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3rd Edition

World History

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Peter Haugen

History Nerd



World History

3rd Edition

by Peter Haugen

**for
dummies[®]**
A Wiley Brand

World History For Dummies®, 3rd Edition

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Introduction

The complete history of the world boiled down to 400-some pages and crammed between paperback covers? The idea is preposterous. It's outrageous. I'd be crazy to attempt it. So here goes.

This book doesn't claim to be complete. It can't be. Hundreds of other volumes are devoted to a measly decade or two (the World War II era comes to mind). Plumbing thousands of years in one little book would be impossible. Skimming the surface, however, is another matter.

About This Book

Here, you can find enough information that if you hit on an era, a personality, or a civilization you'd like to know more about, you'll at least know what to look for. There's no lack of places to find out more. You can turn to many far more complete accounts of the history of specific countries (such as the United States), continents (such as Europe), and events (such as the U.S. Civil War). You can find books about all these topics and more in this excellent *For Dummies* series. But if you want a simplified overview, consisting of a collection of easy-to-read glimpses of major players and events that have made the world what it is today, I'm your guide, and *World History For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, is your first-stop reference.

History is like a soap opera that has been running ever since the invention of writing. The show is lurid, full of dirty tricks and murder, romances and sexual deceptions, adventures, and wars and revolutions. (And, yes, treaties and dates.) Or maybe a better analogy is that history is like hundreds of soap operas, with thousands of crossover characters jumping out of one story and into another — too many for even the most devoted fan to keep straight, which is all the more reason for an easy-to-use overview.

The most important thing to remember is that history is fun, or should be. It's not as though this is life-and-death stuff. . . . No, wait. It *is* life-and-death stuff — on a ginormous scale. It's just that so many of the lives and deaths happened long ago. But that's good, because I can pry into private affairs without getting sued. History is full of vintage gossip and antique scandal, peppered heavily with high

adventure — swords and spears and cannons and stuff. The more you get into it, the better you'll do when the neighbors drag out the home version of *Jeopardy*. (Renaissance Italy for \$500, please.)

Every field from brain surgery to refuse collection has its conventions, a special vocabulary chief among them. History is no exception, but I tried to steer clear of historians-only words and phrases. When such a word is unavoidable, I explain it in reader-friendly terms. As for other technical terms, I usually follow them with definitions and explanations.

You'll find a few Latin and other foreign words and phrases sprinkled throughout the book too. I have to include them because I tell you about cultures and countries where English was unknown. Latin terms show up because this book's subjects include the important, influential Roman Empire, where everybody spoke Latin. I also cover Europe in the Middle Ages, when Latin was the international language. I use other words that may be unfamiliar; those terms are highlighted in italics and defined. Finally, I can't write about world history without covering the enormous influence of the Roman Catholic Church, an institution that for many centuries clung to Latin as its official means of expression. But don't worry. I promise not to use many such terms, and when I do, I'll explain what they mean.

Foolish Assumptions

As I wrote this book, I made some assumptions about you. They may be foolish, but here they are:

- » You've studied at least some history in school. You may even know quite a lot about certain historical topics, but you'd like to find out more about how it all fits together.
- » You've seen movies or read novels set in various historical eras, and you suspect that they'd be more enjoyable if you were better informed about the time periods and the historical peoples featured.
- » At least once in your life, you've encountered an obnoxious history know-it-all, one of those people who spews random facts about ancient Rome or the French Revolution. In the event that it happens again, you want the satisfaction of either keeping up with the conversation or contradicting Smartyants and knowing (at least a little bit) about what you're talking about.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, icons in the margins highlight certain types of valuable information. Here are the icons you'll encounter and a brief description of each.



REMEMBER

Remember icons mark information that's especially important. But it's okay if you forget; just go back and look for the icon. I hope that points you to content that's memorable.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The Technical Stuff icon in this book marks information that's interesting but not essential, so if you want, you can skip it. I like these asides, but you don't have to.



TIP

Tip icons are for ideas that you may find helpful, including places to see historical artifacts that can help you feel more in touch with the past. If the artifact is in a museum, you probably won't get to touch it physically, though.



