1-Page Book Summary of The Lessons of History

The laws of biology are the fundamental lessons of history - humans are subject to the trials of selection and the struggle for existence, like all other animals. The group and nation merely inherits the will of the individual - after all, societies are made up of individuals.

Human nature has largely been unchanged throughout history - the means change, but the motives stay the same.

**Humans are born with different abilities, and so inequality among humans is a natural consequence.** This is magnified by the complexity of civilization, as each invention is seized by the strong to make themselves stronger, and the weak weaker.

- Freedom and equality are fundamentally opposed. If people are given freedom, their natural differences in ability will materialize in different outcomes. If people were forced to show equal outcomes and equal abilities, this reduces freedom.
- The best that egalitarians can hope for in a free society is an approximate equality of legal justice and educational opportunity.
- Society is made up of the imitative majority and the innovating minority. History in general is the “conflict of minorities” and
the majority “applauds the victor and supplies the human material of social experiment.”

**Culture, customs, and morals provide a useful social stabilizing force.** and a dampening force on innovation. What practices survive to present day have survived over time because they worked. New changes need to be put through the crucible of criticism before overthrowing the result of centuries of experiment.

**Morals change with the times as a reflection of what is necessary to grow and survive.**

- Hunting/gathering promoted survival at all costs, including fighting and killing, and gluttony during the rare feast.
- Agriculture spurred the importance of hard work and regularity more than violence and bravery.
- Industry promoted individualism separated from the family; materialism and mass consumption; and delaying marriage along with premarital sex.

**Religion has been constantly present in history.**

- On the positive, religion has given “supernatural comforts” to many, even the most unfortunate, and provided social stability through divine surveillance and moral prescriptions handed down by gods.
- On the negative, religion has been used as a tool of the state to legitimize power, has seen corrupt abuses of power (eg the Crusades).
- “As long as there is poverty there will be gods.”

**Every economic system must eventually rely on some form of profit motive to stir people to productivity.** Alternatives like slavery, brute force management, or ideology have historically proved too unproductive or unsuccessful.

**The constant friction in societal structure is between the rulers and the ruled.**

- The natural progression of government is from monarchy to aristocracy to democracy and back again. Democracy passes to monarchy/tyranny when civil strife weakens the state, revolution is threatened, and a figure arrives promising security and opportunity for all.
- Like a heartbeat, societies alternate in cycles of wealth concentration and redistribution (violent or peaceful).
- Communism has taken on capitalist flair to stimulate productivity, and capitalism has taken on socialist programs to curb discontent with inequality, and so the two converge.

**War is a constant in history. In the past 3421 years, there have been only 268 years of no...**

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Here’s a preview of the rest of Shortform’s The Lessons of History summary:

**The Lessons of History Summary 1: History and the Earth**

Geography is the physical structure that holds history.

Civilization habitually develops along waterways - rivers, lakes, oceans - to provide life and offering inexpensive routes of transport and trade.

- Egypt and Nile, India and Ganges, Italy and the Tiber/Arno/Po, France and the Rhone.
For 2000 years the Mediterranean hosted the battles of the “white man's ascendancy.”

The airplane neutralizes some advantage of waterways, allowing inland countries (Russia, China, Brazil) to develop.

Outside forces like climate no longer control...

**The Lessons of History Summary 2: Biology and History**

The laws of biology are the lessons of history. As animals, we are subject to the same forces as all other living beings - the trials of evolution, the struggle for survival and existence.

All the history and achievements of humans are humbly just a part of the history of life.

If some people seem to supersede biology and are no longer subject to the trials of survival, it's because they're protected by their group; the group itself must endure and survive, like individual organisms. (Shortform example: within a society, the wealthy may have a privileged position that places them above the normal struggles of day-to-day survival. But if the society they belong to crumbles, as in a war, the position of the privileged itself crumbles.)

Life has three forces that determine the behavior.

1: **Life is Competition**

Animals compete to survive. In nature, animals eat one another without a second thought. In civilization, humans consume each other by due process of law.

Cooperation is real, but serves mainly to enhance competition with other groups (whether it's our family, church, political party, race, or nation).

Our societies are individuals multiplied to a massive scale. They conduct along human nature as individuals do, on a larger scale. They multiply our good and evil on a scale of millions. War is like one animal eating another, on a national scale.

2: **Life is Selection**

Some organisms succeed and some fail. Some individuals are better equipped than others to survive. This is the natural product of biological variation, which is necessary for evolution and natural selection.

Inequality is magnified as civilization becomes more complex. New inventions are seized by the able individuals to make themselves stronger, while making the weak weaker. (Shortform note: consider the disparities of wealth created by a small minority of people who harnessed the technology of industrialization in the 1800s and the power of computing in present day.)

