

2019 Theme Narrative:

TRIUMPH & TRAGEDY IN HISTORY

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During the 2018–2019 school year you and all National History Day students will dive into a topic based on the theme Triumph & Tragedy in History. You will ask questions about time, place and context, cause and effect, change over time, and impact and significance. You must consider not only when and where events happened, but also why they occurred, and what factors contributed to their development. You will describe your topic and then further develop it through analysis, drawing conclusions about how the topic influenced and was influenced by people, ideas, or events.

Each year National History Day selects a theme that is intentionally broad enough so that you can select topics from anywhere in the world and any time period. After deciding on your research topic, you must investigate historical context, historical significance, and the topic's relationship to the theme by conducting research in libraries, archives, and museums; through oral history interviews; and by visiting historic sites. Also remember to use evidence from your research to explain how your topic has influenced history. How did your topic create change?

Does every project need to include both triumph and tragedy? That depends on the topic you select. Look closely—most topics will include elements of both triumph and tragedy. History is inherently uneven, and there will not always be an equal split between the two sides. Do not ignore connections to both aspects of the theme when they exist, but do not force your topic to fit into both sides of the theme.

The Triumph & Tragedy in History theme is complex and requires you to view history through multiple perspectives. Can one person's triumph be another's tragedy? Can the same person or group suffer from tragedy and triumph at the same time? How does one ultimately triumph after tragedy? Can triumph lead to tragedy? Throughout this academic year you will ask yourself these questions and more, always looking for how and why.

What is triumph? According to Merriam Webster, the definition of triumph is “a victory or conquest by or as if by military force, or a notable success.” What does that mean in history? How can you define a historical event as a triumph? The first definition listed is victory by military force. Looking at military battles provides examples of triumphs, and tragedies, throughout history. Also contemplate the second definition, “a notable success.” How would you define a notable success in history? Consider the first organ transplant, or the first time Alexander Graham Bell spoke into the telephone and someone heard him at the other end. Does history remember those events as triumphs? If so, why? What makes them triumphant?

What is tragedy? Merriam Webster defines tragedy as a “disastrous event.” What are some examples of disastrous events throughout history? You could look to England in the mid-1500s. Many remember Lady Jane Grey as a tragic figure, but what makes her situation tragic? Or think back to America's Trail of Tears. What decisions allowed that event to come to fruition? What was the impact of those decisions? Who suffered the consequences? Examine the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989. What were the consequences of those Beijing protests?

Can one person's triumph be another's tragedy? Whether an event is considered a tragedy or a triumph depends on one's perspective. Often a triumph for one is a tragedy for another. The American Civil War offers numerous opportunities for in-depth research on a single aspect of the war. There were many triumphs, the North over the South, unionism over sectionalism, freedom over slavery, but what tragedies resulted because of this conflict? Did everyone feel that those were triumphs? Why or why not? How did one side view the events and consequences compared to the other side? If you are interested in architecture, perhaps you might choose to research the San Francisco earthquakes of 1906 and 1989. How did the consequences of the 1906 earthquake influence changes in engineering and design that would lessen the damage of the 1989 earthquake?

Can a person or group suffer both tragedy and triumph from a single event? Did Frederick Douglass triumph when he escaped from slavery? How did he use his freedom? What tragedies did he continue to face? Was he ever treated as an equal during his lifetime? Nuclear scientist Robert Oppenheimer triumphed with his most famous creation, but what tragic outcome came out of his invention? How did he view his work throughout his lifetime? Mahatma Gandhi led India to independence with his strategy of passive resistance, triumphing over violent protest. What impact did that movement have on the Muslim-Hindu relationship? What tragedies occurred and what ultimately caused them? How did independence affect the people living in the region?

How does one ultimately triumph after tragedy? Consider the tragedy of Pompeii. An entire community was tragically eradicated by a volcanic eruption, but what about the archaeologists who discovered it? How would you characterize their discovery? How have their discoveries affected life today? Are these discoveries important? If so, why? Think about the settlement of the American West. The settlers faced tragedy along the way, dealing with harsh weather, inhospitable terrain, and violent conflicts as they traveled west. How did their journey end? Did they eventually triumph in the face of such tragedy? How did their journey affect the future of America as a nation?

Can triumph lead to tragedy? Consider Neville Chamberlain's efforts to appease Adolf Hitler. What did people of the time think of that policy? What tragedies eventually resulted because of it? Many Russian people lost faith in Tsar Nicholas II's government and believed it was corrupt. Why did they decide it was corrupt? Nicholas was forced to abdicate his throne. What were the short-term effects of his abdication? The long-term impacts? Was his abdication a triumph for the Russian people? Did they achieve the change they were hoping for, or did it later lead to tragedy?

Sometimes the best stories are in your own backyard. Local history can open the doors to amazing stories. Check your libraries and historical societies for collections in your neighborhood, town, city, or state. In addition, the National Park Service, with historic sites throughout the United States, is a rich source of local history. For example, the Whitman Mission National Historic Site tells the story of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, their Methodist mission in southeastern Washington, and their murder in 1874 by Cayuse Indians. That series of events reflects the interaction of cultures, religions, ideas, and perspectives.

Whether you decide to research ancient history, a local topic, or anything else, you must always place your project within its historical context. Examine the significance of the topic in history and show development over time. Your research should start with secondary sources, and then you can look for available primary sources. Using your research skills, you should clearly explain the topic's relationship to the theme Triumph & Tragedy in History. Always remember to support your interpretations of your topic's significance in history with evidence. With the knowledge and understanding gained from your research, you can develop quality papers, performances, exhibits, websites, and documentaries for National History Day.



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