

3 Working on information

A note to readers. It is suggested that you increase magnification to 125% or 150% to read the guide on screen. Click on the magnifying glass icon at bottom left of the screen and select your magnification.

Key points in Chapter 3

- Students who move from reading/noting straight to assignment and answer writing hinder their progress.
- Much middle-stage activity is undemanding.
- Middle-stage study encourages thought and promotes understanding and judgement.

HABITS OF WORK can be likened to explosives: they can be beneficial (the clearance of slums to enable redevelopment) or harmful (the destruction of people by bombs or bullets). One habit of study which advanced History students can slip into is very unbeneficial. If you have this bad habit you may have carried it over from earlier study. Under pressure to complete topics and meet assignment deadlines, it is easy to allow work procedure to have only two parts: reading with noting and writing. This is a reduced procedure and encourages a 'cut and paste' approach to work and leads to lower grades. With the middle stage of work, that is working on information, missed out a downward spiral of low achievement and motivation can begin.

The middle stage in study: adding value for time and effort already spent

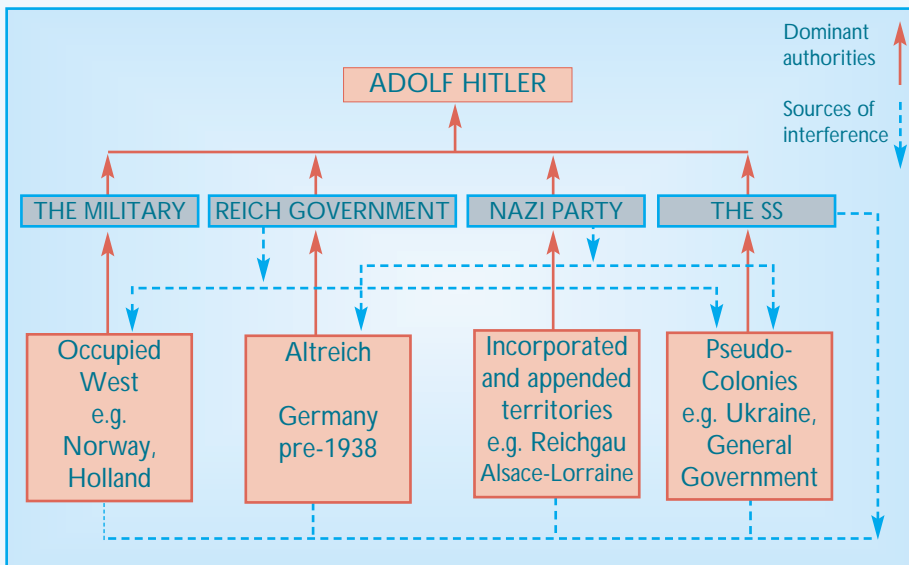
Good readers and note makers will be *active* thinkers and not passive copiers of information (Chapter 1). Students with even rudimentary skills will process their information before an answer is written (Chapter 7). Better students will do more because the middle stage between reading/noting and writing has the potential to be the greatest 'value added' activity for students. It adds to your interest and it enables you to increase your understanding of the

topic and to gain more reward for the time given to study.

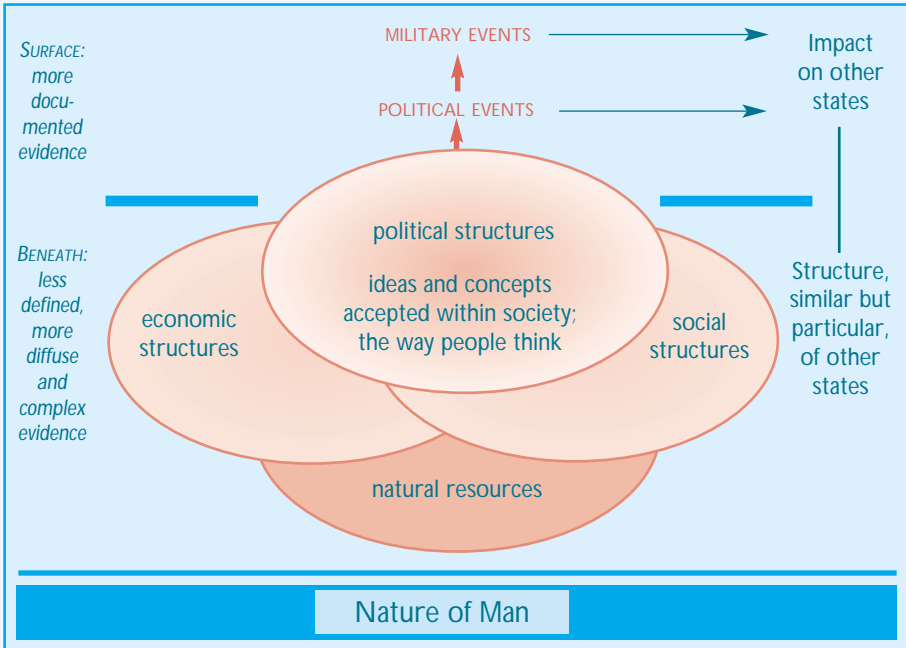
Middle stage activity and greater understanding

