

# A Study of History

---

*A Study of History* is a 12-volume universal history by the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, published in 1934–61. It received enormous popular attention but according to historian Richard J. Evans, "enjoyed only a brief vogue before disappearing into the obscurity in which it has languished."<sup>[1]</sup> Toynbee's goal was to trace the development and decay of 19 world civilizations in the historical record, applying his model to each of these civilizations, detailing the stages through which they all pass: genesis, growth, time of troubles, universal state, and disintegration.

The 19 major civilizations, as Toynbee sees them, are: Egyptian, Andean, Sinic, Minoan, Sumerian, Mayan, Indic, Hittite, Hellenic, Western, Orthodox Christian (Russia), Far Eastern, Orthodox Christian (main body), Persian, Arabic, Hindu, Mexican, Yucatec, and Babylonian. There are four "abortive civilizations" (Abortive Far Western Christian, Abortive Far Eastern Christian, Abortive Scandinavian, Abortive Syriac) and five "arrested civilizations" (Polynesian, Eskimo, Nomadic, Ottoman, Spartan), for a total of 28.

## Contents

---

### Titles of the volumes

#### Genesis and Growth

#### Breakdown and Disintegration

#### Results of the breakdown

Universal state

Universal church

#### Predictions

#### List of civilizations

#### Criticism

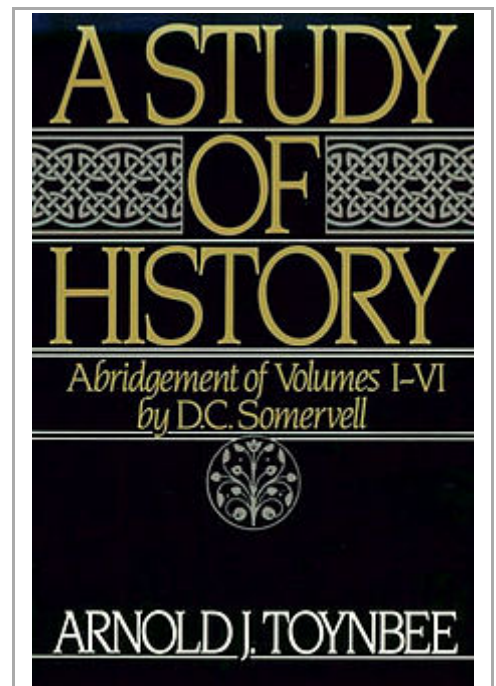
Jews as a "fossil society"

#### References

#### Further reading

#### External links

## A Study of History



Cover of D. C. Somervell's abridgement of *A Study of History*

<b>Author</b>	Arnold J. Toynbee
<b>Country</b>	United Kingdom
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Subject</b>	World history
<b>Published</b>	1934–61

## Titles of the volumes

---

The 12-volume work contains more than 3 million words and about 7,000 pages, plus 412 pages of indices.<sup>[2]</sup>

- Publication of *A Study of History*<sup>[3]</sup>
  - Vol I: *Introduction: The Geneses of Civilizations*, part one (Oxford University Press, 1934)
  - Vol II: *The Geneses of Civilizations*, part two (Oxford University Press, 1934)
  - Vol III: *The Growths of Civilizations* (Oxford University Press, 1934)
  - Vol IV: *The Breakdowns of Civilizations* (Oxford University Press, 1939)
  - Vol V: *The Disintegrations of Civilizations*, part one (Oxford University Press, 1939)
  - Vol VI: *The Disintegrations of Civilizations*, part two (Oxford University Press, 1939)
  - Vol VII: *Universal States; Universal Churches* (Oxford University Press, 1954) [as two volumes in paperback]
  - Vol VIII: *Heroic Ages; Contacts between Civilizations in Space (Encounters between Contemporaries)* (Oxford University Press, 1954)
  - Vol IX: *Contacts between Civilizations in Time (Renaissances); Law and Freedom in History; The Prospects of the Western Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 1954)
  - Vol X: *The Inspirations of Historians; A Note on Chronology* (Oxford University Press, 1954)
  - Vol XI: *Historical Atlas and Gazetteer* (Oxford University Press, 1959)
  - Vol XII: *Reconsiderations* (Oxford University Press, 1961)
- Abridgements by D. C. Somervell:
  - *A Study of History: Abridgement of Vols I–VI*, with a preface by Toynbee (Oxford University Press, 1946)<sup>[4]</sup>
  - *A Study of History: Abridgement of Vols VII–X* (Oxford University Press, 1957)
  - *A Study of History: Abridgement of Vols I–X in One Volume*, with new preface by Toynbee & new tables (Oxford Univ. Press, 1960)

