions. In the exam you read four sources on one case study and answer four questions in 1 hour (24 marks; 30% at SL, 20% at HL). This handout teaches the source skills first, and then gives the facts for the most taught choice, *the move to global war*.

On 20 September 1939 a London newspaper printed a cartoon by David Low. Hitler and Stalin bow politely to each other over the body of a dead soldier, Poland. Hitler says: "The scum of the earth, I believe?" Stalin answers: "The bloody assassin of the workers, I presume?" Two enemies had just signed a pact, and Low showed in one picture that neither trusted the other. A historian reading the cartoon learns little about the pact's details, but a lot about how the British saw it. That is the skill Paper 1 tests: what a source can and cannot tell you.

Must-know for Paper 1:

Area	Key content
the paper	1 hour; four sources; four questions; 24 marks
Question 1	(a) what a written source says (3); (b) the message of a visual source (2)
Question 2	the value and limitations of one source: origin, purpose, content (4)
Question 3	compare and contrast two sources (6)
Question 4	a short essay using the sources and your own knowledge (9)
prescribed subjects	military leaders; conquest and its impact; the move to global war; rights and protest; conflict and intervention

The four questions

The sources are a mix of **primary sources** (made at the time: speeches, letters, photographs, cartoons) and **secondary sources** (written later by historians).

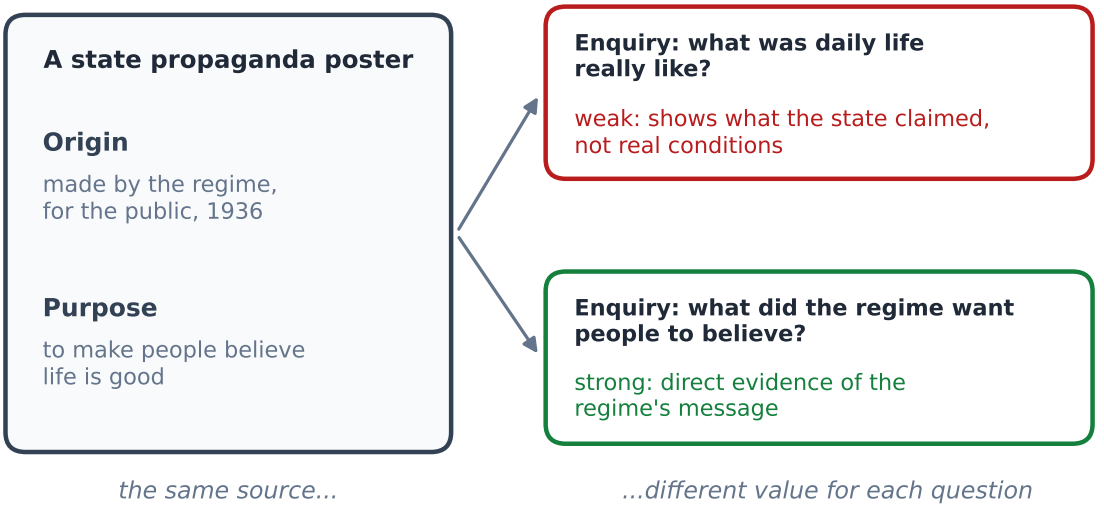
Question	Marks	Time	How to answer
1(a)	3	5 min	three separate points from the source, each with a short quotation
1(b)	2	3 min	the main message of the cartoon or poster, with two details that show it
2	4	10 min	value and limitation, each linked to the origin, purpose or content
3	6	15 min	similarities and differences, point by point
4	9	25 min	an argument with the sources **and** your own knowledge, and a judgement

For Question 1, use only the source: your own knowledge earns nothing there. Spend the most time on Question 4, which has the most marks.

Origin, purpose, value, limitation

For Question 2 you analyse one source with four ideas, often called **OPVL**:

- **Origin** : who made it, when, where, and what type of source it is.
- **Purpose** : why it was made and for whom: to inform, to persuade, to justify, to entertain.
- **Value** : what it can reliably tell a historian, because of its origin, purpose or content.
- **Limitation** : what it cannot show, or where it may mislead.



