

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 460

“Question Time III”

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 460. Question Time III.

Almost a year ago now, I solicited listener questions for a question-and-answer episode of the podcast, which I released at the end of last year. I got a lot more questions than I was able to answer in that episode, so I promised I would do another one the following summer. Well, here it is. I missed my self-imposed deadline by a week, as I'm releasing this episode on the first Sunday after the equinox, so technically summer is over in the Northern Hemisphere, but I was closer this time than I have been on other predictions about the podcast, so give me credit for that much.

I will begin with listener Jack, who asked me my view on why some nations resisted fascism during the interwar period while others embraced it. He cites the United States and Czechoslovakia as two nations that also experienced some degree of pressure to move toward fascism yet successfully resisted, in contrast with Germany and Italy.

Good question, and good point.

A lot of scholars have spent a lot of time examining this question. In both Germany and Italy, a key reason was the sense of bitterness at having been cheated, in their view, by the outcomes of the First World War. By contrast, in the case of Czechoslovakia, the war gave the Czechs and the Slovaks independence, which was what they most wanted. They had nothing to be bitter about.

I suspect there are also cultural reasons. I spent a week in Prague earlier this year, and was struck by the laid-back attitude of the Czech people, if I can put it that way. The Czechs have been wronged in many ways, historically speaking, but seem to take such things in stride. Now, a week isn't nearly long enough to get a good read on another culture, but that's my observation, for what it's worth.

Both Germany and Italy had only recently become unified states, and it seems clear in the national attitudes of both countries between unification and the Second World War of wanting their place in the sun, as Kaiser Wilhelm put it. The Germans and the Italians had long been great nations, but had only recently become great states, if you get what I'm saying. Both of them felt that they'd gotten a late start in the race to become one of the Great Powers and both of them felt a sense that the acknowledged Great Powers, especially Britain, France, and Russia, were determined to preserve the imperial dominance they already had and keep Germany and Italy bottled up in Central Europe.

These feelings that the deck was stacked against them only became stronger after the First World War in both countries, even though they'd been on opposite sides. And you could say much the same things about Japan. Japan didn't go truly fascist, though it did very much go right-wing nationalistic and militaristic.

As for the United States, the US of the Twenties was optimistic and forward looking and to all appearances a poor candidate for the emergence of fascism. Then the Great Depression struck. It is all too easy to imagine how, in different circumstances, an ambitious demagogue might have taken advantage of the dire situation America found itself in.

Jack cites Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh as two Americans of the time who might have led the US toward fascism, had they been in a better position to do so. I would add to that list Huey Long. Fortunately, none of the three had been in a position of great influence, and neither Herbert Hoover nor Franklin Roosevelt, who were, had fascist leanings. Hoover was a smart and talented guy who anticipated the Great Depression; unfortunately, he was also insanely stubborn in his conviction that only he knew the correct response to the calamity, and that response was to wait for the problem to sort itself out. He was wrong on the facts; that was not the right response. He was also wrong on the politics. When things are going very badly, the public wants to see action, and they didn't see much action coming from Herbert Hoover.

Franklin Roosevelt was not an ideologue. He didn't come to the Presidency convinced he knew all the answers. But he well understood that the American public was demoralized and wanted to see somebody doing something. Roosevelt's approach, as he himself described it, was to try something, anything, and if it didn't work, try something else, but never stop trying. It was that can-do attitude that was so refreshing to the voters.

Jack also asked me what people today can do to oppose fascism. Well, that's the \$64 question, isn't it? My personal answer is you should learn more about history yourself and share what you learned with other people, but then I would say that, wouldn't I?

Listener Josh in England asked me the logical follow-up question: What can we learn from history to help us navigate the times we live in? That's a complicated question and to some extent what we can learn from a given bit of history depends on what that bit was.

