World history topics

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · History · HL

IB Diploma Programme History HL (the guide first assessed in 2017). This topic prepares Paper 2, the essay paper, which SL and HL students both sit. Schools choose two of the twelve **world history topics**, and study each through examples from more than one region. In Paper 2 you write two essays in 1 hour 30 minutes, each on a different topic and each marked out of 15. The questions ask about causes, effects, change and comparison. This handout teaches the essay method and then gives the key facts for the three most taught topics: authoritarian states, the causes and effects of 20th-century wars, and the Cold War.

In May 1928, the Nazi Party won 12 of 491 seats in the German parliament. Four and a half years later, its leader was head of the government. How could a small, extreme party take power in a modern democracy so quickly? Questions like this, about causes and change, are what Paper 2 asks. A good answer is an argument with evidence, not a story.

Must-know for Paper 2:

Area	Key content
essay method	a clear answer, argued paragraphs with evidence, a counter-argument, a judgement
command terms	discuss, evaluate, compare and contrast, examine, to what extent
authoritarian states	how they rose, how they kept power, what they did; Germany and Cuba as examples
20th-century wars	long-term, short-term and immediate causes; effects; the First World War
the Cold War	origins, crises, détente and the end, 1945–1991

The Paper 2 essay

An essay is an **argument**: it answers the question and proves the answer. Use this plan:

1. **Introduction**: answer the question directly in one or two sentences. This is your **thesis**.
2. **Three body paragraphs**: each makes one point that supports the thesis. Start with the point, then give precise **evidence** (dates, names, numbers), then explain how the evidence proves the point.
3. **Counter-argument**: give the strongest other view, then answer it.

4. **Conclusion**: a **judgement** that weighs the factors ("the most important cause was ... because ..."), not a summary.

Answer	the thesis in the first two sentences
Leg 1	one argued point + named evidence (dates, actors, laws)
Leg 2	one argued point + named evidence
Leg 3	one argued point + named evidence
Counter-case	concede the other side, then answer it
Judgement	weigh the legs to a verdict; do not repeat

45 minutes an essay: about 5 to plan, about 40 to write

The shape of a Paper 2 essay: answer first, three argued legs, a counter-case, a judgement

Precise evidence earns the marks: "the Enabling Act of 23 March 1933 allowed Hitler to make laws without parliament" is much stronger than "Hitler took more power".

Command term	What to do
discuss / evaluate	give arguments for and against, weigh them, reach a judgement
to what extent	judge how far the claim is true; "to a large extent, but ..."
compare and contrast	similarities and differences, side by side in every paragraph
examine	look closely at the claim and its assumptions

For "compare and contrast", never write about one state and then the other. Each paragraph compares both on one point, using words such as *whereas*, *similarly* and *in both cases*.

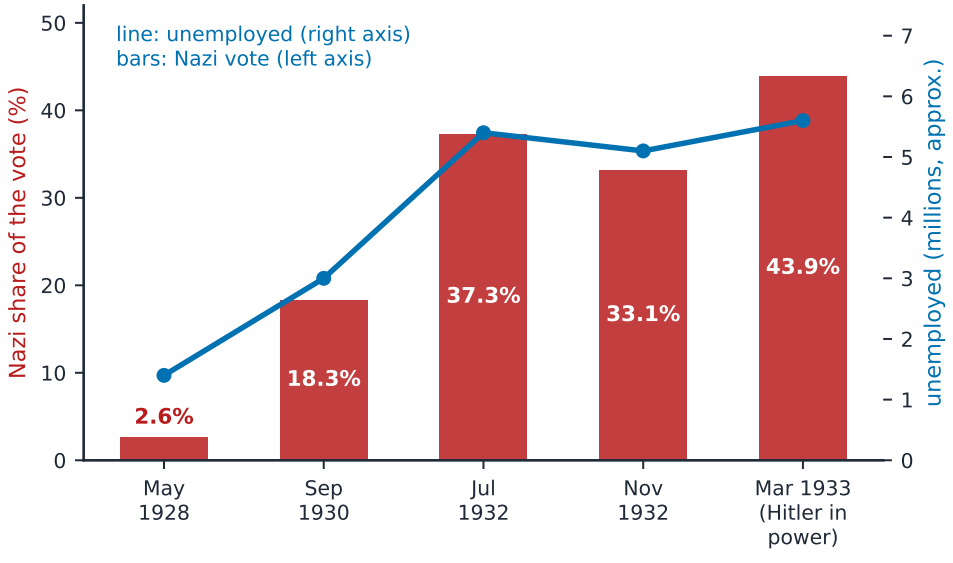
You have 45 minutes per essay. Spend about 5 minutes on a plan. The most common way to lose marks is **narrative** : telling what happened instead of answering the question.

