

# THE OTTOMANS

**By Bram Hubbell**

From roughly 1300 to 1900, the Ottoman Empire ruled the territory around the Eastern Mediterranean. Over the course of these six centuries, Ottoman rule shaped how we think about the Middle East and Southeastern Europe as regions. The Ottomans tolerated ethnic and religious differences, rather than imposing a more unified identity on their subjects, and this contributed to the large amount of religious diversity across the region. It was common to find multiple religions being practiced and different languages being spoken in many Ottoman cities. As the empire expanded well into the seventeenth century, it frequently challenged smaller European states. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the balance of power between the Ottomans and their European neighbors shifted. During the last fifty years of the Ottoman Empire, the government frequently found itself trying to balance a legacy of diversity with the competing trends of political centralization and nationalism that affected states around the world in the late nineteenth century.

In November 1922, the Turkish Grand National Assembly formally abolished the Ottoman Empire. Despite having survived for more than 600 years, the empire was derisively referred to by many European diplomats in the late nineteenth century as "the sick man of Europe," as they debated what to do about the "Eastern Question." While it is easy to dismiss the last fifty years of the Ottoman Empire as a period of chaos and instability that led to collapse, this Eurocentric view obscures the important role the Ottomans played in shaping ideas about identity and politics in the Middle East today.

During the middle of the nineteenth century,

## Chapter Glossary

**Osmanlilik/Ottomanism:** nineteenth century nationalist movement that attempted to foster an ethnically diverse identity for the inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire

**Pan-Islamism:** late nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalist movement that attempted to link all Muslims regardless of ethnicity.

**Tanzimat:** literally means reorganization; series of political reforms in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1876 that attempted to modernize the state.

**Transjordan:** the region on the eastern side of the Jordan River; roughly similar to the present day state of Jordan.

**Waqf:** an endowment made by a Muslim to a charitable cause; frequently used to establish mosques and schools in the Muslim world.

**Young Turks:** Group of early twentieth century Turkish nationalists who sought to reform the Ottoman Empire and emphasize a more secular and Turkish identity in place of the previously more Islamic identity.

numerous individuals across the Ottoman Empire debated, and sometimes enacted, their visions of how to save it. Some officials attempted to implement the **Tanzimat** to reform the aging state, while others offered visions of a secular, multi-ethnic empire or struggled for ways to reconcile Islamic legacies with Western science and philosophy. These competing visions of modernization culminated in the implementation of the first Ottoman constitution in 1876, which was primarily written by the Ottoman statesman Midhat Pasha. He introduced a parliamentary system and elections. He also personally interviewed the new Sultan, Abdülhamid II (r.1876 - 1909), to ensure his willingness to cooperate with the new constitution.



A photograph of a young Abdülhamid II taken in London in 1867.

Despite Midhat Pasha's approval, Sultan Abdülhamid II took advantage of the chaos in the wake of a lost war with the Russians (1877-1878) to suspend the constitution and implement his own vision for the reform and modernization of the empire. The first step was to cultivate more diplomatic solutions to disputes with European powers over territory. Abdülhamid II willingly ceded control of territories around the edges of the Empire to the British, French, and Russians rather than go to war with them. Instead of relying on an earlier form of **Osmanlilik** (**Ottomanism** or Ottoman nationalism), Abdülhamid II cultivated a more neo-patriarchal and Islamic *Osmanlilik*. Although he could not rid himself of the older government officials known as the Sublime Porte, Abdülhamid II encouraged a new bureaucracy that was more personally loyal to him rather than to the state itself. Using this bureaucracy, Abdülhamid II was able to assert greater control over much of the empire. Government officials asserted control in regions that were previously governed in name only, such as the **Transjordan**, where Ottoman officials developed the town of Salt as a key administrative center.

Abdülhamid II also encouraged a more Islamic identity for the subjects of the Ottoman Empire. For much of the nineteenth century, Ottoman officials had emphasized a more secular vision of the state in an attempt to unify the religiously and ethnically diverse population. As the Ottomans lost control of many of the European provinces, the proportion of Muslims in the Empire increased. Sultan Abdülhamid II began to emphasize his position as Caliph and promoted a more distinctly Islamic vision of *Osmanlilik*. He encouraged official versions of the Qur'an to be printed and distributed

throughout the Empire and beyond. Abdülhamid's decision to build the Hijaz railway linking the holy cities of Mecca and Medina to the rest of the Empire's railways was partially designed to facilitate the Hajj for millions of Muslims. To pay for this ambitious undertaking, Abdülhamid set up the railway as a **waqf**, a common form of a religious trust or endowment, and encouraged Muslims across the Empire and around the world to publicly support and fund the railroad. This appeal to Muslims beyond the borders of the Empire reflects Abdülhamid's cultivation of **Pan-Islamism** to unify the world's Muslims and link them to the Ottoman state.

