Theories of History

Cyclical
A cyclical view of history stems from the histories of the Greeks. The Greeks thought that events recurred on a regular basis. Herodutus' (484-424 BCE) work *Histories* is the story of men and states as recurring cycles. Herodutus' contemporary, Thucydides (460-404 BC) also envisioned time as recurring in a cyclical fashion, a process which men were unable to control. Petrach (1304-1374) revived the cyclical concept of history in the fourteenth century. He differed slightly from the Greeks in suggesting the basis of history was the actions of people rather than the whims of the gods. Machiavelli (1469-1527) also saw history as being cyclical and suggested that history could be seen as a casebook of political strategy. In the modern age, the cyclical theory of history has been advanced by Arnold Toynbee (1884-1975) and Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), both of whom based their work on the premise that history is cyclical: civilizations rise and fall, each new one rising to a greater level.

Linear
The linear concept of history began in the west with the writing of St. Augustine (350-430 BCE). Augustine saw history as being the unfolding of the plan of God, a process that would end in the Final Judgement. Voltaire (1694-1788) saw history as being linear, but in a more secular way. He envisioned four great ages of man culminating in the scientific enlightenment of Newton. Marxist historians also subscribe to a linear view of history, in the sense that they see history as a series of class struggles that inevitably ends in a workers' revolution. H.G. Wells (1866-1946) described history as a race between education and disaster, either as world cataclysm or a world state.

Great Man
The “Great Man” theory suggests that dominant personalities determine the course of history. Rulers, warriors, statesmen, are the decisive forces in history and history is the record of the deeds of great people. This theory is most commonly associated with Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881).

Everyman
The “Everyman” view of history is one which sees history as being a record of the collective experience of the ordinary person. Sir Walter Scott's (1771-1832) novels showed how people lived through significant events and he advanced the idea that history was the story of ordinary people’s lives. William E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) in his histories, *Black Reconstruction in America*, *Crisis*, and *The Souls of Black Folk*, rejected the idea of history as the record of Western European events and advanced a view of history as the record of the lives of subject peoples.
Ideas
This view of history is one in which the driving force in history is people’s ideas. The conditions that create history are created or changed by ideas. G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) is most often associated with this view of history. Hegel’s view of history as the continual refinement of intellectual understanding is also a form of linear history, for Hegel described history as the unfolding of God’s Will or purpose through time.

Economic
The economic theory of history sees economic factors as the most important determinant of history. The production and exchange of goods and services is the bases of all social structures and processes. The economic factor is the foundation for the superstructure of culture and government. Karl Marx (1818-1883) is the foremost proponent of this view. He disagreed with Hegel by saying that it was not ideas that created material conditions, but rather the reverse.

Other Theories
There are a number of other theories that attempt to explain history. Some historians suggest that history is the result of geographic factors, and others suggest that wars determine history. Still others suggest that religion, race, or climate determines the course of history. A different view of history is offered by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) who saw history as having no beginning or end, just chaos that could only be understood by the powers of the mind.

Choose the theory of history which makes the most sense to you.
Explain your reasons.
2-3 paragraphs, in ink, double-spaced