

“The truth of how exactly World War Two ended should not be a matter of debate, since all historical accounts should be treated as literature.” Critically assess this view. [RI Y6 TP 2023]

With the postmodern turn in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a growing number of historians began to forward the view that historical accounts are nothing more than literary artefacts, as divorced from historical reality as a fictional story. It is thus no wonder that some have argued that the exact nature of historical events—such as the end of WWII—should not be subject to debate, since all accounts of these events are invariably stories that cannot inform us of the reality of the past. While such a deconstructionist view is grounded in several problems of historical knowledge construction that introduce subjectivity into accounts, claiming that there is no difference between history and literature would be too extreme a position to take.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the exact happenings of the past *should* be a matter of debate, because debate is precisely what differentiates history from literature by helping historical knowledge get closer to historical reality.<sup>2</sup>

The deconstructionist position that history is no different from literature does identify several pertinent sources of subjectivity in history that might superficially render it similar to fiction. First, the historian—much like the author of a novel—must often speculate as to what happened when sources are scarce, or subjectively pick and choose sources when they are abundant. Often, historical sources are scarce because many artefacts do not stand the test of time: erosion and geological forces have destroyed many would-be artefacts that could tell us about ancient civilisations, while oral traditions have often died out over the generations. Hence, when a historian is writing about such societies of the past, he must often exercise his imagination just like a novelist might, constructing possible explanations for the existence of Stonehenge or possible rituals that might have taken place in the Mayan civilisation. This introduces subjectivity into historical accounts, making them ostensibly literary in nature—shaped by the imagination of the author. Even when sources are abundant,

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<sup>1</sup> Clear stand.

<sup>2</sup> Ok.

the historian must select sources to form a cogent account of an event lest it become a meaningless compilation of facts. For instance, with tens of thousands of sources each with a slightly different explanation of how WWII ended, the historian needs to pick between them based on his subjective judgements. A Western historian might thus subconsciously choose Western accounts that attribute credit to the US's atomic bombs rather than the impending Soviet invasion, since these sources cohere with the narrative of the war he was taught in school since young. As such, each historian is bound to write a slightly different 'story' of the end of the war, making history much like literature and any debate on what 'really' happened ostensibly pointless.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, even after the historian has selected sources, he often must emplot these events onto a cogent narrative timeline such that the story or account 'makes sense' to us. As Hayden White observes, such emplotments often take the form of literary conventions: a historian that charts the course of Singapore's history from its days as a bustling entrepot under British rule to its fall to the Japanese might present Singapore's story as a tragic fall from grace, while a historian that continues to tell the story of Singapore's rise to become a futuristic metropolis might present Singapore's story as a romantic testament to the power of grit. Hence, historians also inevitably introduce subjectivity into their accounts by using literary conventions to structure them, making history appear similar to a fictional story written entirely as the author desires.

Finally, much like how diction is used to evoke specific feelings in the reader of a story, the language used in a historical account also introduces subjectivity. A historian that calls American troops that freed Jewish prisoners from Auschwitz "liberators" subconsciously imbues their actions with a sense of glory and honour, whereas another historian that calls them "occupying soldiers marching to Berlin" would leave the reader less sympathetic to their efforts. Hence, the subjective word choice that historians employ further introduces bias into their works, leaving historical accounts ostensibly as subjective as literary ones. In this light, it would be foolish to debate the exact course of events in the past, such as the end of WWII: a deconstructionist would argue that it is impossible to objectively uncover the truth of these events.

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<sup>3</sup> Very clear argument.