IN THEIR
WORDS

The In Their Words icon marks a quote that makes a point better than I can, although I hate to admit it.



WARNING

The Warning icon tells you to watch out! In considering history, it's especially important not to assume, to keep an open mind, and to set preconceptions aside.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the abundance of information and guidance related to world history that you can find in this book, you can get access to even more help and information at Dummies.com. Check out this book's online Cheat Sheet. Just go to www.dummies.com and search for "World History For Dummies Cheat Sheet."

Where to Go from Here

You can start with Chapter 1 and read to the end, but that's not required. A great thing about this book is that it's organized so that you can jump in any place you want. As you page through and browse, note that you can look at the same era

from different perspectives. Part 3, for example, tells you how philosophy and religion shaped history; there, you can find out about the religious wars that followed the Protestant Reformation. But if you're more interested in the weaponry and strategies of war, jump to Part 4. And if you just want to browse the bios of some historical all-stars, check out Part 5. Not sure what you're looking for? Part 1 is a good place to get a general feel for history. The table of contents and index, along with the part summaries earlier in this introduction, should get you to the pages you need.

1

Getting into History

IN THIS PART . . .

Follow the threads of cause and effect that weave through every part of human experience. If you want to know how things got to be the way they are today, look to yesterday.

See how myths and artifacts — such as the ruins of once-great cities and even the preserved remains of our ancestors — provide wonderful clues to the realities of the ancient world and the beginnings of what we call history.

Put history and its personalities into perspective and wrap your head around how long humans have been doing a lot of the same things people do today: buying, selling, cooking, falling in love, traveling, and fighting wars.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Pondering how the past shaped the present
- » Thinking about humankind's remarkable journey
- » Tracing a tapestry of historical threads

Chapter 1

Tracing a Path to the Present

Just two decades into the 21st century, humanity hit a speed bump, in the form of a pandemic. The pandemic was a new viral disease — relatively benign in many patients but deadly in others and wildly unpredictable. Because it was new to our species, nobody had a ready immune response. Highly contagious, it spread rapidly around the world. Immunologists, the scientists who are experts at these things, had to figure out how to fight the disease on the fly.

The World Health Organization called the virus SARS-CoV-2, for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus, version 2 (after a predecessor in 2003). It called the sickness COVID-19, for coronavirus disease 2019, the year it was identified.

The nature of the threat and how it should be dealt with sparked worldwide debate. Some governments took quick, decisive action to contain it, while others decided to go more slowly. The latter approach proved to be ineffective as infection rates soared.

Another point of discussion was why the world was caught unprepared. “Public health experts have predicted we’d be hit by another pandemic for decades,” puffed the pundits. “Why didn’t leadership have a plan?” asked the journalists.

“Why the heck didn’t anybody see this coming?” queried podcasters. “It’s all a hoax!” screamed too many conspiracy theorists.

The pandemic changed the world. According to Johns Hopkins University, it killed more than 4 million people worldwide by the middle of 2021, with case rates rising again. It stalled the world economy and influenced the way people did their jobs, as well as where and how they chose to live.

But this book isn’t about a 21st-century pandemic any more than it’s about the bubonic plague that ravaged Europe and Asia in the 14th century. It isn’t about modern epidemiology or economics, either. It’s about two broader questions: “How did things get to be like this?” and “Why is the world as it is?”

There have been too many years of human activity on this planet — too many lives lived, too many diseases, technological breakthroughs, migrations, wars, murders, weddings, coronations, revolutions, recessions, natural disasters, and financial meltdowns — to trace humanity’s route simply. Too many historians have interpreted events in too many contradictory ways. But what I hope you find in this book is a general view of how human history has gotten you and the world you live in to current reality. To this. To now.

Firing Up the WABAC Machine

If you care about classic TV cartoons, you’ve heard of the WABAC Machine. Pronounced “way back,” the machine was a fictional time-traveling device built and operated by a genius dog named Mr. Peabody. In every episode of the 1960s animated series *Rocky and His Friends*, the professorial pooch and his pet boy, Sherman, transported themselves to a historical setting — say, ancient Rome, revolutionary America, or medieval England — where they interacted with famous people and solved whatever ridiculously absurd dilemma was troubling cartoon Julius Caesar, George Washington, or King Arthur. Thus, Mr. Peabody and Sherman allowed the events we think of as history to take their proper course.