Although Abdülhamid's reign strengthened the state, his vision of an ethnically diverse, but Islamic state was challenged by a broad coalition of Arabs, Albanians, Turkish nationalists, and educated bureaucrats. By 1905, a core group of ardent Turkish nationalists began to distinguish themselves from the rest of the opposition. This group referred to themselves as the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). It was a group of medical students who initially formed the CUP, and they promoted an exclusivist vision of "Turkish nationalism based on race." As the CUP spread, it also gained significant influence among Turkish officers in the Ottoman military. Working with a wide variety of opponents to Abdülhamid II, the CUP, or **Young Turks** as they are frequently known, successfully revolted against the government in July 1908. The revolutionaries presented themselves to the peoples of the Empire and to the world as liberal and secular reformers, who were overthrowing the tyranny of Abdülhamid II. The main slogan for the revolution was "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and Justice," which suggested an application of the ideals of the French Revolution to the Ottoman Empire.

Despite the liberal and inclusive rhetoric and the restoration of the Ottoman Constitution of 1876, the revolution of the Young Turks was more of a military coup intended to restrict the influence of the Sultan and promote a more Turkish and less Islamic vision of the Empire. In the first year after the revolution, the CUP's leadership seemed to honor the rhetoric of the revolution as it oversaw the restoration of the Ottoman parliament and relatively open elections. But due to a number of internal and external challenges beginning in 1909, the CUP gradually implemented a form of one party authoritarian rule. Instead of having disposed of Abdülhamid's autocratic and centralized



Young Turk revolutionaries in Istanbul in 1909.

state, the CUP leadership simply placed itself at the levers of power within the Ottoman state. Responding to widespread strikes throughout the Empire, the CUP pushed through parliament in 1909 the Law of Strikes, which banned strikes and even abolished unions in public services. Unwilling to completely go against the principles of the 1908 revolution, the CUP leadership also tried to encourage support for the government through heavy-handed use of the press.

Between 1911 and 1913, the CUP-controlled government also lost successive wars. During the Tripolitan War (modern day Libya), the CUP lost control of their last North African province to the Italians. As soon as that war ended, the CUP became involved in the Balkan War, in which an alliance of Bulgarians, Greeks, Montenegrins, and Serbs conquered the last of the European provinces of the Empire. These disastrous wars saw the size of the Ottoman Empire reduced to just the capital of Istanbul, Anatolia, and the Arab provinces. These setbacks were also a departure from the relative military stability of the Abdülhamid era. Given the turmoil, three pashas, Mehmed Talaat Pasha, Ismail Enver Pasha, and Ahmed Djemal Pasha, asserted control of the CUP and the Ottoman government in 1913. In order to prevent further setbacks to the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, they pushed for the formation of an Ottoman-German alliance in August 1914. By allying themselves with Germany, the three pashas hoped to prevent any other rival European

powers from seizing control over Ottoman territories. They also ceded administrative control over southern Arabia to the British and eastern Anatolia to the Russians. The three pashas hoped that the slight reduction in the size of the state and support from a major European power would allow them more effectively to govern the empire.

## **The "Southern Front" around the Ottoman Empire was just as much a key theatre of World War I.**

Within a month of allying themselves with the Germans in the hope of avoiding further conflicts, the CUP found the Ottoman Empire being drawn into the continental war that became the World War I. Most histories of the Great War focus on the stalemate along the Western Front or the

turmoil on the Eastern Front that led to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The "Southern Front" around the Ottoman Empire was just as much a key theater of World War I, and the war itself heavily affected the Ottoman population. At least 12% of the Ottoman population died during the war (compared to 9 and 11% in Germany and France, respectively). The relatively higher death rate was a combination of soldiers' deaths as well as civilian deaths caused by crises such as the famine in Mount Lebanon and the Armenian Genocide. The intense Turkish nationalism of the CUP and the increasing fear that non-Turkish minorities could destabilize the state led the Ottoman government to force Armenians from their homes and march them to the eastern reaches of the state. During these forced marches, approximately 1.5 million Armenians died. Despite the numerical losses, the Ottoman army proved surprisingly more successful than expected. It fought on multiple fronts across the empire, including in eastern Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Levant. The most resounding success was the defeat of the British and French naval invasion at Gallipoli led by the young Turkish





army officer Mustafa Kemal, who would later become known as *Ataturk* (father of the Turks) and the founder of modern Turkey.