**Freedom and equality are diametric opposites. When one wins, the other disappears.** If people are given...

**The Lessons of History Summary 3: Race and History**

Western history has been biased toward the success of the white man.

- 1800s French elitist Gobineau believed that a civilization's success depended on the quality of the race.
  - He stressed that environmental advantages cannot explain the rise of civilization, since similar soil-fertilizing rivers that watered Egypt produced no civilization in North America.
  - He saw degeneration of civilization when intermarriage with the conquered race.
  - He also believed in a superior Aryan race.

- American Madison Grant confined achievements to a branch of Aryans he called "Nordics" - Scandinavians, Baltic Germans, Anglo-Saxon Americans
He believed these northern tribes swooped down South and conquered, invading India and setting the caste system to prevent intermarriage; creating the Athenians and Romans of the Republic; and conquering England, France, Italy.

He bemoaned the thinning of Nordic stock through wars and higher birth rate of Alpine and Mediterranean peoples, though he credited the Mediterranean race with superior intellectual and artistic attainments.

History is Color-Blind
The Durants reject all this in Lessons of History - “history is color-blind” and can develop civilization under any skin, given a favorable environment. Ancient Chinese, Egyptian, Rome civilizations counter the notion of Aryan...

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This is the best summary of The Lessons of History I've ever read. I learned all the main points in just 20 minutes.

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The Lessons of History Summary 4: Character and History

Man's character sets the character of groups and nations.

Human nature includes both positive and negative, balancing action vs inaction; fight vs flight; acquisition vs avoidance; association vs privacy; mating vs refusal; parental care vs filial dependence.

Has human nature changed? The historian authors say no - history shows that humans have conducted themselves the same way, time and time again, throughout thousands of years. The means of exercising human nature have changed; the motives remain the same.

Social and Cultural Changes

If people have developed, over time, it has been social and cultural evolution rather than biological (which acts on a much longer timescale). Social behavior and culture are transmitted to the next generation by imitation, custom, or education.

Culture acts as a stabilizing force, limiting massive upheavals in human conduct. If a culture has persisted to today, then it has been selected through “centuries of experiment in the laboratory of history.” Be cautious if you reject the culture or institutions of your society, for you reject the inherited wisdom of tens of generations.

Therefore, new ideas may be inferior to the status quo, and are not worth adopting by pure novelty. They must be superior to what has come before. New ideas deserve to be criticized and opposed, to be put through trials. If these new ideas survive, then they are allowed to affect the human race.

Therefore, the conservative who is inert and rejects change contributes as much as the radical who proposes change. Both...

The Lessons of History Summary 5: Morals and History

Morals are the rules by which a society exhorts its members to behave.

Moral codes look superficially different between societies and across history, but they are quite universal and necessary.

How Morals Change

Morals change with the times and economic engine, from hunting to agriculture to industry. The morals reflect what is needed for the individual to survive in the society, and for the society to survive in the greater world.
Morals in the Hunting Era

* Anything that promoted survival was paramount, including fighting and killing.
* Gluttony during the rare feast allowed storage of energy for scarcer times.
* Continuous reproduction was important to make up for high death rates.
* Many men may die on the hunt, and so some men took multiple women, and every man was expected to help women to frequent pregnancy.
* Loyalty to the tribe and wariness of outsiders promoted tribe survival.
* These base, almost primitive instincts may persist to today and appear as human vices.

Morals in the Agriculture Era

* The means of survival shifted, and so the morals shifted. Hard work became more vital than bravery. Regularity was valued above violence, peace above war.
* The family was the unit of production, with the father at the helm.
* Children were economic assets; birth control was made immoral, a rule that became codified in culture and custom.
* Males were trained in farming from childhood, and became ready at 15 to set off on his own.
* Unlike in the hunting era, both genders survived equally. Therefore, monogamy could be practiced stably. Female chastity became important to increase the chance of finding a valued suitor and to avoid unsupported motherhood.

Morals in the Industrial Era

* The means of survival shifted, and so the morals shifted. Unlike the communal/familial structure in agriculture, people worked as individuals and were individually paid.
* With work no longer dependent on pure physical strength, females entered the workforce.
* Families separated, with individuals moving away to cluster...

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The Lessons of History Summary 6: Religion and History

Even the agnostic historian has to acknowledge that religion has functioned and been seemingly indispensable in every land and age. The authors note that our society is exceptional in history for maintaining moral conduct without the ubiquitous force of religion. Before our time, there is no significant example of a stable society without religion.

Religion has enabled stability by elevating agreements between humans to rigid promises to God.

Religion has provided hope for billions of people - even the unhappy, the suffering, the bereaved, the old enjoy “supernatural comforts” more soothing than any material benefit.