But here's a general principle that comes to mind: I'm often struck by cases when I hear people advocate reverting to an earlier way of doing things. Recent examples I've heard were things like the abolishing the US Federal Reserve System or dissolving NATO or going back to the use of tariffs as a means to raise tax revenue. When I hear this kind of talk, my first thought is always, "Why do you think previous generations abandoned those old things and replaced them with new things?" If they were superior to our current ways of doing things, why did people institute our current ways in the first place?

To give one quick example, I encountered a young man on the internet who declared something like, "Franklin Roosevelt was a fool for thinking inflation would create prosperity." I pointed out to him that during Roosevelt's first term, which took place well before he was born, Roosevelt did what he did and the voters re-elected him overwhelmingly. In fact, most of the generation of people who lived through the 1930s revered Roosevelt for the rest of their lives. But you think his policies were foolish. Does that mean you believe you understand what happened in the US economy from 1933 to 1936 better than millions of Americans who lived through it? That's a bold claim.

With regard to fascists, I'll just note that the last time they made an appearance, we responded by bombing their cities, invading their countries, and demanding their unconditional surrender. I think that's a sound response and see no reason to revise it.

Listener Will from Luxembourg asked me about the two world wars and my thoughts on comparing them. He also ventured that the main theme of twentieth century history, at least so far, might be "Nationalism and the many ways it can be a problem."

Yeah, fair enough. To me, it's interesting to consider that nationalism in the 19th century was generally a positive force. It led to the downfall of multiethnic empires like Austria and Russia but strengthened Germany. Nationalism was also generally a plus in places outside Europe, particularly Turkey, India, and China. In the twentieth century, nationalism in Asia and Africa helped end colonialism; on the other hand, advanced cases of nationalism were the root cause of two terrible wars.

Regarding the wars, one might analyze the two world wars as one larger conflict with a 20-year armistice in the middle. I've heard it dubbed "The Second Thirty Years War." And that's an

interesting way of looking at it. After we finish The Second World War, don't be surprised if I do an episode with exactly that title: "The Second Thirty Years War."

A listener who describes himself as my biggest fan in Alabama asked me about twentieth-figures who changed the course of history, and whether it might be more a case of being at the right place at the right time. Yes, well that's a question much discussed and debated, isn't it?

Here's what I think. I perceive three models of how history might operate, which I call random, linear, and chaotic. Random means that human societies are like gases. The actions of individuals are like the movements of individual molecules of a gas. They are essentially unpredictable, and yet the behavior of the gas as a whole is easily predicted. You only need to know the number of molecules, the volume of the space, the pressure and the temperature. If you know any three of those numbers you can easily predict the fourth. This is Isaac Asimov's psychohistory from the Foundation trilogy, and indeed he used the gas analogy I just used to explain it.

By the second, linear, I mean the flow of history is the sum of individual choices made by everyone living in it. Some people have more influence on history than others, but everyone has some. Every time any one of us makes a good choice, we make the world incrementally better. Every time one of us makes a bad choice, we make the world incrementally worse.

And the third, chaotic, is the butterfly effect. The flap of a butterfly's wings over here might create a cyclone over there. Small changes can have huge and unpredictable consequences.

To summarize, imagine that you are trying to decide whether to have for dinner a salad or a cheeseburger. In the random model, your choice means nothing in the flow of history. In the linear model, if you choose the salad, you make the world incrementally better; if you choose the cheeseburger, you make the world incrementally worse.

And in the chaotic model, your choice might determine the future survival of the human race, and even worse, you can't predict which choice leads to which outcome.

My guess is that history might operate by any of these models, at various times and places. Most of the time, the random model holds, but clearly not always. I think it's obvious that Franklin Roosevelt's effect on the United States in 1933 was unique to him, and had he never existed, the history of that moment would have been quite different. I'd say the same about Winston Churchill in Britain in 1940. And I suppose I have to concede the same about Adolf Hitler and Germany in 1933.