Even though they often fought surprisingly well, the Ottomans' opponents planned how to divide Ottoman territory. In 1916 Sharif Husayn bin Ali of Mecca launched the Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule. For three years, Arab soldiers combined with British soldiers throughout the Levant. Based on correspondence during the war between Sharif Husayn and the British High Commissioner of Egypt Henry McMahon, the British supported the formation of an independent Arab state under Husayn's leadership in much of the Ottoman Arab



#### World War I Legacies

Above: In December 1915, *The New York Times* depicts forcibly displaced Armenian refugees in Port Said, Egypt. The centennial of the Armenian genocide was commemorated in various ways throughout 2015.

Left: Today, the Gallipoli peninsula, the site of the Ottomans' victorious battle against the British and the French in 1915, is frequented by international visitors. This headstone commemorates WWI Turkish soldier Esret, son of Osman. He was born in Çanakkale (a neighboring town), and fell in battle in 1915 at the young age of 21. Photo by Laszlo Ilyes.

territories. In 1917, the British also issued the Balfour Declaration promising to support the establishment of a "Jewish homeland" in the territory of Palestine. The British, along with the French and other wartime allies, also developed multiple plans to partition Ottoman territory among themselves. The most famous example was the Sykes-Picot Treaty (1916), which would divide the Levant and Mesopotamia between the British and the French.

As German support for the Ottomans withered in the fall of 1918, the Ottomans were forced to surrender to the Allies on 30 October 1918. After the victors of the war had punished the Germans with the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919, they turned to the Ottomans. During April 1920, representatives from Britain, France, Italy, and Japan met in San Remo, Italy, to discuss the fate of the Ottoman territories. At roughly the same time, Arab diplomats and politicians were meeting in Damascus at the Pan-Syrian Congress, where they hoped to establish an independent Arab state. The competing visions of the Europeans and Arabs, along with the outstanding promise to the Zionists for a Jewish homeland, proved impossible to reconcile. In August 1920, the Allied victors imposed the Treaty of Sèvres on the Ottoman Empire. The treaty stripped the Ottomans of all their territory outside Anatolia. Much of this territory was set up as mandates under British and French control. The British gained the mandates of Iraq and Palestine, from which the mandate of Transjordan was established. The French gained the mandate of Syria, from which they carved out the Christian-dominated mandate of Lebanon along the coast. Although two of Sharif Husayn's sons were established as rulers in Iraq and Transjordan, all of these mandates were effectively colonies under British and French control.

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In Anatolia, the Ottomans would retain direct control of some territory, but the Armenians, French, Greeks, and Italians directly or indirectly controlled certain zones. While the Turkish leadership of the Ottoman state accepted the loss of territory outside Anatolia, they refused to accept the partition of what remained. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, the Turks launched the Turkish War of Independence in late 1920. By the end of 1922, Mustafa Kemal had established a significantly larger independent Turkish state. The defeated European powers recognized the situation and signed the Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923 recognizing the state of Turkey. In the process, there were significant population exchanges between Greece and Turkey. Turks living in present day Greece were forced to relocate to Turkey, and Greeks living in present day Turkey were forced to relocate to Greece. By early 1923, Mustafa Kemal was the first President of Turkey and formally abolished the Ottoman Sultanate.

Although all the political institutions of the late Ottoman Empire had been dismantled by 1923, a number of important political precedents had been established. The reign of Abdülhamid II had brought about a far more centralized and top-down state. His emphasis on Islam also encouraged

## **These poles of an Islamically-oriented state and a secular, ethnic state still dominate much debate about the vision of Middle Eastern states.**

These poles of an Islamically-oriented state and a secular, ethnic state still dominate much debate about the vision of Middle Eastern states. Even more important, the CUP's heavy reliance on the military to prop up the state and the use representative institutions more as facades to legitimize autocratic rule continue to dominate the Middle East today.

one vision of the state in which the government actively encouraged and promoted Islam in order to unite people of different ethnic backgrounds under the banner of religion. The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) continued the centralizing tendencies of Abdülhamid, but they broke away from his Islamic and multi-ethnic vision. They had encouraged a form of nationalism representing a single ethnicity and emphasized a more secular vision of the state.

