

Books

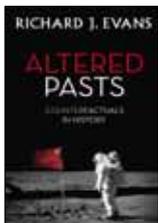
Reviews



Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History

by **Richard J Evans**

Little, Brown, 205pp, £20.00



Britain stays neutral in World War I, keeps her empire and remains a superpower today. In a federal Europe, hairy armpits are compulsory for British women and sexual

intercourse is governed by EU directives. Mrs Thatcher is assassinated by the IRA in 1984 and Britain becomes an “inefficient country” like Germany.

These imagined scenarios from three supposedly serious historians - Niall Ferguson, Andrew Roberts and Simon Heffer respectively - show the pitfalls of counterfactual history: once you start making things up, it's hard to stop.

In this short book, Cambridge history don Richard J Evans turns “a jaundiced eye” on the vogue for counterfactuals, these “alternative versions of the past in which one alteration in the timeline leads to a different outcome”.

As Evans shows, the counterfactualist's one little change usually involves

“unconvincing decisions” to ignore the historical context in order to produce the desired outcome. If you want Britain out of the war in 1940, you can't just replace Churchill with Halifax. You probably need to change the politics of the British Labour movement and possibly the mood of the entire nation.

And then where do you go? Here's an old favourite: the Spanish Armada successfully reaching England in 1588. This usually ends with some variation on Britain returning to Catholicism, a wholly Spanish America and Juan Carlos' son Felipe ending up today as King of the World.

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But, even with the Armada safely landed, why choose to believe Philip II's overstretched forces could defeat Elizabeth's, hold Britain and conquer north America? Why choose to believe Philip's eccentric successors could successfully rule such an empire? And where's France in all of this?

Counterfactualists claim they are

challenging determinist or “left-wing” history by emphasising the role of chance and free will. But, says Evans, these “free-floating agents” don't face the same constraints as their historical counterparts; they are just fictional characters hiding behind real names.

Furthermore, counterfactuals are completely determinist themselves. After changing one fact, the author “assumes and posits a whole series of things that would inevitably have followed,” says Evans. Instead of social and economic forces, the determinants are simply the whims and prejudices of the author.

This usually leads to wishful thinking or scaremongering. The wave of “Eurosceptic” counterfactuals since the 1990s usually present a utopia when Britain disengages from Europe (Ferguson's British superpower fantasy), or a Gothic dystopia when it doesn't (Roberts' hairy armpits). And naturally, Michael Foot's election victory following Thatcher's defeat in the Falklands War, also imagined by Ferguson, leads not just to Britain's demise, but the collapse of Western civilisation itself. Quelle surprise.

No surprise either that the mainly conservative counterfactualists see little historical role for the masses. “It is a story of what generals, presidents and revolutionaries did or did not do,” says Evans. “The contribution of bureaucracies, ideas or social class is nothing to the fickleness of Josef Stalin or the constitution of Franz Ferdinand.”

Intriguingly, Evans concludes that counterfactuals owe their popularity to the collapse of political certainties since the 1990s: “When all the isms became wasms... teleologies vanished and history became open-ended.” Our post-modern taste for apocalyptic fantasies, science fiction and speculating about alternative universes and non-linear concepts of time comes from the same source. When the boundaries between fact, fiction, past, present and future are blurred, one story becomes just as good as another.

Reviewed by Craig Ryan