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# Using Periodization to Understand Change

*by Peter Stearns*

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## Secondary Source:

Here's an easy periodization decision. If you're studying the role of the United States in world affairs, you obviously see a major break with World War II. The nation moved from trying to isolate itself to taking a large global role, which it would long sustain. A new period was underway.

Here's a harder decision. Most world historians see a shift in many world patterns around 1450, marking acceleration of European explorations, the end of the Byzantine Empire and a few other developments. The themes of world history before 1450 are supplanted by new themes, soon including more trade, more use of guns, and the inclusion of the Americas. But does the period begin at 1450, or a bit later when the Americas are more fully involved? And does it fit China, where a major new dynasty, the Ming, actually took power 82 years earlier? Periodization choices are not always problem-free.

Periodization is a historian's word, and it can seem a bit abstract. Its real function is to designate a point at which significant change occurs, introducing a new framework and new trends. If we don't define periods, change becomes just one thing after another, with no clear patterns or emphases. Periodization makes it easier to identify historical meaning, by reducing clutter and highlighting big new developments.

Periodization also targets other opportunities to understand change. Once we know when a new period comes into play, we can more easily figure out what *causes* major change—for example, in deciding *why* the United States decided to drop isolationism. We can also pay attention to some features that persist from the previous period—what historians call *continuity*.

## Notes:

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## Using Periodization to Understand Change *continued*

Thus, we can agree that China did not change fully around 1450, that it shows a number of continuities from before; though in fact its orientation toward international trade did shift at about that point.

But the main focus in periodization centers on defining significant change itself, measured by deliberately comparing the trends *before* the break with the trends *after*.

Depending on the topic, new periods may be formed as a result of major wars, really new ideas, innovative technologies, or other combinations. However eye-catching the potential trigger may be, if significant change cannot be defined, no new period is involved. Not every dramatic event, not every bloody war, really generates durable new patterns. It's vital to be able to show not just apparent new trends, but how they differ from the dominant themes of the previous period.

Periodization applies to any historical topic where change is involved over some span of time. The history of American childhood, for example, involves a fairly clear before-and-after around 1910, when child labor begins to decline rapidly, infant mortality drops dramatically, and schooling becomes more serious business. The combination generates a new period—the experience of childhood. Not surprisingly, periodization is most challenging when it is applied to major patterns in world history. Identifying a new period—for example, around 1450—will almost always work better for some societies than for others, though if it doesn't apply fairly widely the definition is surely off base. It will also work better for some topics than for others. The new period that opens in 1450 applies to political, commercial and military trends, but it works much less well, on a global basis, for cultural developments. Even with problems of this sort, historians generally agree that periodization decisions are essential to sharpen an understanding of major change.

Several other points help clarify the use of periodization.

### Notes:

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## Using Periodization to Understand Change *continued*

First, periodization does not really have to identify a single year as the change point, though it cannot usefully stretch out endlessly. Depending on the topic, major transformations may develop over a few decades. A single year, like 1450, is often just a date of convenience in a slightly longer global transition.

Second, many people, including some historians, make superficial decisions about periods. It's not only possible but useful to challenge some of the standards involved. In American history, periods are often assigned to presidencies, or in the 20th century to decades (the "roaring twenties," for instance). But a presidency (or a monarch's reign, or even a Chinese dynasty) may or may not mark significant change. Even some fairly important presidents do not in fact see a new period taking shape around them. It's vital to remember the significance test, or we will end up with more periods than we can manage.

Third, the challenge of defining periods is harder the closer we get to our own time. We lack perspective about our own age, which complicates judgments about significance. And many people are so easily persuaded that major change is occurring at a faster and faster pace that they lose sight of basic markers and talk about some revolutionary departure every few years.

Here in fact is a great exercise: think of some noteworthy developments that did not, in fact, end up generating massive change, that have not set a new period in motion.

Fourth, and most important of all: periodization decisions should always be made explicitly and should be open to discussion. They are never indisputable, for they involve historians' best judgments about how to measure change. To be sure, some decisions are relatively clear-cut, as with World War II and the American world role. In most cases, however, complications and options form part of any effective use of periodization.