That said, the postmodern view of history neglects to consider a key differentiating factor between history and literature: the role of evidence. Literary works like *Pride and Prejudice* pay no attention to evidence at all: whether there really was a Bennet family with five daughters is of little relevance, as the novel is expected to be utterly divorced from the realities of Regency England. However, if a historian writing about WWII entirely ignores evidence in his work, his work will be discredited as bogus: this is exactly why Holocaust deniers have been criticised for spreading “fake news”, as their historical accounts completely contradict the overwhelming evidence pointing to the Holocaust, such as the existence of Auschwitz and Dachau. As such, there remains a clear differentiating factor that separates history from literature: even if historical accounts are biased, they still must remain tethered to the reality of the past.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the view that all historical knowledge is inevitably tainted with subjectivity is too pessimistic: historians are routinely able to scrutinise the biases of other historians and identify the biased accounts that diverge from historical truth.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Sima Qian’s writing was identified to be heavily shaped by the dictates of the Han court, which has led modern-day scholars to study his works largely for their literary value and not their historical accuracy.<sup>6</sup> This is possible because new evidence that has the potential to confirm or undermine existing historical accounts is regularly introduced, revealing their biases, omissions and exaggerations: archaeological evidence of artefacts dating to the Han dynasty would have helped historians identify the works of Sima Qian as untethered to reality.<sup>7</sup> Hence, as we unearth more artefacts from the ground and collect more records from people, we are able to minimise the bias that percolates into our historical knowledge. Insofar that the argument that we should not debate over what happened in the past hinges on the nihilistic assumption that it is not possible to determine what really happened in the first place due to bias, the possibility of correcting for bias renders this claim less persuasive.

Finally, even if we are unable to weed out biased accounts, we are still able to understand some aspects of the past by looking at the intersubjective concurrences

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<sup>4</sup> Ok. What other kinds of evidence are there that binds the historian to historical convention rather than literature? What other boundaries exist to keep the historian in check or mitigate bias?

<sup>5</sup> But how do they do so?

<sup>6</sup> (Same example used in the long passage response...)

<sup>7</sup> What happens when there are conflicting sources or evidence? Consider the different possibilities.

that exist among subjective historical accounts. For instance, the fact that Soviet, Japanese and American accounts all agree that the Japanese surrender in WWII took place in the same week as the atomic bombing of Nagasaki suggests that the surrender was likely triggered in part by the US's deployment of nuclear weapons. Hence, the truth of historical events—including the end of WWII—is not inevitably buried under layers of subjectivity and bias, making the view that all historical knowledge is necessarily fictional an excessively fatalistic one.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, it is clear that history is not just another branch of literature: it has a unique focus on historical evidence and can achieve some success at helping us objectively learn about what truly happened in the past.<sup>9</sup> However, this does not entail that the truth of historical events should not be up for debate: in fact, it is precisely the process of historical discourse and debate that has helped us to refine our understanding of the past and get closer to uncovering historical reality. This is because of the inherently multicausal nature of history: every historical event can be attributed to a confluence of unique historical factors that eventually catalysed the outcome. It is the process of historical debate that helps us identify these new causal factors and incorporate them into our understanding of the past: revisionists, by contesting the traditional account that the atomic bombs singlehandedly ended WWII, have drawn our attention to Soviet accounts that point to an impending Soviet land invasion that would have influenced Japan's decision to surrender. Additionally, by employing new sources and evidence, these historical debates help us to weed out the most biased accounts divorced from reality: historical discourse has helped us to identify the inaccuracies of Foucault's account of the evolution of sexual discourse in society. Hence, historical debates are not pointless because they fail to uncover the truth of the past, as the deconstructionists argue; rather, they are an indispensable part of the historical method that helps us get to the truth.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, it is true that there is subjectivity that enters historical accounts. That said, this is the only kernel of truth that the deconstructionist position contains. History is ultimately not like literature because it both focuses on evidence and can also help us

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<sup>8</sup> Ok.

<sup>9</sup> Historians are also committed to truth-seeking, but literary authors are not (not necessarily so, anyway).

<sup>10</sup> Good insight.

discover what really happened, unlike fiction. Historical debates, therefore, are not meaningless, but rather a key tool at the historical community's disposal to tell us about the truths of the past.

### **Score**

AO1: 15/15

AO2: 10/10

AO3: 5/5

Total: 30/30

### **Comments**

Excellent piece that thoroughly explores why History ought not be treated like Lit, even though there are clearly unavoidable biases and subjective elements in historical accounts. Argumentation is very strong—clear premises, conditions, and an excellent logical flow to the entire piece. Points are clearly expressed, and well-supported with relevant and accurate examples. Comprehensive exploration of issues to do with truth-seeking and the role of evidence in historical knowledge construction, with some insight.

Good job!