

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 430

### “Question Time II”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Today I will be answering questions sent in by you, my listeners, because for every question I receive, there are probably hundreds of other listeners who wondered the same thing. So let's get to it.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 430. Question Time II.

Here is the question-and-answer episode I've been promising you. Over forty listeners sent in questions in response to my call, and many of them sent me more than one question; as many as eight in one case. I want to thank everyone who submitted a question—or two, or three, or eight—and apologize because I didn't have time to send a personal response to every one of you.

Please be assured that I have read and filed every question from every person who wrote in. Unfortunately, I'm not going to be able to answer every one of them today. And to think a few months ago I wasn't sure there would be enough questions to fill one episode. Given the circumstances, I think the best solution is to do another question-and-answer episode in a few months. So if I don't answer your question today, don't despair. I'll try to get to it next time.

Let me begin with a question I received from several of you, who asked me how much longer I expect the podcast will take to finish the twentieth century and/or how many more episodes I expect to need.

Well, those of you who have listened through from the beginning know that in the early years I made a few predictions along these lines, every one of which proved to wildly underestimate the answer. When I began this podcast, I had in mind 200 episodes. I figured that was two episodes for each year of the century, which sounded like plenty of time. It quickly became clear that it would be more complicated than that.

I have always believed that the two world wars would take up a disproportionate amount of time, and I expect that once we finish the Second World War, which I think we will do in 2026, but don't quote me on that, the second half of the century will go faster than the first. On the other hand, as listener Michael pointed out when he asked about this, the cultural, social, and technological stories will multiply after the war, so that would tend to increase the number of episodes in the second half of the century. All I can say is, we'll just have to wait and see.

Frankly, these days I try not to think too hard about how much farther I have to go, because thinking long-term just exhausts me. I find it easier to focus on the next few episodes and not worry too much about anything beyond that. I don't have a target number of episodes anymore; I plan to let it take as long as it takes.

On the other hand, I'm 68 years old now, and I've also been contemplating the possibility that I won't remain alive and healthy long enough to finish this project. There's nothing I can do about that but plug along and hope for the best. I might find myself declining to the point where I will have to slow the pace of new episodes, and I'll let you know if and when I get there. The worst case would be if I suddenly became completely incapable of continuing the podcast. If that happens, I may suddenly go silent, at least for a time, without explanation. So let me take this opportunity to advise you all right now that if that happens, if I suddenly stop posting new episodes without warning, it's because something forced me to stop, and I'll let you know, if and when I can, what's going on.

In a related question, some of you have also asked me whether I still enjoy doing the podcast, and the answer to that is an emphatic yes. I have learned so much about history myself in the course of producing *The History of the Twentieth Century*. It's a truism that the best way to learn about a given topic is to teach it to someone else, because it forces you to think hard about the material. Ten years in, I don't see myself ever quitting the podcast by choice.

This leads me to another related question which some of you have asked: how do I decide which topics to cover on the podcast. The first rule is a simple one: if I think it's interesting, it goes into the podcast. In addition to everything else, *The History of the Twentieth Century* is very much a personal statement of what I think is important about the twentieth century, and, as you may have noticed, sometimes my personal opinion about what it all means. For listeners, that means if you are interested in the same kinds of things I'm interested in, you will enjoy the podcast, and if you aren't, you may find the podcast tedious. But that's fine; you have many other podcasts available to you if mine doesn't suit.

I said that was the first rule. I would be lying if I said it was the only rule, because often I include a topic because it's too important and too well known to ignore, regardless of my personal feelings. But I learned something instructive in the early days of the podcast, the Belle Époque period, or the first season, if you will. When I was preparing those episodes, I was keenly aware that I was approaching the sinking of *Titanic*. Clearly, this was an event I needed to cover, but I

approached it without much enthusiasm, because I felt that story has been told and retold and analyzed and interpreted so many times that I wouldn't be able to come up with anything new to say, so the episode wouldn't be very good.