Said Napoleon, religion kept the poor from murdering the rich. For many, hope and faith may be the only thing preventing despair. Destroy that hope, and you risk triggering class war.

Mankind seems to desire a religion rich in mythology, mystery, and miracle.

The Rise and Fall of Religion

In the earliest formation of religion, gods seem to have been created to explain natural events (earth, water, winds, sky), without a clear moral purpose. Spurred by fear of the vagaries of the natural world, religion became the worship of natural forces.

Gradually, religion included moral prescriptions for human behavior that were handed down by gods. Religion provided general social stability, providing paths for conflict resolution through courts and softening penalties exacted by barbarian law.

In so doing, religion became a useful ally/servant of the state.
Yahveh gave the 10 commandments to Moses; Thoth gave law to Menes in Egypt; Shamash gave Hammurabi a code for Babylonia.

Religion was used to justify the position of rulers (as in pharaohs and kings) - setting up clear perverse incentives.

Religion always tried to maintain clear precedence over the state, however, claiming a super-national court to which all rulers were morally responsible.

But as with all humans, religious leaders can be weak, leading to a variety of abuses of power:

Religion was used to justify the Inquisition, holy wars, and the...

The Lessons of History Summary 7: Economics and History

Much of history can be interpreted sensibly through the economics lens, as a contest among individuals, groups, and states vying for resources and economic power.

Consider that it was economic ambition that launched a thousand ships, not Helen's face.

The Crusades were attempts to capture trade routes to the East. In turn, America was discovered as a result of the failure of the Crusades.

Not all activities are primarily economically motivated - like the teachings of Buddha or the nationalistic fervor of Hitler's troops. The motives of leaders may be economic, but the passions of the masses may not be.

But in some cases, military might may cause rather than result from economic operations, like the Bolshevik revolution, or army coups in South American history, or the Mongol conquest of Asia.

Money is vital in shaping the direction of history. “The men who can manage men manage the men who can manage only things, and the men who can manage money manage all.”

In history, the bankers rise to lead the economic hierarchy, financing wars and popes, sparking revolutions.

Profit Motive

The individual profit motive is vital to spurring productivity. The profit motive sparks the spirit of competition and inventiveness, in a way that works without excessive monitoring, and scales well across an entire growing population.

Every successful economic system must eventually rely on profit incentive. Alternatives like slavery, governmental force, or ideology ultimately prove too unproductive or too unsuccessful to compete against incentive-driven systems.

Inequality and Redistribution

The concentration of wealth is a natural result of the concentration of ability.

As we discussed in the section on biology, some individuals are better equipped than others to survive. This is the natural product of biological variation, which in turn is necessary for evolution and natural selection. And the complexity of civilization magnifies this difference, allowing the exceptional few to wield tools that further enrich themselves.

In a...

The Lessons of History Summary 8: Socialism and History

Nothing instills the spirit of competition and inventiveness and exhaustive labor like capitalism and self-interest do.

Yet elements of socialism have recurred throughout history. These include state control of commerce, wide government...
employment, price controls, welfare, progressive taxation, redistribution of wealth, and large public works to reduce unemployment.

- Examples include Sumeria in 2100BC; Egypt under the Ptolemies (300BC); Rome under Diocletian (301AD); China in 140BC and in 1068 (Wang An-shih); the Incas until the 1500s.

Socialism is especially palatable under threat of security. When external danger mounts, people are willing to forsake internal liberty.

- In Diocletian Rome, the threat of barbarians spurred the society to subsume individual liberty to collective liberty.
- In Communist Russia, the fall of the disgraced Czarist government led to internal disorder and threat of external attack, allowing a socialist system to take hold.

Socialist institutions are commonly overturned when:

- the authorities become corrupt, no longer returning taxes to...

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The Lessons of History Summary 9: Government and History

Durant believes that the first requirement of freedom is its own limitation - absolute freedom would cause chaos, and the extinction of freedom itself. For the sake of stability, order needs to be established, and that is the role of an organized central government.

The Natural Progression of Government

In his idea of “five regimes,” Plato saw a natural progression of government from monarchy to aristocracy to democracy to tyranny:
Monarchy is possibly the most natural form of government, descending from the father of the family or the chieftain of a tribe from earlier human societies. However since succession is often hereditary, leaders become prone to incompetence, laziness, and excess. A saner alternative is more distributed responsibility, like:

Aristocracy, where the elite hold power and train their offspring to rise to governance. This provides meaningful stability in morals and culture. But like monarchy, aristocracy is prone to corruption and hedonism. Hence the masses (stirred partly by rich, non-aristocratic merchants who feel constrained) overthrow the aristocracy, leading to:

Democracy, with greater individual liberty than all the other forms. There is greater freedom, and morals weaken, the customs of old are washed away. Wealth inequality intensifies as a consequence of unequal concentration of inability. If uncontrolled, the civil strife between the rich and poor erupts, and opens an opportunity for:

Tyranny, where an authoritarian leader promises to solve the problems.

Such was the progression in Greece:

- Beginning with aristocracy in Pericles (460-430BC). With the defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the demos or lower class rose to power.
- Civil strife between oligarchs and democrats led to assassinations. Plato condemned the violence, moral decadence, and love of money stirred by democracy.
- The gap between rich and poor widened. The rich flaunted their wealth, the poor schemed to redistribute through legislation, taxation, and sometimes murder of creditors and the rich. The rich in turn entrenched...

The Lessons of History Summary 10: History and War

War is a constant in history, there being only 268 years of no war in 3421 years of history.

War occurs for the same reason individuals fight - to compete for more resources and power, for pride, and to survive under threat. Peace is accomplished only through acknowledged supremacy or equal power.

- “The Ten Commandments must be silent when self-preservation is at stake.”

The state inherits the will of the individual, without the individual's normal boundaries. The individual is constrained by morals and laws, because the state guarantees him basic protection in exchange for his submission. But the state is unfettered, either because it is strong enough to defy interference with its will, or because there is no superstate to offer it protection.

Nationalism gives added force in diplomacy and war.

- Improving communication and means of indoctrination made nationalism far more effective and pervasive than centuries past, involving civilians and combatants.

Philosophers will wax about pacifism, but generals believe that war is necessary and, in the military interpretation of history, the final arbiter.

- What would have happened to our heritage if not protected against Mongol invasions?
- A society that enjoys a long peace may atrophy its martial muscles, making it susceptible to outside attack.

The Threat of Communism

The book was written in the 1970s, and the authors consider what to do about communism, if it threatens to engulf Asia, Africa, and South America.

Russia industrialized rapidly under a model of state control. Young nations in developing areas want to imitate this, and so are eager to replicate its practices.

Should America, at the height of its power, withdraw and let hostile states encroach; or should it consider what future generations wish they had done? Should it resist once, fight on foreign soil, and make the necessary...
The Lessons of History Summary 11: Growth and Decay

The authors define civilization as “social order promoting cultural development.” Social order is granted by political order of custom, laws, and morals, and economic order through production and trade.

Looking back at history, all civilizations have ended. What are the patterns of civilization's growth and decay?

In general, the pattern is one of coherent construction, then of individualistic deconstruction.

- Civilizations often begin as a conquest of one group by another, and the spreading of the victor's modus operandi.
- Growth occurs as a result of taking advantage of a physical boon (land, water); directing people to productive work; to internal tension between the rulers and the ruled; of meeting external challenges (human or natural) and overcoming them.
- Decay occurs as a failure of political or intellectual leaders to meet new challenges - natural disaster, improper uses of resources, economic changes, energy-sapping taxation, class war, external threat, or moral upheaval through education leading to secularism.
- The final blow may come from a major defeat in war.

On internal strife, the authors have an elitist perspective: as a natural result of inequality, society may be divided between a cultured minority and a majority of people unable to adopt the standards of “excellence and taste.” As this majority grows, it drags down the minority - its judgment and thoughts pollute upward, and the society undergoes a mass “barbarization.” This is the price that the minority pays for its unequal control of...

The Lessons of History Summary 12: Is Progress Real?

If history repeats itself endlessly, then is humanity actually making progress?

It depends on how you define progress.

- Cultural: Is Shakespeare better than Aeschylus? Nietzsche over Confucius?
- Religion: As we become more secular, have we developed a natural ethic strong enough to keep us from our baser instincts? Or will chaos and confusion prod us back to the order of religion?

The authors have no strong conclusion. History has so many examples and counterexamples that almost any conclusion can be drawn, depending on what lens you look through.

If progress is defined as humanity's control over the environment, there is certainly progress.

- Quality of life for the average person is way up compared to primitive times. “If undertakers are miserable, progress is real.”

If progress is defined as increase in happiness, then there has been little progress.

- Humans will always find a way to be miserable. There is a perverse pleasure in rejecting the universe as unsatisfying and incomplete.
- We romanticize our ancestors who had to worry only about their local village. As the world's complexity increases, our perceived troubles rise in kind.

Yet human nature has seemed largely fixed. Science and technology are new means of achieving the same old ends - acquisition of goods, sex, and power.

- Science is neutral - it can kill us as readily as it will heal.
- We are...
Shortform Exercise: Reflect on History

Place your understanding of today into context.

What's an issue you thought was unique to our time, but now realize has happened throughout history?

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