Authoritarian states (20th century)

An **authoritarian state** is ruled by one leader or party that does not allow free elections or opposition. Questions ask about three stages: its **emergence** (how it came to power), its **consolidation** (how it kept power) and its **policies** (what it did with power). You must know at least two states from different regions. Germany and Cuba are a common pair.

■ Germany under Hitler

Date	Event
1919	Treaty of Versailles: Germany loses land and must pay reparations; many Germans feel humiliated
1923	hyperinflation; Hitler's failed Munich Putsch
1929	the Wall Street Crash; American loans stop; unemployment rises
1930–32	Nazi share of the vote rises from 18% to 37%
30 Jan 1933	Hitler is appointed chancellor by President Hindenburg
27 Feb 1933	the Reichstag fire; a decree suspends civil rights
23 Mar 1933	the Enabling Act: Hitler can make laws without parliament
Jul 1933	all other parties are banned
30 Jun 1934	the Night of the Long Knives: rivals in the SA are killed
Aug 1934	Hindenburg dies; Hitler becomes Führer



As unemployment rose, so did the Nazi vote

The graph shows a strong link between the **Great Depression** and Nazi votes. But the vote fell in November 1932, and Hitler became chancellor by a deal among conservative politicians who thought they could control him, not by an election victory. A good essay weighs economic crisis, Nazi **propaganda**, the use of violence, and the mistakes of other politicians.

To keep power, the Nazis used both **terror** (the Gestapo secret police, concentration camps) and the search for consent (propaganda by Joseph Goebbels, the Hitler Youth, jobs through rearmament and road building). Jewish people were removed from public life by the Nuremberg Laws (1935) and attacked in the violence of Kristallnacht (November 1938), the road to the Holocaust.

■ Cuba under Castro

Date	Event
1952	Fulgencio Batista takes power in a military coup
26 Jul 1953	Fidel Castro's failed attack on the Moncada barracks
1956–58	guerrilla war from the Sierra Maestra mountains
1 Jan 1959	Batista flees; Castro's forces take power
1959	land reform: large estates broken up
1960	Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) set up in every street
1961	the Bay of Pigs invasion fails; the literacy campaign
1962	the Cuban Missile Crisis
1965	the Communist Party of Cuba becomes the only party

Castro's support came from social policies: the 1961 literacy campaign sent about 250,000 teachers and volunteers into the countryside, and official figures show illiteracy falling from about 24% to about 4%. Free health care and schooling followed. At the same time, opposition newspapers were closed, opponents were jailed or left the country, and the CDRs watched each street.

Worked comparison. *"Compare and contrast the use of propaganda and force in two authoritarian states."*

> Whereas Hitler's regime won support mainly through propaganda and economic recovery, Castro's relied more on real social reforms such as the literacy campaign. In both states, however, force set the limits: the Gestapo in Germany and the CDRs in Cuba made opposition dangerous. Propaganda built consent, but terror was the final guarantee.