But when I tackled the subject, I realized that no matter how many other people have told that story, no one has ever told it my way. No one ever told it *The History of the Twentieth Century* way. What does that mean? I'm not even sure myself. Part of it is a matter of personal style. Part of it is because in this podcast I like to consider developments in science and technology and in arts and culture and how they influence the course of history, so when I produced an episode about the *Titanic*, I talked about the place of the brand-new medium of radio in the story. I examined the prior experiences of large steamships that encountered icebergs. And I talked about the music the band played as the ship went down. You see?

Similarly, when I came to 1914 and the July Crisis, I was acutely conscious of the fact that my friend and colleague Zack Twamley has done amazing work on that topic in his podcast, *When Diplomacy Fails*. In fact, the July Crisis is I believe his main academic interest in history. I could never compete with Zack in talking about the July Crisis, but especially after my *Titanic* experience, I realized I don't have to, because this isn't a competition. I'd like to think that anyone who has listened to Zack on this topic would be more interested, not less, in hearing what I had to say about it, or vice versa. So in fact we're on the same team, you see?

A few listeners, including Alex T. and Nico, asked me if there was any topic I wish I had covered, but that we've already passed by on the podcast chronology. First of all, I don't regard any topic as out of bounds because of chronology. There are many episodes in which I went back to an earlier time and reviewed some of the back-story to the topic of the episode. There are some stories that are already unfolding as of 1944, where we are right now, but there isn't enough to say about them yet to justify inserting them into an episode.

I have a number of topics in the back of my mind that I want to talk about someday, but I'm not ready to talk about yet. One example would be antibiotics, which were already beginning to appear by 1944, but I'm not going to deal that until after the war. When I am, I surely will go back to the earliest discoveries that led to antibiotics, which would include events from before the war. So while I like to keep the podcast more-or-less chronological, I do move back and forth on the timeline when I feel the narrative requires it.

Sometimes, I have a topic in the back of my mind that I want to introduce into the podcast, but I'm not sure how to work it in. In those cases, I wait until an opportunity appears. I call these "entry points," a place in the narrative when it would be natural to introduce this new topic I want to talk about. To give you an example, I wanted to talk about polio in the interwar period and discuss how people were left disabled by the disease and how much it was feared at the time, but no opportunity ever seemed to present itself. I was beginning to feel as if I was never going to get to it; then came time for me to discuss Franklin Roosevelt's early years, and there it was:

the perfect entry point. Roosevelt was a prominent figure who'd been disabled by polio, making an episode focused on him the perfect opportunity to talk about how the disease was affecting society at large.

I have a number of topics in the back of my mind that I intend to address as we move into the post-war world, and experience has taught me not to worry too much about when and how to work them into the narrative. Instead, I'll trust that the right moment will come and that I'll recognize it when it does.

Listener William asked me whether I thought there were figures in the twentieth century who single-handedly changed the course of history, or whether they were simply people at the right place and time.

This is an interesting question. I lean more toward the view that historical events are shaped by large forces: social, technological, economic, and cultural, and that leaders of the time are following those trends rather than shaping history by the force of their own will.

On the other hand, there are critical moments in history where it does seem that certain people, yes in the right time and place, were able to force history to move in their preferred direction. I suppose that's what makes a "critical moment," when the large forces are pulling in different directions, and certain individuals, especially those who wield a lot of power, can indeed bend history to their will.

One example who immediately comes to mind is Winston Churchill. There is much criticism you can fairly level against Churchill, especially Gallipoli and the Bengal Famine, and that's just the beginning, but the most important moment in Churchill's life and the moment when he most clearly shaped history came immediately after the fall of France, when the shaken political leadership in Britain came very close to suing Germany for peace. It is easy to imagine that had Churchill not been prime minister at the time, the British government might very well have made substantial concessions in exchange for an armistice.

