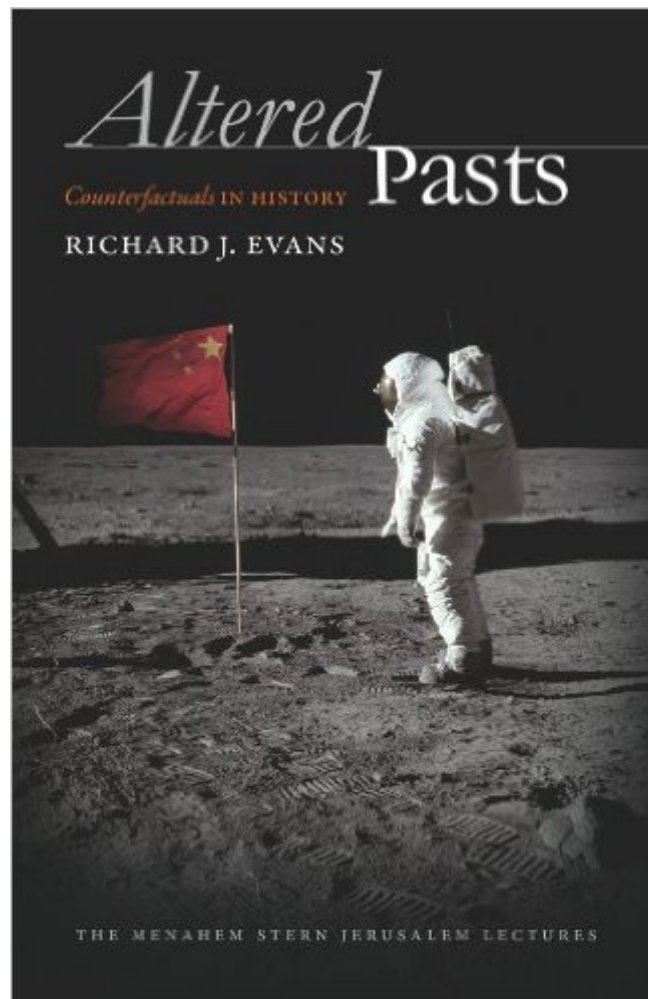


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Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals In History (The Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures)



Synopsis

A bullet misses its target in Sarajevo, a would-be Austrian painter gets into the Viennese academy, Lord Halifax becomes British prime minister in 1940 instead of Churchill: seemingly minor twists of fate on which world-shaking events might have hinged. Alternative history has long been the stuff of parlor games, war-gaming, and science fiction, but over the past few decades it has become a popular stomping ground for serious historians. The historian Richard J. Evans now turns a critical, slightly jaundiced eye on a subject typically the purview of armchair historians. The book's main concern is examining the intellectual fallout from historical counterfactuals, which the author defines as "alternative versions of the past in which one alteration in the timeline leads to a different outcome from the one we know actually occurred." • What if Britain had stood at the sidelines during the First World War? What if the Wehrmacht had taken Moscow? The author offers an engaging and insightful introduction to the genre, while discussing the reasons for its revival in popularity, the role of historical determinism, and the often hidden agendas of the counterfactual historian. Most important, Evans takes counterfactual history seriously, looking at the insights, pitfalls, and intellectual implications of changing one thread in the weave of history. A wonderful critical introduction to an often-overlooked genre for scholars and casual readers of history alike.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have admired Richard Evans since reading his account of his contribution to the Irving v Lipstadt libel trial. His book, *Telling Lies about Hitler*, gave me a fascinating insight into the work involved in

being a professional historian. When I studied history at school, I recall two bits of advice from my teachers in tackling the subject. The first was that no-one should assume that historical events are somehow inevitable and the second was that you should not speculate about what might or should have happened - stick to what actually did happen. This is valuable advice if you are writing essays and trying to get good grades. However, there is much fun in asking yourself what might have happened if key events had happened differently. This goes back to the first piece of advice of not assuming that things are inevitable. Events often turn on the behaviours of individuals. Some of the key questions include the following:- supposing Hitler won the Second World War- supposing Hitler survived and escaped to South America- supposing Franz Ferdinand of Austria was not assassinated in Sarajevo. Most counterfactuals (the term used for this kind of speculation) seem to concern war and indeed Hitler seems to feature in many of them. While such speculation has been a popular vein of fiction, Evans is more concerned about the practice of counterfactuals being adopted by professional historians. He mentions those of Geoffrey Parker, Niall Ferguson and Dominic Sandbrook. Clearly some counterfactuals are ridiculous exercises in wishful thinking and Evans can't help but point out the flaws in many of them. I do wonder whether in engaging with counterfactual debate one ends up somehow legitimising the practice.

In this brief but delightfully readable book, WWII historian Richard Evans takes us on a tour of speculative alternate histories of the Western world yielding interesting perspectives as to the nature of historical explanations. Some focus on pivotal figures or decisions where the hinge of history depends on single individual. What if Lord Edward Grey had held back on having Britain enter WW I in defense of Belgium - would Germany have won quickly and established an early version of the common market. What if Napoleon had won at Waterloo or Lenin had survived perhaps preventing the regime of Stalin. Or more trivially, if Cleopatra's nose was a bit shorter - assuming power itself was not an aphrodisiac, would Julius Caesar and Marc Anthony dealt differently with Egypt. What if Fidel Castro had accepted (the very real) offer to play baseball for the New York Giants or the Archduke Ferdinand had not taken a wrong turn in Sarajevo. Such cases follow the Great Man (rarely Woman) notion affirming that it is the significant actions or placement of individuals that makes a difference. In other cases the pivot rests less on individual decisions rather the outcome of specific events. Common themes are having the South win the civil war, good weather allowing the Spanish Armada to conquer England, usually restoring it to Catholicism or if the Franks had lost to the Umayyads leading to an Islamified Europe. These alternities have a tendency towards historical healing, the present, though slightly changed, is, for the most part recognizable versions of our own.

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