Relatedly, listener Markus asked me which person grew on me the most in the course of the podcast, whom did I learn to detest the most, and whom would I invite over for dinner?

Easy answer. Winston Churchill. All three. Studying the situation in 1940 after the fall of France led me to the realization of how close Britain came to capitulating to Hitler, and how important a role Churchill's unyielding opposition to any compromise played.

On the other hand, Churchill was wrong about an awful lot of things, most notably Britain's relationship with India. He was also a voice in the wilderness warning about Hitler in the Thirties, true, but is that perhaps a case in which even a stopped clock is sometimes right, as they say? Churchill was wrong about a lot of things, not to mention a toffee-nosed aristocrat wannabe, and a dreadful racist to boot, which are the parts I detest. On the other other hand, he was witty and charming and would have made a wonderful dinner guest.

So there you have it.

[music: Vivaldi, "Summer" Concerto from *The Four Seasons*.]

That was an excerpt from the "Summer" Concerto from *The Four Seasons*, a set of four concertos composed by Antonio Vivaldi. Which means that although I didn't get this episode released in summer, I got "Summer" in the episode.

Listener Kathy asked me how I choose my source material. This is a question I am leery of answering, because I know there are people waiting to pounce and tell me, "That was a terrible source to use, how could you have possibly not used this much better one over here?"

I've already acknowledged my debts to Barbara Tuchman and Jacob Bronowski, and particularly their books *The Proud Tower* and *The Ascent of Man*, respectively. I should also mention Mary McAuliffe's *Twilight of the Belle Époque*. I used the Tuchman and McAuliffe books as sources back in the Belle Époque days of the podcast. Not so much *The Ascent of Man* because that book spans a much wider history. But I cite these books not so much because they were useful resources as because they showed me how I wanted to talk about history in this podcast.

What do I mean by that? Two things. First, the interdisciplinary approach. I love to look at politics and culture and international affairs and music and literature and science and technology and trace the connections between them at a given historical moment. If this podcast has a thesis, it is that you can't fully understand what was going on in any of those fields until after you've examined what was going on in the others.

Second is the personal approach. The lives of individuals are inherently more interesting than broad historical trends. I love to tell history through the eyes of someone who was living it, maybe an important figure, like Franklin Roosevelt, or an obscure figure like Yuri Ryabinkin, the teenage boy who kept a diary of the Siege of Leningrad. Recounting the life of a person who lived in a certain time and place is a great way to give listeners a fuller picture what life was like at the time. And this, like politics and culture and music and science and all the rest, is also essential to truly understanding the period.

Those are the two characteristics I look for in a source: interdisciplinarianism and attention to personal stories.

To give you an example, since I already mentioned Yuri, here's how I might go about approaching a topic. I knew I needed to do an episode on the Siege of Leningrad. The first stop is usually Wikipedia, for an overview of the subject and a bibliography. I look over the bibliography and pick out what appear to be promising sources. Then I try to get copies of them. I only have access to my small-town public library, so I'm biased in favor of resources I can get there. And of course, there is such a thing as inter-library loans. And if a book seems particularly promising and I can't find it otherwise, I'll buy a copy.

In the case of the Siege of Leningrad, Wikipedia's bibliography led me to Anna Reid's massive book, *Leningrad: Tragedy of a City under Siege*. I got the book from my library and read it. Reid uses excerpts from the diaries of around a dozen people to help illustrate events during the siege, and that was how I first encountered the diary of Yuri Ryabinkin. What made his writing in particular jump out at me was the way it felt so much like the thoughts of a sixteen-year-old boy.

Half of us were sixteen-year-old boys ourselves at one time, and the other half of us likely met a few here and there, and one lesson I've learned from history is that teenage boys are exactly the same, regardless of their culture or nationality or the century they grew up in. Somehow, I find that comforting, and by the way, that's an observation I first made long before I was introduced to Yuri.

