

# Preparing for A105: what history is

From Book 1, *Reputations*, Chapter 5 Stalin, p. 126.

## Activity

Look up the terms 'history' and 'myth' in a dictionary, and then take some time to reflect on the differences between them.

## Discussion

I expect that most answers to this activity will point out that, in relation to the past, a myth is a distorted account of events, whereas a historical account is more 'truthful'. This is not inaccurate, but the issue is slightly more complicated than this.

I looked up 'myth' in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. At first sight it didn't seem that the definition helped very much: 'A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural person, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena.'

Obviously we can't use a definition of myth that emphasises the purely fictional, but we can work to some extent with a definition that stresses a 'popular idea concerning ... historical phenomena'. We need also to revisit the 'fictional' aspect of the *OED*'s definition, because our definition should look something like 'a popular idea concerning historical phenomena, which distorts the reality of past events, or cannot be fitted with the weight of the available evidence'.

When I looked up 'history' I found a large number of possible definitions and a multitude of examples of their use. There seemed to me to be two definitions given by the *OED* which are relevant to us: 'A written narrative constituting a continuous methodical record, in order of time, of important or public events, esp. those connected with a particular country, people, individual etc'; and 'That branch of knowledge which deals with past events, as recorded in writings or otherwise ascertained; the formal record of the past, esp. of human affairs or actions; the study or formation and growth of communities and nations.'

The question of what history is, of course, is a complex one, and there are many definitions and much academic dispute over them. All we need here is a provisional working definition. 'A written narrative constituting a continuous methodical record', as the *OED* puts it, is often the end result of historical investigation. In order to answer what history is, we need to combine our sense of the end product with the description of history as a field of knowledge contained in the second definition. Let's define history as an account of past events based upon the interpretation of all the available evidence that relates to the particular aspect of the past it is studying.

The key, therefore, to grasping the difference between myth and history is that where myth is a distortion and cannot be fitted with the weight of the available evidence, history is an account that aims at capturing the truth about the past through a careful interpretation of evidence. It is worth noting that the issue is slightly more complex, for myths about the past play important roles in shaping the actions of historical actors. Historical accounts of the past

are often constructed as replies to mythical accounts. Therefore, even though they are distinct, in practice the two are locked in continuous dialogue with each other.

I'd like you to put to one side any notes you have made on this activity for now. We will revisit and expand upon some of these themes later in the chapter.