If that had happened, I don't believe it would have ended the war; it only would have paused it. Peace with Britain would only have encouraged Hitler to invade the Soviet Union, which you'll notice he did even with a hostile Britain on his western flank. The invasion of the Soviet Union would, I think, have led to the US aiding the USSR and pressing Britain to re-enter the war in exchange for Lend-Lease aid. I think Britain would have taken that deal. So in my counterfactual, the war would have developed in a similar way and ended in a similar way, but it would have taken longer and cost even more in lives and treasure than the war as we know it.

Much as I hate to acknowledge it, the single most influential individual of the twentieth century has to be Adolf Hitler. His is certainly a case of bending history by force of will, though he bent it in a most terrible way. That Hitler could even get so far as chancellor of Germany strikes me as

unlikely. During the darkest hours of the Great Depression, the German political system was able to hold Hitler at bay for a time, but as we saw, not quite long enough.

And then we have to consider the rapid fall of France, which was largely due to Hitler's strategy of an armored offensive through the Ardennes. My gut feeling is that there was only about a one out of three chance that would have worked, but Hitler rolled the dice and got lucky. Had it not worked, a standoff not unlike that of the last war would have developed between the two countries, and maybe France would eventually have been beaten anyway, but in that scenario, the UK, the USSR, and the US would all have had more time to prepare their own militaries to deal with Germany while the German military would have taken much heavier losses in fighting the French.

Hitler's story is of a man who put everything on the line and rolled the dice, not just once but repeatedly, and for a while it seemed to work. Even those who doubted him had to concede his successes. Imagine how that must have felt to him, and you begin to see why he kept doing it, and why he began thinking of himself as a man of destiny, called by fate to lead the German nation.

But a strategy like that can't work forever, and as the saying goes, whatever can't go on forever eventually stops. In Hitler's case, that was the invasion of the Soviet Union. It was the biggest gamble of his life, and the dice didn't quite get him what he needed.

Listener Mike asked me several questions related to how I do research. No, I do not have an assistant or anyone helping me. I get most of my research materials from my local library, and if there's some book I really want to see that my library can't provide, I buy it online. I confess I rely heavily on Wikipedia, though not in the way that sounds. When I want to research a given topic, I go to Wikipedia first to get an overview and form an outline of what I want to talk about, then I read the bibliography at the bottom of the page for some ideas on which books to look at.

Another vital service I get from Wikipedia is assurance that I haven't overlooked some major aspect of whatever topic I'm talking about. I often worry that I've missed something important that should be included in the episode, and Wikipedia helps me be sure I've hit all the most important points.

I find Wikipedia to be generally reliable, though I try to make sure I can find at least one other source that agrees with whatever Wikipedia is telling me. I also find Wikipedia is excellent on dates. If you want to know when someone was born or died or on what date major events happen, I often discover that Wikipedia disagrees with what's in the books, and when there is a disagreement, usually Wikipedia is right and the author of the book is the one who's mistaken.

On the other hand, an important guideline that serves me well when reading Wikipedia is this: if what Wikipedia is telling me sounds hard to believe, it probably is wrong, or at least it needs to be carefully verified from another source before I use it.

The books I use are sometimes biased, and there are occasions when listeners have written in trying to warn me off certain books or certain authors, but I find that a serious scholar tries to get their facts right, even when the conclusions they draw from them seem to me way wrong. Serious scholars might go so far as to omit certain facts that rebut the conclusion they're making, but no worse than that. And I do try to stick to books written by actual experts on the topic. And please note that English is the only language I know well enough to read a book in, so that means my history is strongly slanted toward topics English-speaking academics and authors are interested in. I don't know what I can do to remedy that; I can only confess it and hope you understand.

And this wasn't a question anyone sent in, but I have occasionally been accused of having an Anglo-American bias, and especially an American bias. It's true, but please keep in mind how I'm restricted to English-language sources. Additionally, the single most important development of the twentieth century, in my mind, was the decline of Britain as the pre-eminent military and economic power in the world, and the rise of the United States to supplant it. *Time* magazine famously declared the twentieth century "the American century," though I haven't mentioned that yet because it hasn't been said yet. But it's true, and to understand what happened in America—and in Britain—during the twentieth century is key to understanding everything else.

