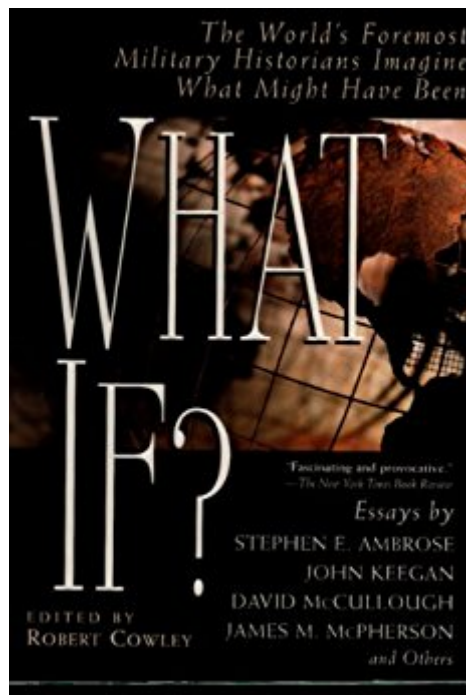


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What If?: The World's Foremost Historians Imagine What Might Have Been



Synopsis

With its in-depth reflections on the monumental events of the past, this amazing book of essays ponders what might have been if things had gone differently in history. Featuring Stephen J. Ambrose, John Keegan, and many others.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Firstly, I enjoyed this book as it was really a look behind the curtains of history itself. It reads smoothly and it serves as a much better source of information on history than any documentary book on history I have ever read. Secondly, most of the authors only set the stage of history in detail as it happened, set vaguely a course of where-it-most-likely-would-lead and then give you a space for your imagination to chew on the idea and spit out your own version of the what-if universe. Even though I expected that the alternative worlds will be described more thoroughly, I eventually realized that I am enjoying the book as it was - a chronicle of real events spiced with an exciting view of alternative turn-out of the course of the history.

Good clean fun exploring various historical events and asking: what if they had turned out differently? This anthology (the chapter for each event is written by a different author) describes each event from 3 perspectives. First, the background that led to the event. This sets the context to help understand the significance of the situation. Second, the event itself is described, with special attention to the factors that affected the outcome, and how small changes to those factors would have reversed the outcome. Third, the consequences of the different outcome—how the world would have been altered had events turned out differently. These are mostly military events in one way or another. I don't think that should be taken to mean all critical events in world history have been military in nature. It just means military battles are particularly prone to outcomes which hinge on small factors. And it's the smallness of the factors here that is most enlightening. From the appearance of fog in Brooklyn one night in the summer of 1776, to an envelope accidentally dropped onto the ground in a field of clover in Maryland. These are the tiniest of influences that drastically altered the fate of the world. Because of the anthology nature of this book, some of the chapters are inconsistent. The one about the revolutionary war doesn't follow the pattern used in most of the chapters at all. But that doesn't detract from the great fun you'll have in considering how the world we live in might have so easily and profoundly diverged from what we know today. It's healthy to have your faith in the inevitability of history shaken.

Interesting historic what ifs i.e. what if FDR hadn't taken Truman as his running mate, what if Truman hadn't used the bomb on Japan (convinced me it was necessary). Fascinating concepts to think about! It's amazing how much history could have turned out different!

"What If" offers a series of essays pondering different counterfactuals in military history. Written by acclaimed historians, these essays range in time from the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC to the Cold War struggles over Berlin. Essays also cover Greek and Roman battles, Alexander the Great, the Mongol Invasion of Europe, the Spanish Armada, the American Revolution and Civil War, WWI, and four essays on WWII. As these essays range in time period and subject matter, they also vary in quality. Counterfactual histories can be useful ways to learn history, but they have limitations. Most of the better essays, such as John Keegan's "How Hitler Could Have Won the War" and Alistair Horne's "Ruler of the World: Napoleon's Lost Opportunities" are limited in scope and describe how, had certain leaders taken a different approach, they could have been more effective and possibly changed history. Others, such as Thomas Fleming's "Unlikely Victory: Thirteen Ways the Americans Could Have Lost the Revolution" and Robert Cowley's "The What Ifs of 1914," describe the many

tiny turning points that could have radically changed history. All of these essays do a very good job and remain true to the limited utility of counterfactual history: what ifs are possible different courses of history and should be described as such. Unfortunately, not all of the essays are so limited and go on to speculate concrete changes, especially the essays about the ancient world. For example, Lewis Lapham, in "Furor Teutonicus: The Teutonic Forest, A.D. 9," speculates that, had the Romans defeated the Germanic army in that battle, the Roman Empire would have lasted until modern times, and the U.S.A. would instead have become the United (Roman) Provinces of America. The book is well worth reading. Overall, the authors do a good job illustrating why these battles or events are so important, and one of its strengths is the breadth of "key battles" in history that are covered. And while some of the essays are weaker than others, none of the essays are very long, and soon the reader will be on to another watershed moment in history.

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