



Jonathon Dallimore offers some reflections on the new HSC Modern History Core due to be examined for the first time in 2019...

The new Modern History Core, '[Power and Authority in the Modern World](#)', presents both an exciting and a challenging update to the HSC course. At a time when discussions of populism, [authoritarianism](#) and [dictatorship](#) abound, students are provided an opportunity to consider a period of history in which politics was radically destabilised, much more than the present day.

There would be little disagreement that issues of power, authority, democracy and globalism (all central to this new Core topic) are important for students of the modern world to explore. Importantly, they also underpin other topics that students can study in the HSC course; in one form or another they are at the heart of most National Studies, Peace and Conflict studies and Change in the Modern World topics. This new Core can, therefore, be leveraged to tie links between other topics that students might investigate depending on the choices a school/teacher makes in setting up the course.

That said, this topic is much larger in scope than the previous Core, World War One, which covered a five-year period and focussed mostly on the Western Front. Power and Authority covers the period 1919 – 1946 (27 years) and requires students to come to terms with a much broader set of issues. This presents a challenge, and a [new set of examination specifications](#) will certainly add to the complexity of teaching this new topic for the first few years.

In the reflections that follow, I would like to highlight some key questions and issues that have arisen regularly as I have run workshops, visited schools to assist with program design and generally responded to questions about the new Modern History Core. There is, obviously, *much* more that could be said on this topic, and my hope is that these ideas might be useful as teachers and students begin exploring this topic over the next twelve months. My observations are based on my reading of the syllabus, and the support materials and the sample questions NESA have published.

Where to begin?

One approach to teaching Power and Authority would be to start with the first dot-point ('an overview of the peace treaties...') and move through the following points sequentially. An alternative might be to find a central theme that runs through the topic, such as 'internationalism and nationalism', that allows students to make connections between different parts of the topic as they explore the content.

Following the latter suggestion, it might be useful to start the topic by surveying the peace treaties that ended World War One and then introduce the 'intentions and authority of the League of Nations' (from the last section of the topic: 'The search for peace and security in the world'). Not only does this



make chronological sense in that the League of Nations was established in 1919 – 1920 during ongoing debates about the closure of the Great War, but it also sets up a theme of internationalism/nationalism that can be referred back to consistently throughout the topic. As the students then explore the Russian, Italian, German and Japanese regimes, they can compare-and-contrast their interaction with the League, why it ultimately failed and then consider how the United Nations developed the ‘intentions and authority’ of the League following the Second World War.

Where do sources ‘fit’ into this topic?

Although it has been a consistent message regarding this new Core topic, it is worth restating that teaching the Power and Authority topic should be grounded in source material relevant to the various content points. Students will obviously need a broad understanding of the ‘facts’ and ‘content’ relevant to each dot-point but they also need to be prepared to work closely with a range of source material.

Importantly, for those who taught the German National Study in the previous iteration of the Modern History course, this means that the more dense and detailed coverage of the Nazi regime to 1939 may need to be amended. Students will not be required to construct 25-mark essay responses for this topic and, therefore, the amount of detailed knowledge they will be required to take into the examination is likely to be less than it was for the previous German National Study.

It is also crucial to point out that the previous emphasis on the three concepts of ‘perspective’ (P), ‘reliability’ (R) and ‘usefulness’ (U) in relation to source material is unlikely to feature in the same way for this new Core. Certainly, those ideas will still be relevant to explore within class and they may appear in some form or another in the examination, but teachers who have taught Modern History for some time will need to move beyond the PRU paradigm for the new Core study. The [sample questions published by NESA](#), the [History Teachers’ Association’s](#) ‘Core Papers’ and Nicole Mansfield’s sample assessment task published in the September 2018 edition of *Teaching History* (HTA NSW, pp. 58 – 71) would provide a good starting point for those looking to broaden the scope of questions asked about source material.

What to do about timing?

The following is one suggestion for allocating the number of lessons to each part of this topic within the teaching unit. It should be noted that the 10% designation for the ‘survey’ is set as a requirement by the Modern History syllabus.



The other weightings provided below are *not* mandated by NESA but seem to be a reasonable division of the unit's lessons to ensure that students develop a well-rounded understanding of the topic:

- Survey (10%)
- Rise of Dictatorships (about 25%)
- Nazi Germany to 1939 (about 45%)
- Search for Peace and Security (about 20%)

It is possible to integrate some of the content points from the 'Search for Peace and Security', for example 'ambitions of Germany in Europe', into some of the other major sections of this topic, such as 'Nazi Germany to 1939', which may mean that the percentage weightings allocated here are reshuffled slightly.

Some specific challenges

Most of the content-points within this topic are reasonably clear and it is easy to imagine examination questions developed from them. There are two, however, that seem a little awkward when considering how they might be 'tested'.