Mike also wrote that he was impressed by the depth and detail of some episodes, and I feel obligated to say this is only to the credit of the authors of my sources. They do the really hard work. I mean to name on the podcast website the books I found particularly helpful, though unfortunately, I am literally a half a decade behind on that task. One day, I hope to give some credit to the people who most deserve it.

Also, on the subject of detail, once I latch on to a detail I find particularly important or interesting, I do go down research rabbit holes to flesh it out as far as I can. As long-time listeners know, I sometimes spend much time on the life of one individual. I do this because the biographical details of a given person who lived at a given time and place can tell you a lot about what life was like at that time and place, and sometimes I like to tell the story of an event through the eyes of someone who experienced it. This isn't always possible, and I wouldn't tell every story that way even if I could, but focusing on how history affected an identifiable, relatable person sometimes is instructive in a way that a conventional telling would not be.

A good recent example of this is the young man Yuri Ryabinkin, whom I talked about when I described the Siege of Leningrad in episode 406. I met Yuri through the book *Leningrad: The Epic Siege of World War II*, by Anna Reid. She included excerpts from the diaries of many who experienced the siege, including Yuri; when I read a couple of his excerpts, I realized Yuri was going to be at the center of that episode. Once I made that decision, I went beyond the excerpts in the book. I searched online and found more information, including a complete copy of Yuri's diary. Unfortunately, it was in Russian. Fortunately, Google Translate is a thing, and I managed to get Yuri's words and thoughts clearly enough to talk about them.

By the way, for those who might be interested, I understand someone is working on an annotated English translation of Yuri's diary, which I think is a great idea, but a project like that is going to take some time, so I can't tell you when you'll be able to read it.

[music: Beethoven, *Bagatelle No. 25 in A minor*.]

Listener Fernando asked me about the place of mysticism in National Socialism. Over the past fifty years, any number of books and television documentaries have appeared that purport to explain the actions of Adolf Hitler and other Nazis by reference to various forms of occultism.

There are two versions of this claim. What I'll call the "strong" version proposed that Hitler was in fact possessed by some demon or demonic influence that used him to unleash evil upon our world. Now, if a person truly believes that demons are real, that they are capable of possessing humans and using them for evil purposes, and that Hitler is an example of this, then we're more in the realm of religious or spiritual belief than historical fact, and I don't know how anyone could disprove such a belief.

Then there is what I'll call the "weak" version of this idea. This version is agnostic on whether demons or evil spirits or such exist, but claims that Hitler and the top Nazis believed they did, and incorporated ideas from various occult belief systems into their ideology and practice. Well, the evidence of such a thing is very thin. If you dig deep enough into the biographies of the top Nazis, you can find some signs of interest in the occult, but that's also true of the public at large and I doubt it means anything.

The one form of mysticism you can plausibly pin on the Nazis is Ariosophy, which is a sort of mystical interpretation of German history and culture. The whole idea of ancient Aryans, who were a superior sort of human being, from whom modern Northern Europeans are descended, is ahistorical nonsense. I'll refer you to episode 272, where I talked about it a little bit. The Nazis were interested in the culture and artifacts of the ancient Germanic peoples, including German paganism, symbols, and runes. This is not surprising for a German nationalist movement; the swastika itself was drawn from ancient Germanic sources.

But Nazis and other German nationalists of the time did tend to think of these legacies of the ancient Germans as imbued with some special power or meaning, besides the historical or cultural significance. These beliefs were part and parcel of the Nazi belief in the inherent superiority of Germans, the "master race," and the supposed destiny of Germany to lead the rest of the world. But this is more a case of embracing the mysticism because they were German nationalists. To suggest they embraced German nationalism because they believed in the mysticism is putting the cart before the horse.