This middle stage work on information can take many forms.

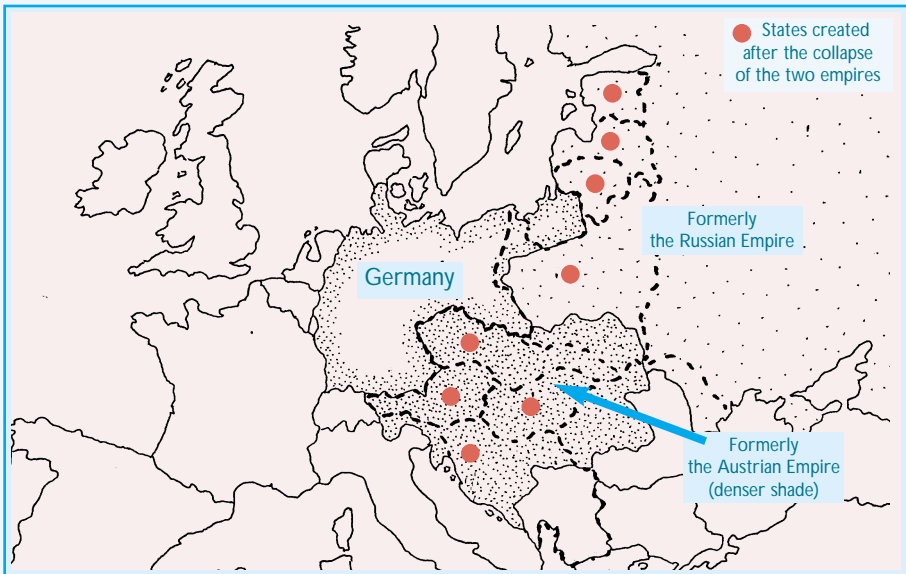
- At its simplest, it should include the creation of a chronology, fashioned for your purpose, if this was not undertaken during reading.
- Spray diagrams or ideas maps of the main influences underneath the surface of events. These diagrams are particularly useful because they depict the relationship between events. These influences are what scientists call variables. I shall refer to them again later in ‘mind games and counterfactuals’, page 21.
- Government structure sketches, if they are not provided in texts, will clarify your reading (see figure below on this page).
- Placement of the history within the contemporary social, economic and political structure. You may find it useful to create your own diagram (see figure on the next page).
- Reference to maps can help you understand why events could occur as they did: atlases, even if not historical atlases, are a neglected aid to understanding. A sketch map of the main place of activity can bring out patterns which you had not noticed in a textbook (see the map of Central Europe after 1919, next page).



*The dominant administrative authorities in the Third Reich.
Why there was administrative chaos*



The relationship of events within a state and its underlying structures



The importance of maps. The potential for instability in Central Europe is better appreciated when the small weak states on the eastern border of Germany (not permanently weakened by the Treaty of Versailles) is seen.



- Development of check lists for analysis. These are headings against which to measure events. As an example, here is a check list that can be used to measure changed power between states.