The first is the 'role of prominent individuals in the Nazi state' dot-point. This obviously reflects discussions about the nature of Hitler's power and the structure of the Nazi state that have been in the historical literature for many years. It is, however, hard to know how this could be examined given the wording of the point. Questions which arise include:

- Can they name a 'prominent individual' in a question? (for example, Joseph Goebbels)
- If so, since none are mentioned specifically in the syllabus, which ones are 'fair game'?
- If not, how could questions on this point be framed?

Perhaps something like the following could be a starting point:

- *Other than Adolf Hitler, outline the role of ONE prominent individual in the Nazi state.*
- *Explain how prominent individuals contributed to the Nazi dictatorship between 1933 and 1939.*

These are obviously not predictions regarding how these dot-points *will* be examined but are merely possible options for how they *could* be examined.

The second dot-point to consider is the 'intentions and authority of the League of Nations and UN'. The League of Nations is logical in a topic that is largely centred on the 'interwar crisis'. The United



Nations, however, is more difficult to imagine as an examination question. The topic cuts off in 1946 which is barely enough time for signatories to ratify the UN charter and hold the first meeting of the General Assembly (January 1946), so how much might we expect students to know about this organisation? This is especially relevant when compared to the League of Nations, which was in operation for almost the entire period covered in this topic.

Perhaps a lower-mark question on the United Nations in an examination might be:

- *Outline the intentions and authority of the United Nations.*

A higher-mark question drawing on the United Nations might be:

- *Compare and contrast the intentions and authority of the League of Nations and the United Nations.*

Given the imbalance in what the students will learn about the two institutions in a topic covering the period 1919-1946, a compare and contrast question may not be as appropriate but that reaffirms the points: beyond a lower-mark question, how could the United Nations be 'tested' in an examination?

Examination notes

The basic [examination specifications published by NESA](#) for the new Modern History course are quite clear. For the Core topic, they note the following:

- There will be 3-4 questions asked;
- 'Analysing and interpreting sources' and 'applying own knowledge' will be required;
- One of the questions will be worth between 10 and 15 marks;
- All questions in the Core section of the paper must be answered.

These directions and the [sample questions provided by NESA](#) for the new Core do, however, leave a lot of issues unanswered regarding this section of the examination. Some of these complexities are explored further in the article 'Challenge and Response: Setting New Modern History Core Questions', in the September 2018 edition of *Teaching History* (Kiem and Dallimore, 2018).

Resources

There are a range of dedicated textbooks now in circulation for Power and Authority. The following resources are very useful and may be good to purchase for school libraries or faculty collections (they are in no particular order):



- Stephen Lee's *The European Dictatorships (4th Ed.)* – this is a very useful overview of the period covered in this topic and it includes strong coverage of the dictatorships in Russia, Italy and Germany (the fourth edition includes a very small section on Japan).
- Bruce Pauley, *Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini: Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century (4th Ed.)* – this is a shorter book than Lee's but it provides a clear overview of the main dictatorships that are the focus of the topic (except Japan). It is also highly readable and appears to be targeted at a younger audience (late high school and early university).
- Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914 – 1949* – although this book also covers the Second World War and the early developments leading towards the Cold War, it provides a great insight into key issues of the Power and Authority topic.
- Richard Overy, *The Inter-War Crisis, 1919 – 1939* – Richard Overy is a very gifted writer and although this book seems aimed at undergraduate level, there are some very useful sections including a source cache at the back of the book (some of which may be too complex for the HSC topic).
- Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* – this book covers the entire 20th century but the first several chapters are a highly readable account of the key issues underpinning Power and Authority in the Modern World.
- Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931 – 1945* – this book will provide useful detail on developments in Japan in the lead up to the Second World War which are covered in this topic.
- Professor Richard J. Evans' Gresham College lecture series 'The Age of Dictatorship: 1919-1989' provides excellent overviews of the Russian, Italian and German dictatorships. The first episode of that series (on Mussolini) can be accessed [here](#).

Final thoughts

Although the new Modern History Core sets a different tone for the course, not everything is completely new. Many teachers will continue to explore the same national and conflict studies (some of which include only minor changes). More generally, the new Modern History syllabus strikes me as a positive update in some ways because we now have skills and concepts that run through Stages 4, 5 and 6. This will hopefully allow faculties to develop students' historical thinking throughout junior courses and Year 11 in the lead-up to the HSC course.



This is the first time I have witnessed a major overhaul of the senior history syllabuses. It is a challenging process, especially when, for most teachers, a full 50% of the course will require change in Modern History (a new Core and an entirely new topic replacing the Personality Study). What makes the process less stressful is the community effort already well under way to produce and share resources and respond to issues as they arise. This, I think, the history teaching community in NSW does particularly well.

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