And I'll end this episode with three questions from listener Joseph, and I'll answer all three of them, because they're likely to be of general interest. First, is the "oh, and one more thing" inspired by the American TV series *Columbo*? Actually, no. I'm familiar with that program but I have never actually watched it and was unaware that it was a recurring element of the show until other people told me about it.

Second, yes, I am sometimes approached by businesses interested in buying advertising on the podcast and I have turned down every offer. As to why, well when I first created the podcast, I envisioned, or at least hoped, I'd get advertising revenue someday. I put that fanfare at the beginning of the show so I could insert an ad before the episode began, with the fanfare serving as the transition from the ad to the program.

I lost interest in this when so many generous listeners began sending in donations. I have to say, it is quite an experience the first time you get an email that says, "I would like to send you money. Please tell me how."

But I don't criticize any podcaster who does run ads. Podcasts take up a lot of time, and some podcasters are hoping to make their podcast into their full-time job. Getting and keeping a good job isn't easy these days, and I respect anyone who tries to carve out their own niche in the economy, but none of this applies to me. I'm retired, and for me, this is more a hobby than a job. It's helpful to get a little money. I've joked a few times about how your donations help convince Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century that I'm not wasting my time doing this, but it's also the truth. The podcast is sometimes an imposition on her as well, and donations are a tangible sign that yes, there are people out there listening to the podcast, and yes, it is important to them and they value it.

I once tried to work out how much money I receive in donations compared to how many hours I spend producing the podcast and it works out to around five dollars an hour, so you know I don't do it for the money, although I do appreciate your gifts.

And that brings me to the third question: are you still enjoying this after ten years in? I already spoke about this, but it seems a good place to end today's episode. Yes, I am enjoying this, and I don't expect that will change. I'm retired, so I have to do something with my time. If I weren't doing this podcast, I'd be doing something else to entertain myself, but the difference is this: I might enjoy myself watching a movie or playing a videogame, but after it's over, I have nothing to show for it. I not only enjoy making the podcast, but it gives me a sense of fulfillment. I have something to show for my time and I have many, many listeners who download the episodes and write me emails and send donations and in doing those things affirm that my time is well spent. And really, what more can you ask?

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening. This is a special Christmas episode of the podcast, which is my gift to you, my listeners. I hope you enjoyed it.

And I hope you'll join me two weeks from now, when we return to the war and the pending invasion of France. I'll be talking about Allied bombing of France, from 1940 up to the invasion, and the awkwardness of bombing one of your own allies. That's in two weeks, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I also had a couple of American listeners write in to query me about my use of the metric system on the podcast, which apparently irritates them. It even moved them to question my patriotism, although I confess I'm baffled over what is so quintessentially American about using a British system of measurement. I mean, we did fight a revolution for the right to do things our own way.

One of these questioners suggested it my use of the metric system was unnecessary, pointing out to me that my French audience is small. Yes, that's true. Only 0.5% of my listeners are in France, but there are 190 other countries that also use the metric system, and when I add up audience shares, I find that 42% of my listeners are in countries that use the metric system. 58% are in the United States.

I used to use American-style measurements all the time, until my metric listeners began to complain, and I realized they had a point, especially considering how big a share of my audience they are. You also have to consider that while many Americans are familiar with the metric system, few people outside the US are well-acquainted with the system we use in this country. Why should they be?

The way I reckon it, this works out to roughly an even split. I decided to resolve this dilemma by using American measurements when I'm talking about American things, and metric measurements when I'm talking about other countries. I also lean heavily metric when I talk about military matters, because militaries around the world use the metric system, including the US military.

And as I said, many Americans are already familiar with the metric system, especially those who work in science, technology, engineering, or medicine, and I suspect this group is disproportionately represented in the audience for podcasts. I was trained as an engineer myself, so I speak metric fluently. I doubt even the staunchest advocates of the American system of measurements refuse to use metric tools, or complain when their doctors write them prescriptions with the dosages given in milligrams. America is more metric than you might think.

[music: Closing Theme]