## Genesis and Growth

---

Toynbee argues that civilizations are born out of more primitive societies, not as the result of racial or environmental factors, but as a response to *challenges*, such as hard country, new ground, blows and pressures from other civilizations, and penalization. He argues that for civilizations to be born, the challenge must be a golden mean; that excessive challenge will crush the civilization, and too little challenge will cause it to stagnate. He argues that civilizations continue to grow only when they meet one challenge only to be met by another, in a continuous cycle of "Challenge and Response". He argues that civilizations develop in different ways due to their different environments and different approaches to the challenges they face. He argues that growth is driven by "Creative Minorities": those who find solutions to the challenges, who inspire (rather than compel) others to follow their innovative lead. This is done through the "faculty of mimesis." Creative minorities find solutions to the challenges a civilization faces, while the great mass follow these solutions by imitation, solutions they otherwise would be incapable of discovering on their own.

In 1939, Toynbee wrote, "The challenge of being called upon to create a political world-order, the framework for an economic world-order ... now confronts our Modern Western society."

## Breakdown and Disintegration

---

Toynbee does not see the breakdown of civilizations as caused by loss of control over the physical environment, by loss of control over the human environment, or by attacks from outside. Rather, it comes from the deterioration of the "Creative Minority", which eventually ceases to be creative and degenerates into merely a "Dominant Minority".

He argues that creative minorities deteriorate due to a worship of their "former self," by which they become prideful and fail adequately to address the next challenge they face.

## Results of the breakdown

---

The final breakdown results in "positive acts of creation;" the dominant minority seeks to create a Universal state to preserve its power and influence, and the internal proletariat seeks to create a Universal church to preserve its spiritual values and cultural norms.

### Universal state

He argues that the ultimate sign a civilization has broken down is when the dominant minority forms a "universal state", which stifles political creativity within the existing social order. The classic example of this is the Roman Empire, though many other imperial regimes are cited as examples. Toynbee writes:

"First the Dominant Minority attempts to hold by force—against all right and reason—a position of inherited privilege which it has ceased to merit; and then the Proletariat repays injustice with resentment, fear with hate, and violence with violence when it executes its acts of secession. Yet the whole movement ends in positive acts of creation—and this on the part of all the actors in the tragedy of disintegration. The Dominant Minority creates a universal state, the Internal Proletariat a universal church, and the External Proletariat a bevy of barbarian war-bands."

### Universal church

Toynbee developed his concept of an "internal proletariat" and an "external proletariat" to describe quite different opposition groups within and outside the frontiers of a civilization. These groups, however, find themselves bound to the fate of the civilization.<sup>[5]</sup> During its decline and disintegration, they are increasingly disenfranchised or alienated, and thus lose their immediate sense of loyalty or of obligation. Nonetheless an "internal proletariat," untrusting of the dominant minority, may form a "universal church" which survives the civilization's demise, co-opting the useful structures such as marriage laws of the earlier time while creating a new philosophical or religious pattern for the next stage of history.<sup>[6]</sup>

Before the process of disintegration, the dominant minority had held the internal proletariat in subjugation within the confines of the civilization, causing these oppressed to grow bitter. The external proletariat, living outside the civilization in poverty and chaos, grows envious. Then, in the social stress resulting from the failure of the civilization, the bitterness and envy increase markedly.

Toynbee argues that as civilizations decay, there is a "schism" within the society. In this environment of discord, people resort to archaism (idealization of the past), futurism (idealization of the future), detachment (removal of oneself from the realities of a decaying world), and transcendence (meeting the challenges of the decaying civilization with new insight, e.g., by following a new religion). From among members of an "internal proletariat" who transcend the social decay a "church" may arise. Such an

association would contain new and stronger spiritual insights, around which a subsequent civilization may begin to form. Toynbee here uses the word "church" in a general sense, e.g., to refer to a collective spiritual bond found in common worship, or the unity found in an agreed social order.

## Predictions

It remains to be seen what will come of the four remaining civilizations of the 21st century: Western civilization, Islamic society, Hindu society, and the Far East. Toynbee argues two possibilities: they might all merge with Western Civilization, or Western civilization might develop a 'Universal State' after its 'Time of Troubles', decay, and die.