These episodes spoofed a classic science-fiction premise. Storytellers often use time travel as a plot device. American novelist Mark Twain did it in 1889 with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. England’s H.G. Wells followed suit in 1895 with *The Time Machine*, although he sent his protagonist (identified only as “the Time Traveller”) into the future. Other examples include British TV’s numerous incarnations of *Doctor Who* to hundreds of novels, graphic novels, plays, films, and videogames.

Often, these stories involve someone going back in time to change something in the present or to prevent the present from being changed in some fashion that will cause a future catastrophe. One tiny interference in the “time continuum,” as it’s often called, can lead to a monumentally altered chain of events.

Nobody can do that, of course.



REMEMBER

You can, however, understand more about the present if you time travel in your head — that is, think about the ways that yesterday’s events shaped today. You can ponder how what happened a decade ago shapes this year and how a single change somewhere in the past could have made today different. Historians scoff at the “what if” game, but it’s a tool for getting your head into history.

What if incumbent Donald Trump had won the 2020 U.S. presidential election instead of challenger Joe Biden? Would an angry mob have attacked the U.S. Capitol the following January? How different would American politics have been? How about if voters in the United Kingdom had not chosen, in a 2016 referendum, to withdraw that nation from the European Union? Would that nation’s banks or fishing industry be better off or worse today? What about its people?

For that matter, what if Japan had not attacked the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941? Or what if the terrorists who crashed airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, had been stopped before they could board the planes? Think about the lives that would have been saved and the grief that would have been averted. Imagine the years since. What would have been different?

In the case of the World Trade Center, U.S. troops wouldn’t have been sent to Afghanistan, for one thing. That invasion turned into a two-decades-long conflict, the United States’ longest war. And if the Trade Center had not fallen, would there have been that other U.S. war in the Middle East — the one in Iraq? We can’t know for sure, but we know that many lives changed because of that tragic 2001 attack.

Footpath to Expressway: Building on Humble Beginnings

Human beings used to be hunter-gatherers. There may be a slim chance that you’re still living that way, getting all your food from the natural world around you. I doubt it, though. Instead, you’re a student, an office worker, or perhaps a truck driver. Maybe you write code, or you’re an IT specialist. You perform any of

thousands of occupations unimagined by early humankind. You use tools like cell-phones and GPS navigation — things hardly dreamed of even when I was born in the middle of the 20th century, let alone at the dawn of civilization. Yet here I am, clacking away on a computer keyboard, checking my meager investments online, and listening to my streaming playlist just like a modern human being.

In a way, here too are the people of 30,000 years ago, my ancestors and yours. They may have thought a lot about berries, seeds, insects and grubs, shellfish, and calorie-rich bone marrow from fresh or scavenged kills. But they were endowed with the same basic biological equipment we have today. They were big-brained, tool-using bipeds with opposable thumbs, and after tens of thousands of years living hand to mouth from what they could find or kill, some of them spread across the world.

Either pushed by circumstance (climate change, for example) or inspired by new opportunities, they traveled from the lush forests, savannahs, and seacoasts of Africa to face the harsh challenges of virtually every environment on Earth, including mountains, deserts, frozen steppes, and remote islands. Eventually, they traded in stone spearheads and scrapers for tools and weapons made of copper, then of bronze, and then of iron . . . and ultimately built things like microcircuits and Mars rovers. Those people traveled and adapted and innovated all the way to today. They are you and me. In a weird way, then is now.

Around 12,000 years ago, not very long after the last Ice Age ended, some people whose technology consisted largely of sticks and rocks settled down. They were discovering that if they put seeds in the ground, plants would come up, and that this process worked best if they stuck around to tend the plants. This realization eventually led to farming.