## Teaching Tool

### The Ottoman Railways, 1914

On the following two pages are maps of Ottoman railways in 1914. Print them out for discussion with your students. Ask them to consider the below discussion questions.

## Discussion Questions/Essay Topic

**Directions to teacher:** The following questions can be used to either guide a student discussion or to guide students in writing an informational essay.

**Student Instructions:** Compose a well-thought-out short essay that addresses the following questions in informing your reader about the topic we have been studying. Be sure to include specific references to the text(s) that are correctly cited, proper grammar, introductory and concluding statements and transitions where appropriate.

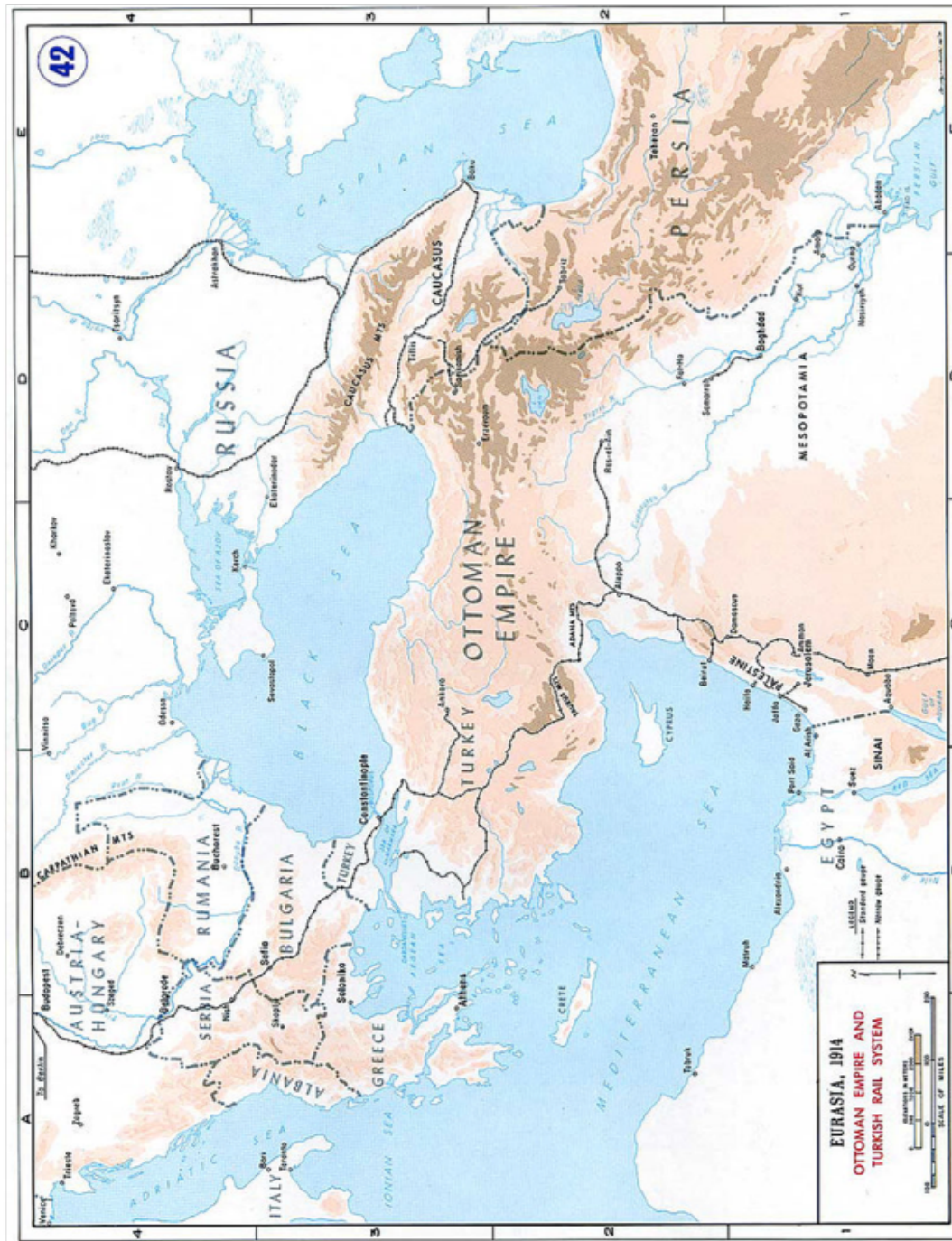
1. Which other cities are connected to the capital?
2. Which regions/cities are not connected?
3. How might the rail links between the capital of the Ottoman Empire and the rest of the empire reflect Abdulhamid's vision for the Ottoman state?
4. Why do you think the railroad in the bottom map is frequently referred to as the Hejaz railway?
5. Does the building of that railroad seem to be more influenced by political ideals or religious ideals?