## List of civilizations

The following table lists the 23 civilizations identified by Toynbee in vol. VII. This table does not include what Toynbee terms primitive societies, arrested civilizations, or abortive civilizations. Civilizations are shown in **boldface**. Toynbee's "Universal Churches" are written in *italic* and are chronologically located between second- and third- generation civilizations, as is described in volume VII.

1st Generation	2nd Generation	Universal Church	3rd Generation
<b>Minoan</b>	<b>Hellenic</b> (Greek and Roman)	<i>Christian</i>	<b>Western; Orthodox-Russian; Orthodox-Byzantine</b>
	<b>Syriac Society</b> (Ancient Israel, Phoenicia etc.)	<i>Islam</i>	<b>Islamic</b> (at early stages divided into <b>Iranian</b> and <b>Arabic</b> , civilizations, which later were unified)
<b>Shang</b>	<b>Sinic</b> (see also <u>Han Dynasty</u> )	<i>Mahayana (Buddhism)</i>	<b>Chinese; Japanese-Korean</b> (" <u>Far Eastern</u> ")
<b>Indus</b>	<b>Indic</b>	<i>Hinduism</i>	<b>Hindu</b>
<b>Egyptiac</b>		-	-
<b>Sumeric</b>	<b>Hittite; Babylonian</b>	-	-
<b>Andean; Mayan; Yucatec; Mexican</b>		-	-

## Criticism

The social scientist Ashley Montagu assembled 29 other historians' articles to form a symposium on Toynbee's *A Study of History*, published as *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and Reviews* (1956 Cloth ed.). Boston: Extending Horizons Books, Porter Sargent Publishers. ISBN 0-87558-026-2. The book includes three of Toynbee's own essays: "What I am Trying to Do" (originally published in *International Affairs* vol. 31, 1955); *What the Book is For: How the Book Took Shape* (a pamphlet written upon completion of the final volumes of *A Study of History*) and a comment written in response to the articles by Edward Fiess and Pieter Geyl (originally published in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 16, 1955.)

David Wilkinson suggests that there is an even larger unit than civilisation. Using the ideas drawn from "World Systems Theory" he suggests that since at least 1500 BC that there was a connection established between a number of formerly separate civilisations to form a single interacting "Central Civilisation", which expanded to include formerly separate civilisations such as India, the Far East, and eventually Western Europe and the Americas into a single "World System".<sup>[7]</sup> In some ways, it resembles what William H. McNeill calls the "Closure of the Eurasian Ecumene, 500 B.C.-200 A.D."<sup>[8]</sup>

After 1960, Toynbee's ideas faded both in academia and the media, to the point of seldom being cited today.<sup>[9][10]</sup>

## Jews as a "fossil society"

Volume 1 of the book, written in the 1930s, contains a discussion of Jewish culture which begins with the sentence "There remains the case where victims of religious discrimination represent an extinct society which only survives as a fossil. .... by far the most notable is one of the fossil remnants of the Syriac Society, the Jews."<sup>[11]</sup> That sentence has been the subject of controversy, and some reviewers have interpreted the line as antisemitic (notably after 1945).<sup>[12][13][14][15][16]</sup> In later printings, a footnote was appended which read "Mr. Toynbee wrote this part of the book before the Nazi persecution of the Jews opened a new and terrible chapter of the story...". The subject is extensively debated with input from critics in Vol XII, *Reconsiderations*, published in 1961.

## References

---

1. Richard J. Evans (2000). *In Defense of History* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=hbbdCQAAQBAJ&pg=PA47>). p. 47.
2. Brander, Bruce G. (1998). *Staring into Chaos* (<https://archive.org/details/staringintochaos00bran/page/168>). Dallas, Texas: Spence Publishing Company. p. 168 (<https://archive.org/details/staringintochaos00bran/page/168>). ISBN 978-0-9653208-5-6.
3. The Table of Contents for all the volumes is presented at this website *A Study of History* ([http://nobsword.blogspot.com/1993\\_10\\_17\\_nobsword\\_archive.html](http://nobsword.blogspot.com/1993_10_17_nobsword_archive.html)) some volumes being given in greater detail than others. Selected portions of the text are also provided, as keyed to the Table of Contents.
4. This first abridgement by Somervell has been translated into Arabic, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Gujarati, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Serbo-Croat, Spanish, Swedish, and Urdu. William H. McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee. A life* (Oxford University, 1989), text at 285, note 5 [337].
5. Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (Oxford University 1934–1961), 12 volumes, in volume V *The Disintegration of Civilizations (Part One)* (Oxford University 1939), at 58–194 (internal proletariats), and at 194–337 (external proletariats).
6. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (1934–1961), e.g., in volume VII *Universal States, Universal Churches* (Oxford University 1954), at 70–76, and in volume VIII *Contacts between Civilizations in Space* (Oxford University 1954) at 82–84 (referring to Islam, Christianity, Mahayana Buddhism, and Hinduism).
7. Wilkinson, David (Fall 1987). "Central Civilization" (<https://ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/CCR/article/view/12262/12162>). *Comparative Civilizations Review*. 17. pp. 31–59.
8. McNeill, William H. (2009). *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* ([https://books.google.com/books?id=RSPzrsAvoC&newbks=1&newbks\\_redir=0&lpg=PP1&pg=PA295](https://books.google.com/books?id=RSPzrsAvoC&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&lpg=PP1&pg=PA295)) (3rd ed.). University of Chicago Press. pp. 295–359. ISBN 0-226-56141-0. Retrieved 10 December 2019.