Scholars point to an area they call the Fertile Crescent (see Figure 1-1), as a hotbed of early farming. Shaped like a mangled croissant, the Fertile Crescent stretched from what is now western Iran and the Persian Gulf through the river valleys of today's Iraq and into western Turkey. Then it hooked south along the Mediterranean coast and the Jordan River through Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and into northern Africa and the Nile Valley of Egypt. The crescent is where archaeologists have found some of the oldest cities in the world.

The chain reaction that starts civilizations goes something like this: Agriculture leads people to stay put in exchange for more food, and ample food enables population growth. When a group's population reaches a certain size, there's little chance of going back to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, because there wouldn't be enough food for so many people. Ample food also gives the growing population commodities to trade. Trade leads to more trade, which leads to more goods and wealth. Not everybody works in the fields. Some folks can specialize in hauling

goods; others can construct buildings or perhaps concentrate on making weapons, used either to protect their own wealth or to take wealth away from others. Artisans create jewelry and turn mundane objects (arrowheads, pots, baskets) into aesthetic statements. Society gets multilayered. Buildings rise. Villages become towns. Cities rise. Trade necessitates keeping track of quantities and values, which necessitates a way to record information. Number systems get invented. Writing follows. Prehistory becomes history.



FIGURE 1-1: The Fertile Crescent extended from the Persian Gulf through Iraq and into Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and into the Nile Valley of Egypt.

Nafsadh / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY SA 4.0

Next thing you know, an English-speaking woman in Florida, whose various ancestors spoke Spanish, Irish Celtic, and Japanese, is sitting in her South Korean car, stuck in traffic on the expressway, a style of limited-access road invented in Germany. She's sipping a cup of coffee harvested in El Salvador, brewed in the Italian style in a machine manufactured in China to Swiss specifications. On her car's satellite radio, a voice beamed from London is introducing news stories about outbreaks of disease, raging wildfires, floods, and a new tropical storm. The reports come from Greece, Canada, China, and Haiti. She reaches over and switches to a station that features a style of music invented in Jamaica by English-speaking people of African descent.

War! What Is It Good For? Material for History Books, That's What

A view of history that sees only progress — this advance leads to that terrific advance, which leads to another incredible breakthrough, and so on — doesn't account for the fact that people can be awful. Some are ruthless, some are destructive, some are stupid, and many are hateful. More often, people are simply thoughtless and careless. Not you, of course. You're full of compassion and understanding, and capable of doing great things. And we all know or at least know about somebody whose ability to make this world better is off the charts. But the human race also produces bad characters and bad results.

Much of this book deals with war. I wish that weren't so, but for reasons that anthropologists, psychologists, historians, politicians, economists, and many more have never been able to untangle, there's always been somebody who's eager to bash, skewer, shoot, blast, or vaporize somebody else. History is too often an account of how one group of people, under the banner of Persia, Genghis Khan, William of Normandy, imperial Japan, or whatever decided to overrun another group. Many such efforts succeeded, if success can be defined as killing other people and stealing their land, resources, wealth, wives, children, and so on.



IN THEIR
WORDS

One of my favorite quotations about war comes from the historian Barbara Tuchman: “War is the unfolding of miscalculations.” It underscores two facts: Many decisions made in war turn out to be wrong, and many successful wartime strategies have turned out to be the result of dumb luck.

Historians cite the 20th century as being perhaps the worst ever in terms of war and its toll — not because people were more warlike, but because the weapons had grown so much deadlier and transportation so much faster. During World War I (1914–18) and even more during World War II (1939–45), the machines of destruction reached farther and did more damage than ever before.

Wars since WWII have been somewhat contained to a region or fought with an understanding that neither side would escalate the weaponry too far. During the Vietnam War, a 1960s–'70s conflict between communist North Vietnam and the nationalist government of South Vietnam, each side had allies with deep pockets and nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union and China provided supplies and arms to the North Vietnamese, while the United States sent military advisers and then, starting in 1965, active troops to fight for South Vietnam. The military conflict spread to Cambodia and Thailand, but not around the world. The Americans, though deeply suspicious of and armed against both the Chinese and the Soviets, avoided all-out war with either.