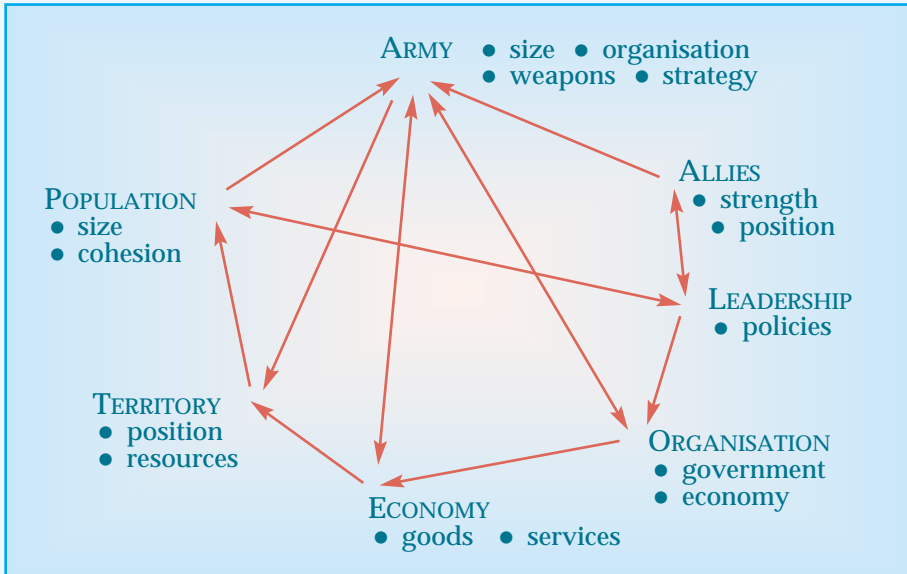
The Power of States

- 1 **Natural advantages of the State.** Size, soil, climate, minerals, population and position.
- 2 **Opportunities for the Society and the State.** Agriculture, industry, communication (internal and external), trade, administrative, fiscal and financial institutions, military skills and technological innovation.
- 3 **Problems within Society and for the State.** Wealth creation (management of the economy), administrative management, political and/or social discontent/concord and natural disasters.
- 4 **The Influence of other States.**

Mind games and counterfactuals

Games you can play with historical information are senseless in one way. After all, no one can change what actually happened. In another way they can help the student toward a more full understanding. Historians tend not to play mind games in public but there are examples, including Geoffrey Parker's 'If the Armada had Landed' (*History*, October 1976) and Jeremy Black's 'Could Bonnie Prince Charlie have Won?' (*History Today*, July 1995). *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* edited by Niall Ferguson (Picador, 1977) is nine counterfactual essays by different contributors. Here are four kinds of mind games you can play.

- Isolate the main elements in a historical situation. Now vary one of the elements and see how the others are affected. Try this with the reasons for German strength in 1939 (next page).
- Change the order of events and assess the probable consequences. This is especially useful if events changed greatly within a short space of time. Example: Russia's acceptance of negotiations with Austria on 1 August 1914 after the German decision for war on Russia. Exchange the order. Is it possible subsequent events could have been different?
- Remove one or two juxtapositioned events and estimate the possible direction of events. Example: remove the expulsion of the 'Sea Beggars' from Dover (in 1572) from the Dutch revolt.
- Assume that some important project/aim that succeeded had failed (or that failed, had succeeded). Assess the consequences. Example: Cavour failed to make an agreement with Napoleon III in 1859.



Identification of variables. The strength of Germany in 1939

This middle phase of work, between reading/noting and essay writing can increase understanding and is not as demanding as the first or third stages of work. It does not require long periods of uninterrupted time. Some of this kind of activity can be fitted in while waiting for class to start, and middle-stage work can seem little more than doodling but, because your mind is active and the information is considered, sorted, filtered and reworked, your understanding is enhanced.

The middle stage and the development of judgement

Students often choose to study advanced History because they are good at it and/or because they enjoy the subject. Whatever the reason, in the end advanced History study opens the door to many careers. Very few of these careers require the use of the knowledge gained as History students. Would not a course with a strong vocational content, say, Media Studies, Business Studies, Law and so on, be better? The answer is that the subject matter of History may not be directly relevant to careers but because History students develop transferable skills it is, indirectly, very relevant. History study fosters:

- (i) The development of skills for absorbing and using a lot of information.
- (ii) The development of skills of analysis and judgement.
- (iii) The development of the skill of clear, persuasive, presentation of ideas in answers.



You will recognise that (i) particularly relates to reading and note making and (iii) to essays and dissertations. It is (ii), the development analysis and judgement, which is nurtured particularly during middle-stage activity.