9. McIntire, C. T.; Perry, Marvin, eds. (1989). *Toynbee: Reappraisals*. University of Toronto Press.
10. Perry, Marvin (1996). *Arnold Toynbee and the Western Tradition*. New York: Peter Lang. ISBN 978-0820426716.
11. *A Study of History*, Volume 1, Section VII, at 135–139.
12. Franz Borkenau, "Toynbee's Judgment of the Jews: Where the Historian Misread History", *Commentary* (May 1955).
13. Eliezer Berkovits, *Judaism: Fossil or Ferment?* (Philosophical Library, 1956).
14. Nathan Rotenstreich, "The Revival of the Fossil Remnant: Or Toynbee and Jewish Nationalism", *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July 1962), pp. 131–143.
15. Abba Solomon Eban, "The Toynbee heresy: address delivered at the Israel", in *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and reviews*, ed. by Ashley Montagu (Porter Sargent, 1956).
16. Oskar K. Rabinowicz, *Arnold Toynbee on Judaism and Zionism: A Critique* (W.H. Allen, 1974).

## Further reading

---

- Costello, Paul. *World Historians and Their Goals: Twentieth-Century Answers to Modernism* (1993). Compares Toynbee with H. G. Wells, Oswald Spengler, Pitirim Sorokin, Christopher Dawson, Lewis Mumford, and William H. McNeill
- Hutton, Alexander. "'A belated return for Christ?': the reception of Arnold J. Toynbee's *A Study of History* in a British context, 1934–1961." *European Review of History: Revue europeenne d'histoire* 21.3 (2014): 405-424.
- Lang, Michael. "Globalization and Global History in Toynbee," *Journal of World History* 22#4 Dec 2011 pp. 747–783 in project MUSE ([http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal\\_of\\_world\\_history/v022/22.4.lang.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_world_history/v022/22.4.lang.html))
- McIntire, C. T. and Marvin Perry, eds. *Toynbee: Reappraisals* (1989) 254pp
- McNeill, William H. *Arnold J. Toynbee: a life* (Oxford UP, 1989). The standard scholarly biography.
- Montagu, Ashley M. F., ed. *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and Reviews* (1956) online edition (<https://www.questia.com/read/5990202?title=Toynbee%20and%20History%3a%20Critical%20Essays%20and%20Reviews>)
- Toynbee, Arnold J. *A Study of History* abridged edition by D. C. Somervell (2 vol 1947); 617pp online edition of vol 1, covering vol 1–6 of the original (<https://www.questia.com/read/98819969?title=A%20Study%20of%20History%20-%20Vol.%201>); *A Study of History* online edition ([http://nobsword.blogspot.com/1993\\_10\\_17\\_nobsword\\_archive.html](http://nobsword.blogspot.com/1993_10_17_nobsword_archive.html))

## External links

---

- *A Study of History* ([https://web.archive.org/web/20070616032525/http://nobsword.blogspot.com/1993\\_10\\_17\\_nobsword\\_archive.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20070616032525/http://nobsword.blogspot.com/1993_10_17_nobsword_archive.html))
- <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.12118/page/n5> (first volume of *A Study of History*)

---

Retrieved from "[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A\\_Study\\_of\\_History&oldid=931490881](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A_Study_of_History&oldid=931490881)"

---

This page was last edited on 19 December 2019, at 05:18 (UTC).

Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#); additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the [Wikimedia](#)

Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization.