5 C’s of Historical Analysis

1. CHANGE and CONTINUITY OVER TIME: (Technically, these are two C’s, but I’m only going to count them as one). Historical chronology is a distinguishing characteristic of history. Historical chronology differs from other chronologies. For example, the physical sciences include cyclical chronologies (like seasons of the year) and repeatable chronologies (experiments that are reproducible). Historical chronology is neither cyclical nor repeatable. Certainly there are patterns that reappear across time and space, but while it might rhyme, the past does not repeat itself (Mark Twain quote). **In this category of analysis, historians seek to understand how and why things change or stay the same over time.** What changed? What stayed the same? Who benefitted from the change, and why? Who did not benefit from the change, and why?

2. CONTEXT: Context is “everything else that was going on at the time.” Context helps to view the event or person in a **broader perspective** that, well, gives context and a deeper meaning to our understanding of something in the past. **Context helps us to “see the past” through the eyes of the people who lived it.** Analyzing historical context can open a door to understanding both what all humanity shares in common and the many ways in which we are different. It brings us closest to the real lives of real people in the past. What did their world look like? How did they spend their days and nights? Who was in their family and what were they expected to do? What motivated them to act in the ways they did? **Context** can give us a window into the motivations that affected choices and actions. **Context** can also help us to avoid understanding complicated events in isolation, without taking into account what else was going on at the time.

3. CAUSALITY: Causality is how one person, event, or process influences another (or many other) person, event, or process. Causality is the intersection of individuals and conditions. There are multiple layers, many factors that influence outcomes. Causality helps to identify these multiple layers. **Causality can have immediate and underlying causes – simultaneously.** It is also important to distinguish between **CAUSES** and **EFFECTS** when discussing causality. Who or what made change happen? Who supported change? Who did not support change? What were the effects? Which effects were intentional? Which effects were unintentional?

4. CONTINGENCY: Understanding **contingency** is absolutely essential to understanding history as an academic discipline! Our society and education system, as a rule, conditions people to see history as a boring movie that they have seen a thousand times and already know the boring ending to. The outcome was NOT inevitable, however. The outcome was contingent upon **unpredictable and unforeseen** events. Change a prior condition and the outcome could have been completely different! In other words, **contingency helps us to understand that just because things happen, does not mean they HAD to happen that way.** Contingency helps us to identify **KEY TURNING POINTS** in our history, decisions, actions, and events that fundamentally altered the course of history. **Contingency helps us to disempower destructive myths of racial or national superiority or inferiority.** **Contingency is the opposite of teleological thinking.**

5. COMPLEXITY: The past was more than simply good or bad; but it was not too complicated for us to try to understand. Complexity in historical analysis can be broken into **three areas:** moral (how did people judge what was right or wrong at the time), epistemological (how did people know what they thought they knew at the time), and causal (how multi-layered and complicated factors can combine to cause an outcome).