As soon as I read the quotations from Yuri's diary in Anna Reid's book, I knew immediately this was how I wanted to tell the story of the siege: by centering Yuri. It also meant that I was now going from one episode on the Siege of Leningrad to two, but that was a price I was glad to pay. I was able to find a complete copy of Yuri's diary online, albeit in the original Russian, but with the help of Google Translate, I was able to read to you more of the diary than what Anna Reid provides.

A few listeners asked me which episode I'm most proud of. I don't have a single favorite, but the story of Yuri Ryabinkin and the Siege of Leningrad is definitely on the list. That one might be the most emotional episode I ever produced; a couple of listeners wrote in to tell me it made them cry. Tens of millions of Russians suffered terribly during the Second World War, but somehow, telling the story of the broad sweep of the war, the hunger, deprivation, suffering and killing doesn't bring it as close to home as does a glimpse of it all through the eyes of one sixteen-year-old boy who was there.

And since you asked, some of the other episodes I'm most proud of, in no particular order, were the ones on Diaghilev and Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes, the one on King Leopold and the Congo, the episodes on the birth of jazz and Marie Curie and the July Crisis and Pearl Harbor and Thomas Midgley and the Great Debate over the size of the Universe. Just to name a few.

Listener Christian asked me where my personal takeaways of twentieth century history diverged most strongly from the historical consensus. The one I keep coming back to, in my own mind, is this: I think it was a mistake for the United States to have gotten involved in the First World War. And having said that, I suppose I should explain my thinking.

It's not so much that I believe the US should not have declared war on Germany; rather, I contend that it was a mistake to send so many soldiers to France and get so involved in combat on the Western Front. As I pointed out in the podcast at the time, a declaration of war does not necessarily require raising an army of millions and sending them overseas. The US could have avoided that and instead simply sent the Navy to assist the British and French with enforcing the blockade of Germany.

The US could also have lent money to Britain and France to help them maintain their war effort, as indeed it did. It could have devised a plan similar to Franklin Roosevelt's Lend-Lease program, if anyone could have thought of it in 1917. Most important of all, the US could have extended cash grants, or at least forgiven the loans after the war was over. If an Allied victory in Europe in the First World War was important enough to America to justify sending millions of young Americans to France to risk life and limb, surely it was important enough to spend some money on. I find it peculiar that this doesn't seem to have occurred to anyone in the US government at the time.

And if the United States had forgiven Britain and France their debts, those countries might have been more flexible with German reparations payments, and who knows, that whole unpleasantness in Germany in the Thirties and Forties might have been avoided. More generosity toward the Russian Republic might have meant no October Revolution and no Russian Civil War, which would likely have also made for a better world.

I can only think of two potential downsides. One is that no American soldiers in Europe would have meant no African-American soldiers in Europe, which helped advance civil rights in the US. Even so, I expect the civil rights movement would have happened anyway. The other is that the US would have had less influence at the peace talks, which might have meant no League of Nations. Of course, the League of Nations proved a disappointment anyway, but no League of Nations would likely mean no United Nations. We haven't gotten to the creation of the United Nations yet, though it's coming soon, but the United Nations is basically the League of Nations 2.0, and I believe the world of the past eighty years has been a better place for having the United Nations in it.

A couple of listeners wrote in to ask me if I had any plans to write a book. Well yes, and I'm planning to self-publish it at the beginning of next year. But it's not a book about history, not directly. It's a young adult novel, centered on an American teenager living in Germany. It's a time travel story; I call it *No Time Like the Present*. (See what I did there?)

Does it involve history? Yes, it does; German history, to be specific. Is it twentieth-century history? No, it's sixteenth-century history. Will there be an audiobook? Yes, there will. Will I be the narrator? No, because I don't have the right voice for this story, so I hired a nice young man who does to read it for me.

I'll keep you posted on the publication. Young adult books are aimed at teenage readers, but you don't have to be a teenager to enjoy it. I myself read young adult novels all the time; it's nothing to be embarrassed about, I promise.

And finally, an anonymous listener asked, after ten years of telling the story of the twentieth century, and potentially as many as ten more ahead of me, what keeps me going?

In some sense, I wonder if I know the full answer to that question myself, but I'll give it a shot. First of all, I'm retired and I have to do *something*. Those who know me well will attest to the fact that one of my best skills is keeping busy. If I weren't doing this, I would be doing something else. I could be spending my time playing video games. I enjoy playing video games, but I learned long ago that while video games are fun, and if I play well I even feel a sense of accomplishment, after the game is over, it disappears and is forgotten and I have nothing to show for all my time and effort.

One of the best parts of doing this podcast is that after I'm finished with an episode, it goes on the shelf next to all the other episodes, metaphorically speaking, where anyone who cares to can admire it, study it, and enjoy it for themselves. That's enormously satisfying.

I also appreciate emails and messages listeners send me and reviews they post that indicate they did enjoy the podcast and appreciate my work on it. Some listeners have written to me to tell me that this podcast got them through a difficult time in their lives. I received a number of emails to that effect during the worst of the COVID pandemic, saying the podcast helped them cope with the loneliness and isolation.

And there it is right there: the knowledge that my podcast helped even one person get through hard times and come out the other side, that more than anything keeps me going.

We'll have to stop there for today. I apologize to those of you whose questions I didn't get to. If I didn't answer your question, the two most likely reasons are either that the question would take too long to answer properly, or, and more likely, that I didn't have much to say about your question, other than perhaps, "I don't know" or "I never thought about that." In any case, thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Ron for his kind donation, and thank you to Jake for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Ron and Jake help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

As always, the podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. You know the drill. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, where it's back to the war and back to the Western Front as Adolf Hitler launches his Hail Mary offensive. Wacht am Rhein, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. An anonymous listener challenged me on my claim that the introduction of the tank was the most important development in warfare in the twentieth century. The listener suggested that perhaps I should have said the airplane.

First of all, when I said that, I was thinking about land warfare. As my correspondent pointed out, the introduction of airplanes revolutionized naval warfare, which you can see most clearly in the Pacific Theater of the Second World War, where aircraft carriers displaced battleships as the most powerful and most feared of naval warships. And that's just one way in which the airplane changed naval warfare. I completely agree about this and should have clarified I was talking about ground combat. In naval terms, the airplane was the most important development, for sure.

But my correspondent also challenged me on ground warfare, pointing out that the French and the USSR both had better tanks than the Germans did in 1940 and 1941, but the Luftwaffe largely neutralized those advantages.

Here I have to stand by what I said earlier. The early German victories, in my view, had more to do with superior tank doctrine, or to put it in blunt language, the Germans had much better ideas on how to use their tanks than their enemies did. It is true that the Germans also enjoyed air superiority during that time, but in my view, that was less important.

All else being equal, it's better to have air superiority yourself than to face an enemy who has air superiority, but that fact alone doesn't make air power decisive. All else being equal, it's better to have naval superiority, or better submarines, or better artillery guns than your opponent has.

But when I was talking about the importance of the tank, I wasn't thinking primarily of how valuable it is to have armor superiority vs air superiority vs some other kind of superiority. I was thinking more in terms of how the introduction of the tank changed what ground combat looked like. Compare the four years of stalemate on the Western Front in the First World War against the rapid maneuver and movement of the combat in France in 1940 and 1944 and you can see clearly what I'm talking about.

I mentioned this matter of the importance of tanks because I was planting a seed for a future discussion, as I also think that 1945, where we are right now in the podcast chronology, is

something like the high point for tanks and armored vehicles and their importance in combat. The second half of the twentieth century will see the influence of tanks ebb away as new weapons and new tactics diminish the value of tanks on the battlefield. Think of the French and American wars in Vietnam for example.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

[music: Closing Theme]