Changes in human affairs are not tidy, though they are also not entirely random. Periodization, but also some debate about periodization, provide the best shot at identifying the major signposts.

### Notes:

# Global History Timeline (c. 1750-Present)

<p><b>1650-1800</b></p> <p><b>The Enlightenment</b></p> <p><b>France</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rousseau - Social Contract</li> <li>- Locke - natural rights, (life, liberty, property)</li> <li>- Hobbes - Absolutism</li> <li>- Smith - Capitalism</li> <li>- Aim to fix social, economic, political problems with logic &amp; reason</li> <li>- Wollstonecraft - Women's Rights</li> </ul>	<p><b>1740-1900</b></p> <p><b>The Industrial Revolution</b></p> <p><b>Great Britain</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Change from products made at home by hand to mass produced goods by machines</li> <li>- Starts in Great Britain because of Geography (rivers, ports, raw materials)</li> <li>- Industrialization (people move from rural to urban centers for jobs)</li> <li>- Karl Marx (Communism)</li> </ul>	<p><b>1789-1799</b></p> <p><b>The French Revolution</b></p> <p><b>France</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Third Estate pays all taxes</li> <li>- Louis XVI - absolute ruler beheaded by guillotine</li> <li>- French republic, abolish monarchy</li> <li>- Robespierre - radical revolutionary, beheaded</li> <li>- Reign of Terror led by Robespierre</li> <li>- Rise of Napoleon</li> </ul>	<p><b>1750-1900</b></p> <p><b>The Agricultural Revolution</b></p> <p><b>Great Britain</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Greater population need for more food</li> <li>- Four Field System /Crop Rotation</li> <li>- Enclosure Act</li> <li>- Starts in Great Britain</li> <li>- Malthus - population theory of survival of fittest applied to human society (Social Darwinism) &amp; concept of race</li> </ul>	<p><b>1804-1900</b></p> <p><b>The Age of Nationalism</b></p> <p><b>Italy/German</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collective pride for your Nation/Country/State</li> <li>- Latin American Revolutions</li> <li>- L'Ouverture (1804) - Haiti</li> <li>- Bolivar - Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru &amp; Panama</li> <li>- Italy (1861) - Cavour, Mazzini, Garibaldi</li> <li>- Germany (1871) - Bismarck</li> </ul>	<p><b>1885-1914</b></p> <p><b>The 2nd Age of Imperialism</b></p> <p><b>European Powers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Berlin Conference (1884-85)</li> <li>- European Empires Scramble for Africa</li> <li>- Made possible by the Industrial Revolution &amp; need for raw materials for manufactured</li> <li>- China imperialized / Boxer Rebellion &amp; Opium Wars</li> <li>- India imperialized / Sepoy Mutiny</li> </ul>
<p><b>1914-1919</b></p> <p><b>World War I</b></p> <p><b>Balkan Peninsula</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- M.A.I.N.S.</li> <li>- Central Powers (defeated) vs. Allied Powers (victorious)</li> <li>- Starts in Balkan Peninsula with assassination of Austrian-Hungary Archduke Ferdinand</li> <li>- Treaty of Versailles ends war</li> <li>- Ottoman Empire split up</li> <li>- Austria-Hungary Empire split up into ethnic &amp; religious areas</li> </ul>	<p><b>1919-1939</b></p> <p><b>Rise of Totalitarianism</b></p> <p><b>Italy/Russia/Germany</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Russian Revolution (1917)</li> <li>- Soviet Union - Lenin &amp; Stalin (Communism)</li> <li>- Treaty of Versailles punishes Germany / War Guilt Clause</li> <li>- World Wide Depression</li> <li>- Germany pays reparations</li> <li>- Rise of Fascism / Communism</li> <li>- Germany - Hitler (Fascism)</li> <li>- Italy - Mussolini (Fascism)</li> </ul>	<p><b>1939-1945</b></p> <p><b>World War