

# Great Man theory

The **Great Man Theory** was a popular 19th century idea according to which history can be largely explained by the impact of "great men", or heroes: highly influential individuals who, due to either their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom, or Machiavellianism utilized their power in a way that had a decisive historical impact.

The theory was popularized in the 1840s by Thomas Carlyle, and in 1860 Herbert Spencer formulated a decisive counter-argument that remained influential throughout the 20th century; Spencer said that such great men are the products of their societies, and that their actions would be impossible without the social conditions built before their lifetime.<sup>[1][2][3]</sup>

For example, a scholarly follower of the Great Man theory would be likely to study the Second World War by focusing on the big personalities of the conflict – Sir Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Charles de Gaulle (Allies); Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, (Axis); et al. – and view all of the historical events as being tied directly to their own individual decisions and orders.

## Introduction

The Great Man Theory is associated most often with 19th-century commentator and historian Thomas Carlyle, who commented that "The history of the world is but the biography of great men," reflecting his belief that heroes shape history through both their personal attributes and divine inspiration.<sup>[4]</sup> In his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle set out how he saw history as having turned on the decisions of "heroes", giving detailed analysis of the influence of several such men (including Muhammad, Shakespeare, Luther, Rousseau, and Napoleon). Carlyle also felt that the study of great men was "profitable" to one's own heroic side; that by examining the lives led by such heroes, one could not help but uncover something about one's true nature.<sup>[5]</sup>

This theory is usually contrasted with a theory that talks about events occurring in the fullness of time, or when an overwhelming wave of smaller events cause certain developments to occur. The Great Man approach to history was most fashionable with professional historians in the 19th century; a popular work of this school is the *Encyclopedia Britannica Eleventh Edition* (1911) which contains lengthy and detailed biographies about the great men of history, but very few general or social histories. For example, all information on the post-Roman "Migrations Period" of European History is compiled under the biography of Attila the Hun. This heroic view of history was also strongly endorsed by some philosophical figures such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Spengler, but it fell out of favor after World War II.

In *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche writes that: "...the goal of humanity lies in its highest specimens" [2].

## Criticisms

One of the most vitriolic critics of Carlyle's formulation of the Great Man theory was Herbert Spencer, who believed that attributing historical events to the decisions of individuals was a hopelessly primitive, childish, and unscientific position.<sup>[6]</sup> He believed that the men Carlyle called "great men" were merely products of their social environment.

“ [Y]ou must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of ”  
complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the

*social state into which that race has slowly grown....Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.*

—Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology*<sup>[7]</sup>

The editors of the influential 18th century French encyclopedia *Encyclopedie* were ideologically opposed to biographies because they believed too much ink had already been spilled on hagiographies of church fathers and deeds of kings, and not enough about the average person or life in general. To this end *Encyclopedie* had almost no biography articles. However, this policy was contentious among the encyclopedists and so some biographies were "hidden" inside articles;<sup>[8]</sup> for example, the article on Wolstrobe (Woolsthorpe), England is almost entirely about the life of Newton.<sup>[9]</sup>