## Hejaz Railway 1914



## Ottoman Empire and Turkish Rail System



Note: The capital of the empire is labeled Constantinople on this map.



## Teaching Tool

### Young Turks Revolution, 1908

Using the following postcard that celebrates the 1908 Young Turks Revolution, analyze how the Young Turks presented themselves.



Didar-i Hürriyet kurtarılıyor (la Liberté sauvée) : carte postale de 1895, saluant la constitution ottomane du 23 novembre 1876, figurant le sultan Abdul-Hamid, les différents millets de l'empire (Turcs avec les drapeaux rouges, Arabes avec les drapeaux verts, Arméniens, Grecs) et la Turquie (non voilée) se relevant de ses chaînes. L'ange symbolisant l'émancipation porte une écharpe avec les mentions : « Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité » en turc et grec.

Caption Translation: "The Saved Liberty: A post card from 1895, saluting the Ottoman constitution of November 23, 1876, shows Sultan Abdul Hamid, the different millets of the empire (Turks with the red flag, Arabs with the green flag, Armenians, Greeks) and Turkey (the unveiled woman) freeing themselves from chains. The angel symbolizes emancipation wearing a scarf that reads "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" in Turkish and Greek. "

## Discussion Questions/Essay Topic

**Directions to teacher:** The following questions can be used to either guide a student discussion or to guide students in writing an informational essay.

**Student Instructions:** Compose a well-thought-out short essay that addresses the following questions in informing your reader about the topic we have been studying. Be sure to include specific references to the text(s) that are correctly cited, proper grammar, introductory and concluding statements and transitions where appropriate.

1. How are the Young Turks dressed in this image?
2. Who do you think the woman in the center of the picture represents?
3. What does it suggest about her having been released from chains?
4. What do you think the chains represent?

### Sources and for Further Reading

Hanioğlu, M. Şükrü. *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

Rogan, Eugene. *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East*. (New York: Basic Books, 2015)



## Common Core/Standards

### Common Core/Standards/College, Career, and Civic Life (C3)

#### Anchor Standards Reading

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**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1**

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4**

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10**

Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### Anchor Standards Writing

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**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2**

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4**

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5**

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

#### Anchor Standards Speaking and Listening

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**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1**

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4**

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6**

Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grades 9-10 Language standards 1 and 3[here](#) for specific expectations.)

## Social Studies ELA Standards by Subject/Grade (9-10)

Reading: Literature » Grade 9-10

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**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1**

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone

Reading: Informational Text » Grade 9-10

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**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1**

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7**

Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.10**

By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literacy nonfiction in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

History/Social Studies » Grade 9-10

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**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1**

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.10**

By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.2**

Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.4**

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.5**

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

## **NCSS Themes**

### **2. Time, Continuity and Change**

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Through the study of the past and its legacy, learners examine the institutions, values, and beliefs of people in the past, acquire skills in historical inquiry and interpretation, and gain an understanding of how important historical events and developments have shaped the modern world. This theme appears in courses in history, as well as in other social studies courses for which knowledge of the past is important.

### **5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions**

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Institutions such as families and civic, educational, governmental, and religious organizations, exert a major influence on people's lives. This theme allows students to understand how institutions are formed, maintained, and changed, and to examine their influence. In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, and history.

### **6. Power, Authority and Governance**

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One essential component of education for citizenship is an understanding of the historical development and contemporary forms of power, authority, and governance. Through this theme, learners become familiar with the purposes and functions of government, the scope and limits of authority, and the differences between democratic and non-democratic political systems. In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with government, history, civics, law, politics, and other social sciences.

#### 9. Global Connections

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The realities of global interdependence require an understanding of the increasingly important and diverse global connections among world societies. This theme prepares students to study issues arising from globalization. It typically appears in units or courses dealing with geography, culture, economics, history, political science, government, and technology.

## NCSS C3 Framework

### *D2.Geo.2.9-12.*

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Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.