Questions

1. Who is your favourite historian?

2. War has been described as the "locomotive of history" – what might this mean and to what extent is it true?

Prompts

Question 1:

i) Think about the history books you have read recently. Which of them were particularly interesting or convincing?
ii) Why might this be, and in what ways did the historian affect this?

Question 2:

i) To begin, what images are evoked by the phrase 'locomotive of history'? Speed is surely one of them – what would it mean for history to 'speed up' and how could this be linked with times of war?
ii) This statement was originally made by Leon Trotsky; how does this change the way we understand it?

Suggested answers

Bear in mind that this is only guidance intended to explain the purpose of the questions and the way I personally might go about answering them. There are, of course, no objectively correct answers when it comes to open theoretical questions about history like these, so there is no need to worry if you did not address the questions in same way I did or use the same examples, which I drew from the periods I know best. Rather, try to adopt a similar mindset and thought process so you can approach questions in an analytical and questioning manner.

Question 1: Who is your favourite historian?

Deceptively simple questions like this are common in history interviews. Whilst it should hopefully be relatively easy to pick out a historian you especially enjoy reading, the difficulty lies in justifying your choice, which would ideally culminate in attempting to provide a loose personal definition of what constitutes 'good history' or a 'good historian'. For an interviewer, it is very appealing for the Oxbridge applicant, and in particular the historian, to have this attitude of deeply interrogating answers which initially seem obvious or not insightful.

One reason a historian's work might particularly resonate with you is if it is very well written. For me, an example of this is Carlo Ginzburg's seminal 1980 work *The cheese and the worms: The cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller*, which centres on the figure of Menocchio, a miller living in Northern Italy, and the multiple heresy trials he underwent due to his decidedly non-standard religious and cosmological beliefs. Critics often point out the glowing fluidity of Ginzburg's prose and the unique structure of the work, split not into standard chapters but rather 62 numbered sections, some as short as a paragraph, each of which drive the work forward.

But Ginzburg's work is important and impressive beyond the aesthetic quality of his prose. There is also undeniable skill in his compilation and reconciliation of a vast range of archival sources into a compelling narrative. A question which often crops up in lists of Oxbridge interview questions is that of whether history is an art or a science (though it is very unlikely you would be asked this in interview). I would use Ginzburg's work to support the alternate answer that history is a 'trade', such that the skills it requires are learned and honed over time and consist primarily of turning the 'raw material' of forensically uncovered primary sources into a 'finished product', the secondary source or work of history.

The cheese and the worms also has great historiographic significance. In the late 1970s, Ginzburg acted as a pioneer of the historiographic approach which became known as 'microhistory', which, as the name suggests, focuses *microscopically* on an individual, community, event etc. (in this case the ideologically divergent peasant Menocchio) in order to ask wider questions about the space and time in which this person lived or event occurred. In this work, Ginzburg not only explores the figure of Menocchio but also situates him within the wider religious, intellectual and literary context of 16th century Italy following the Reformation. Microhistory, now one of the most popular historiographic approaches, is uniquely able to highlight stories which would otherwise have been forgotten, which is especially valuable when considering the history of minorities or social outcasts.

Therefore, my judgement of Carlo Ginzburg as my 'favourite historian' would be based on his truly unique contribution to the discipline, such that his works – most notably *The cheese and the worms* – can serve as a model of excellent history which is able to inspire others. Not only does he exhibit a real talent for historical prose writing, his attitude to sources is one of relentless dissecting curiosity. Furthermore, he is situated at the epicentre of a conflux of innovative historiographic approaches (microhistory, the history of mentalities, history from below…), which have, in my view, made an immensely positive impact not only historically but also culturally and politically.

I hope this answer demonstrates the need to really interrogate questions asked at interview, no matter how simple they may seem. Always focus on justifying your answers and try to relate individual examples of historical research to the 'bigger picture'; the ability to 'zoom out' and see things in perspective will be valued much more highly than the number of facts you know about a particular period or figure in history.

Question 2: War has been described as the "locomotive of history" – what might this mean and to what extent is it true?

This is a question which could, at first glance, seem very intimidating: working out how to engage with such questions is an important part of interview preparation. There is nothing wrong with not immediately having an answer to a question, nor with taking some time to think. Evidence that you are considering your answers rather than blurting out the first thing that comes into your head is a very good thing. What is important is being able to make the step from being initially intimidated to offering some cogent thoughts on a topic, which may include subtly moving in a direction you are more comfortable with. In this respect, it's also worth noting that the questions 'what might this mean?' and 'to what extent is it true?' would come one after the other in the real interview, rather than being asked at the same time.

One reason the question might be intimidating is its mention of war, but, whilst it outwardly presents itself as being about military history, which may not be your area of expertise, it in fact gives the interviewee the chance to move beyond this by thinking about the implications of the metaphor 'locomotive of history'. To my mind, this evokes high speed and directionality, so one imagines a high-speed train moving towards a distant destination with increasing velocity. The implication here is twofold: firstly, that times of war 'accelerate' history, in that important events happen with greater frequency and concentration than in peacetime, and also that there is some point in the distance to which 'history' is inexorably heading; in other words, that there is some teleology present within the course of history.

This all seems more concrete if we bear in mind that this remark was made by Leon Trotsky in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, referencing the influence World War I had had on the rise of Bolshevism and his hope that communist states would also be established across Europe and even in America. (You won't be expected to know details like this in the interview, but the interviewer may well reveal them to you to see how you react to them. Incidentally, the extended context of the quote – "naturally all sorts of new facts are possible such as, say, a war between America and Japan; and war…is a great locomotive of history"– is particularly interesting due to the tension between the recognition of contingency in the first half and the implied reassertion of some teleology in the second. Whilst this is, again, something you can't be expected to know, it is very helpful to practice such close reading regularly as you can be given texts to analyse at interview.)

Trotsky's thought seems inspired by Marx, who observed in his 1850 articles, entitled 'The Class Struggles in France 1848–1850', that 'revolutions', not war, are the 'locomotives of history'. Comparing these two statements can reveal interesting

developments in socialist thought, but it is also interesting to remove these observations from the direct contexts in which they were made and assess their applicability more broadly. In early modern Europe, it was only through the mass destruction of the Thirty Years War from 1618-48 that, through the Peace of Westphalia, the chaotic potential of European religious and political energies unleashed by the Reformation could be in some way contained. Following 1648, European wars seemed to grow shorter and shorter, as the locomotives grew in speed and power, culminating in the Mutually Assured Destruction theory of the Cold War, whereby America and the Soviet Union declined to even board the train.

Marx's metaphor gives us the chance to think not only about the 'locomotive' of revolution as an image the historian can employ to assess change over time, but also about the subjective experience of time by 'those who were there'. In the French Revolution, there were reports of people fainting in the street due to 'information overload': the sheer volume of news which they were consuming and the rapidity with which they had to come to terms with significant changes. This experience of time accelerating, whereby what might normally happen in a decade happened in a matter of months, was, in that moment, overwhelming. Continuing our motif of the locomotive, we imagine the sensation of standing at the platform as a high-speed train rushes past, a feeling which can give us an insight into how life in revolutionary France was experienced.

Again, I would stress that the ideas and examples presented here will likely be very different from those you might select. What is important here is not to be intimidated by questions which initially seem impenetrable, but rather to carefully consider how you could apply your historical knowledge to unfamiliar contexts and ideas. The 'history of time' is rather fashionable at the moment, and it is a good idea to briefly look into current trends in historiography before your interview. Even if the interviewer doesn't directly reference them, it shows interest and a sense of perspective on your subject if you bring the state of the discipline into discussion.