Causes and effects of 20th-century wars

Historians separate three kinds of cause:

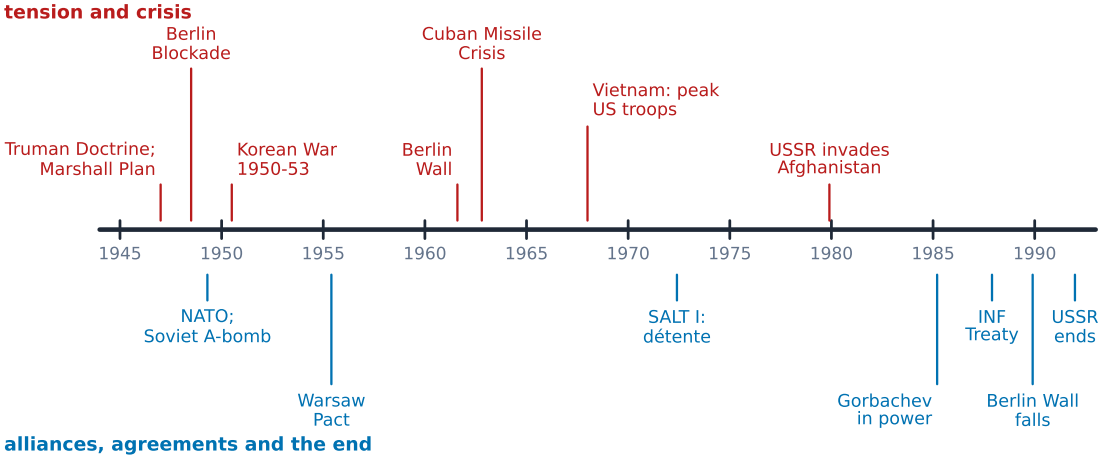
Kind	Meaning	First World War example
long-term causes	conditions over many years	alliances (Triple Alliance 1882, Triple Entente 1907); the naval race; nationalism in the Balkans
short-term causes	events in the months before	the July Crisis: Austria-Hungary's ultimatum to Serbia; Russia mobilises
trigger	the event that starts the war	the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, 28 June 1914

War came quickly: Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on 28 July, Germany on Russia on 1 August and on France on 3 August, and Britain on Germany on 4 August, after German troops entered Belgium.

Effects are political, economic and social. About 10 million soldiers died. Four empires collapsed (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and the Ottoman Empire). In Britain, most women over 30 got the vote in 1918, partly because of their war work. The peace treaties, especially Versailles, created anger that later helped the Nazis, so the effects of one war became causes of the next.

The Cold War (1945–1991)

The **Cold War** was a long rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, and their allies. They never fought each other directly, but they competed through alliances, an **arms race** and **proxy wars** in other countries.



The Cold War, 1945–1991: crises above, alliances and agreements below

- **Origins** : different ideas (capitalism and communism), Soviet control of Eastern Europe after 1945, and US policies such as the Truman Doctrine (1947) and the Marshall Plan, which gave about US$13 billion to rebuild Western Europe.
- **Crises**: the Berlin Blockade (1948–49), the Korean War (1950–53), the Berlin Wall (1961) and the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962), when the world came close to nuclear war for 13 days.
- **Détente** : in the 1970s both sides reduced tension and signed arms agreements such as SALT I (1972).
- **The end**: the Soviet economy weakened; Mikhail Gorbachev (in power from 1985) introduced reforms; the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989; the Soviet Union ended on 26 December 1991.

Historians disagree about who was responsible. The **orthodox view** blames Soviet expansion; the **revisionist view** blames US economic interests; the **post-revisionist view** sees fear and misunderstanding on both sides. Using these views shows the examiner you understand that history is argued.

Checklist

- The essay plan: thesis, three argued paragraphs with precise evidence, counter-argument, judgement; the command terms; 45 minutes per essay.
- Authoritarian states: emergence, consolidation and policies; Germany (1919–1934 timeline, vote and unemployment data, terror and consent) and Cuba (1952–1965, literacy campaign, CDRs); a worked comparison.
- 20th-century wars: long-term, short-term and trigger causes of the First World War; its political, economic and social effects.
- The Cold War: origins, crises, détente and the end; the orthodox, revisionist and post-revisionist views.