OPVL: origin and purpose are the handles; value and limitation depend on the question asked

Value and limitation always depend on the question you ask. A **propaganda** poster is poor evidence of how people really lived, but excellent evidence of what a government wanted people to believe. Never write "this source is **biased**, so it is useless": the bias itself tells the historian something.

Worked Question 2. *Source: the Lytton Report, published by a League of Nations commission in October 1932 after it visited Manchuria. With reference to its origin, purpose and content, analyse the value and limitations of the source for a historian studying the Manchurian crisis.*

> The source is valuable because the commission was sent by the League and visited Manchuria in 1932, so its members saw the situation shortly after the events and heard both Chinese and Japanese views. Its purpose, to give the League facts on which to act, meant it had to be careful and detailed. However, it is limited because it was written for a diplomatic audience: it uses cautious language to avoid closing the door to Japan. It also cannot show how the League's members would respond to it, which is what decided the crisis.

Each value and limitation is tied to a feature of the source (who sent it, when, why), not just to its content.

Comparing and using sources

For Question 3, **compare** means find similarities, and **contrast** means find differences. Link the two sources in every point:

> Both Source A and Source C show that Britain wanted to avoid war in 1938, but while Source A presents this as wise, Source C presents it as weakness.

Aim for at least two similarities and two differences. Describing Source A in one paragraph and Source C in the next earns few marks.

For Question 4, write a short essay: a **thesis** in the first sentence, two or three paragraphs that each use a source (named, such as "Source B") together with your own facts, and a judgement at the end. Use at least three of the four sources.

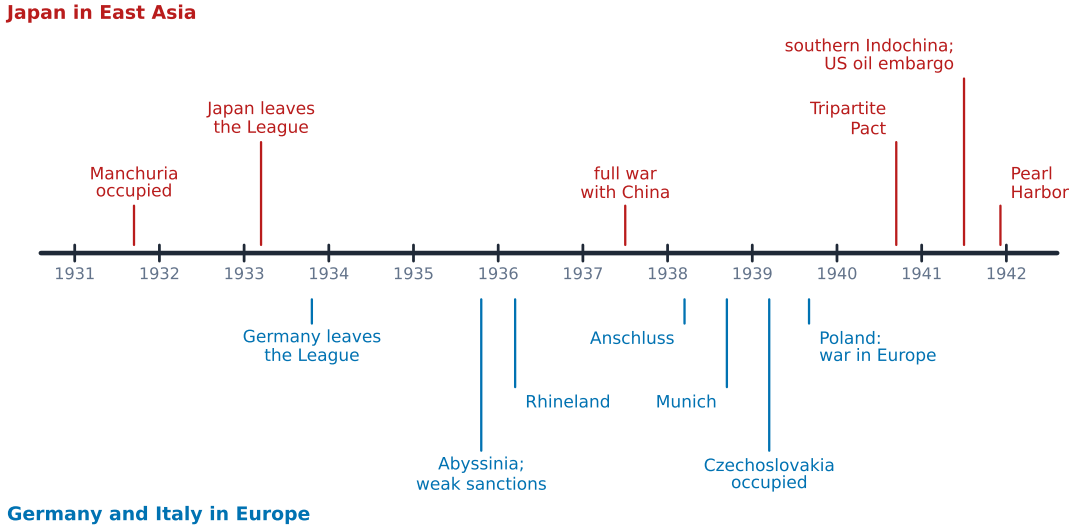
The five prescribed subjects

Prescribed subject	Case study 1	Case study 2
military leaders	Genghis Khan (c1200–1227)	Richard I of England (1173–1199)
conquest and its impact	the final stages of Muslim rule in Spain (1482–1492)	the conquest of Mexico and Peru (1519–1551)
the move to global war	Japanese expansion in East Asia (1931–1941)	German and Italian expansion (1933–1940)
rights and protest	the civil rights movement in the United States (1954–1965)	apartheid South Africa (1948–1964)
conflict and intervention	Rwanda (1990–1998)	Kosovo (1989–2002)

Each exam puts all four sources on one case study, so you must know both of your school's case studies.

