

What Might Have Been – Imaginary History from Twelve Leading Historians.  
Edited and introduced by Andrew Roberts.  
Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2004.

The ‘what if?’ exercise is a popular one in which to indulge, whether round the dining table, in the classroom or the lecture hall. What if, or counterfactual history, if well argued and soundly researched, can be highly persuasive and deeply thought-provoking. This collection of twelve what ifs includes the Armada landing in England, Charles 1 winning the Civil War, Napoleon triumphing in Moscow, Franz Ferdinand surviving Sarajevo, Margaret Thatcher being killed in the Brighton bombing and Al Gore being elected President. The contributors are redoubtable and include Simon Sebag Montefiore, Antonia Fraser, Norman Stone and Conrad Black.

What makes these scenarios so fascinating is the fact that even though key events transpire differently from what actually occurred, end results may be the same or very similar. One or two of the essays are neither as persuasive nor as powerful as others, but overall this is an excellent collection.

From a Jewish perspective counter-factual history doesn't seem to exist, and yet there are many intriguing counter-factual avenues down which one might venture, and many scenarios in the consideration of which we may gain greater understanding of our historical and contemporary experience.

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