II</b></p> <p><b>Poland/Germany</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Axis Powers (defeated) vs. Allies (victorious)</li> <li>- Hitler invades Poland to start war (Blitzkrieg)</li> <li>- Holocaust continues to The Final Solution (12 mil killed)</li> <li>- Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor</li> <li>- D-Day Invasion of Europe</li> <li>- Germany &amp; Italy defeated</li> <li>- Atomic bombs dropped</li> </ul>	<p><b>1945-1980</b></p> <p><b>Decolonization</b></p> <p><b>Poland/Germany</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- British Empire in majot decline because of WWII</li> <li>- Gandhi &amp; India gain independence from Britain</li> <li>- African colonies slowly gain independence</li> <li>- Japanese imperialism ends with their defeat in WWII</li> <li>- State of Israel is carved out of the Palestinian area of the Middle East</li> <li>- Southeast Asia states become independent</li> <li>- End of colonization in many places causes civil wars</li> </ul>	<p><b>1945-1991</b></p> <p><b>The Cold War</b></p> <p><b>U.S. /U.S.S.R</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- war of ideologies</li> <li>- Capitalism (U.S) vs. Communism (USSR)</li> <li>- Democracy (U.S.) vs. Totalitarianism (USSR)</li> <li>- Warsaw Pact (USSR) vs. NATO (The West)</li> <li>- Space Race</li> <li>- Nuclear Weapons build up</li> <li>- Korean War</li> <li>- Soviets build wall around East Berlin inside GDR</li> <li>- Cuban Missile Crisis</li> <li>- Vietnam War</li> </ul>	<p><b>1950-Present</b></p> <p><b>Communist China</b></p> <p><b>China/Taiwan</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China becomes independent of Japanese &amp; Russian influence after WWII</li> <li>- Chiang Kai-Shek (Republic) vs. Mao Zedong (Communist)</li> <li>- Mao victorious, Kai-Shek escapes to island of Formosa (Taiwan)</li> <li>- China becomes communist</li> <li>- Great Leap Forward</li> <li>- Cultural Revolution</li> <li>- Mao dies 1975, Deng Xiopeng reforms economy by reversing some of Mao's programs</li> <li>- Tiananmen Square (1989) protests &amp; masacre for democracy fail</li> </ul>
<p><b>1991</b></p> <p><b>The End of the Cold War</b></p> <p><b>U.S. / Russia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reagan, Thatcher, Pope John Paul II vs. Gorbachev</li> <li>- Soviets militarily &amp; economically can't keep up</li> <li>- Glastnost &amp; Perestroika</li> <li>- Poland breaks free from Soviet influence. Fall of the Berlin Wall</li> <li>- Soviet Union falls 1991</li> </ul>	<p><b>1990-Present</b></p> <p><b>Globalization</b></p> <p><b>Worldwide</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Since 1950s, World economy &amp; free trade has expanded &amp; increased</li> <li>- NAFTA (U.S./Canada/Mexico)</li> <li>- WTO (World Trade Organization)</li> <li>- EU (European Union)</li> <li>- Increase in GDP of many states</li> </ul>	<p><b>2001-Present</b></p> <p><b>War on Terrorism</b></p> <p><b>Worldwide</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 9/11 US Attacked by Al Qaeda terrorists</li> <li>- Since break up of Soviet Union, terrorism increased</li> <li>- U.S. Wars in Afghanistan, and Iraq (2003)</li> <li>- Increase in Fundamentalism &amp; Extremism</li> </ul>			

Dates to Remember			
<b>1789</b>	<b>French Revolution Begins</b>	<b>1945-1991</b>	<b>Cold War</b>
<b>1884-1885</b>	<b>Berlin Conference</b>	<b>1950s</b>	<b>Communist China under Mao</b>
<b>1914-1919</b>	<b>World War I</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>Berlin Wall Falls</b>
<b>1917</b>	<b>Russian Revolution Begins</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>Collapse of Soviet Union</b>
<b>1939-1945</b>	<b>World War II</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>World Trade Center Attack</b>