The move to global war

After the First World War, the **League of Nations** (1920) was meant to keep the peace by **collective security**: if one state attacked another, all members would act together against it, first with **economic sanctions** and, if needed, with force. In the 1930s Japan, Italy and Germany expanded by force, and collective security failed. The key question is why.



Expansion in Asia and Europe, 1931–1941, and how other states responded

Japanese expansion in East Asia, 1931–1941

Date	Event
Sep 1931	the Mukden Incident: Japanese officers blow up a railway line and blame China; the army occupies Manchuria
Mar 1932	Japan sets up the state of Manchukuo, with Puyi as its head
Oct 1932	the Lytton Report says Japan's actions were not self-defence
Feb–Mar 1933	the League accepts the report; Japan leaves the League
Jul 1937	the Marco Polo Bridge Incident starts full war with China
Dec 1937	Japanese troops take Nanjing and kill very large numbers of civilians and prisoners
Sep 1940	the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy
Jul–Aug 1941	Japan occupies southern French Indochina; the US stops oil exports to Japan
7 Dec 1941	Japan attacks the US base at Pearl Harbor

Causes historians weigh: the Great Depression, which hit Japan's silk exports and made resources in Manchuria attractive; the growing power of the army over the civilian government; nationalism; and the weakness of the League, which had no army of its own and whose most powerful members did not act.

German and Italian expansion, 1933–1940

Date	Event
Oct 1933	Germany leaves the League and the Disarmament Conference
Mar 1935	Hitler announces conscription and a German air force, breaking the Treaty of Versailles
Oct 1935	Italy invades Abyssinia (Ethiopia); the League's sanctions do not include oil
Dec 1935	the Hoare–Laval Plan to give Italy much of Abyssinia is leaked and dropped
Mar 1936	German troops enter the demilitarised Rhineland
Mar 1938	the **Anschluss** : Germany takes over Austria
Sep 1938	the Munich Agreement gives the Sudetenland to Germany
Mar 1939	Germany occupies the rest of Czechoslovakia; in April, Italy invades Albania
23 Aug 1939	the Nazi–Soviet Pact
1 Sep 1939	Germany invades Poland; Britain and France declare war on 3 September
Jun 1940	Italy enters the war; France surrenders

Britain and France followed **appeasement** : giving in to some demands to avoid war. Reasons included the memory of the First World War, economic weakness, the belief that Versailles had been too harsh, and the need for time to rearm.

Worked Question 4 plan. *"Using the sources and your own knowledge, evaluate the claim that the League of Nations failed mainly because its members chose not to act."*

1. Thesis: largely true; the League had tools, but Britain and France put their own interests first.
2. Manchuria: the League investigated, but no member would fight Japan so far away (use the Lytton Report source).
3. Abyssinia: sanctions without oil, and the Hoare–Laval Plan, showed that Britain and France wanted to keep Italy friendly (use a cartoon source).
4. Counter-argument: the League had no army, and the US, the largest economy, was never a member; the aggressors were determined.
5. Judgement: the weaknesses of its structure made failure likely, but the members' choices made it certain.

Checklist

- The format: 1 hour, four sources, 24 marks; the marks and timing for each question.
- Question 1: from the source only, with quotations; the message of a visual source.
- Question 2: OPVL, each value and limitation linked to the origin or purpose; bias as evidence.
- Question 3: similarities and differences, point by point.
- Question 4: thesis, sources and own knowledge, a judgement.
- The five prescribed subjects and their case studies.
- The move to global war: collective security; the Japanese timeline 1931–1941; the German and Italian timeline 1933–1940; appeasement.