

HISTORY BULLETIN

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

<i>anniversaries</i>	1
<i>New films</i>	1
<i>The Sympathizer</i>	1
<i>Verdicts on Castro</i>	2
<i>Podcasts</i>	2
<i>The Sellout</i>	2

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

This novel about the end and legacy of the Vietnam War deservedly won the Pulitzer Prize in 2016. It can be read as a spy novel, a war novel, an immigrant novel or a political novel. That makes it sound complex—in fact it is an ‘easy read’.

Perfect timing for the return of Vietnam to Haileybury’s iGCSE syllabus.



2017: YEAR OF ANNIVERSARIES

Every new year brings a spate of anniversaries but 2017 sees some important ones come into focus.

The most obvious ones are the Russian Revolutions in 1917 and the publication of Luther’s 95 theses—the act which supposedly began the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

The Russian ‘revolution’ happened in two stages, made more confusing still by the use of two calendars. The Romanov tsars were toppled in February/March to be followed by the Bolshevik takeover in October/November. Had the anniversary fallen whilst the Soviet Union was still in existence there is no doubt that there would have been huge celebrations but the event is more problematic for Putin’s Russia which is keen to stress stability and continuity with Russia’s imperial past. It will be interesting to see how the Russian state decides to commemorate the events.

The 500th anniversary of the Luther’s famous nailing of 95 theses for dispute on the church door at Wittenberg (possibly an apocryphal story) certainly marks a crucial event in European history. Luther’s sermons and vernacular translation of the Bible changed the world. It ushered in centuries of religious conflict in Europe, some of which still leaves a footprint – not least in Ireland. Some also see Luther’s act as an early example of German nationalism.

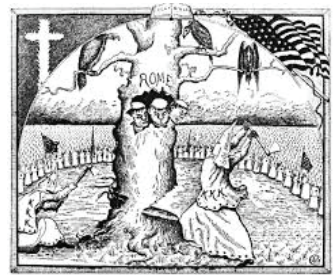
1917 also marks a century since the third Battle of Ypres - Passchendaele, ‘one of the great disasters of the war’ (Lloyd George). Removes visit Tyne Cot where British dead from the Passchendaele are remembered.

There are other interesting anniversaries in 2017. It is a century since the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. This was far from being a First World War side-show although many at the time probably saw it as such. The

troubles of the Middle East which still afflict us stem from the Ottoman breakup and failure to resolve Arab nationalism equitably.

In 717 the fourth siege of Constantinople by the Arabs took place. This is one of the great battles of history. It will also be 1000 years since Emma of Normandy married the Danish King Cnut. The wife of two kings (she had been married to Aethelred before Cnut) and the mother of two kings (Edward the Confessor and Harthacnut) Emma was a power behind the English throne until her death in 1052.

Watch out for a spate of new publications, documentaries and exhibitions to mark the anniversaries.



OSCAR TIME: DENIAL, JACKIE, VICEROY’S HOUSE

Denial is based on Deborah E. Lipstadt's book *History on Trial: My Day in Court with a Holocaust Denier* about the *Irving v Penguin Books Ltd* case when the Holocaust scholar was sued by Holocaust denier David Irving for libel. It stars Rachel Weisz, Tom Wilkinson, Timothy Spall. This looks

like an important film for potential lawyers as well as historians.

Natalie Portman’s performance as **Jackie** Kennedy in the immediate aftermath of the assassination has been fantastically well reviewed. As a new First Lady takes up residence in the White House and a greatly respected

one leaves, it is a poignant moment to reflect on the role.

Edwina Mountbatten was another kind of first lady—wife to the last Viceroy of India. **Viceroy’s House** looks at the end of 300 years of British rule. There’s a college connection was Attlee was PM at the time.



No unified verdict on Castro

One of my pupils once asked in frustration: Why can't historians just agree? Disagreement, argument and persuasion are at the heart of an historian's work. The death of Castro is a good illustration. To some historians Castro was a heroic champion of the disenfranchised; to others he was a cruel tyrant. Here is a range of views greeting his death in December:

Simon Hall, University of Leeds: *Castro was a revolutionary who symbolized his age. Arriving in Cuba in December 1956 he boldly predicted 'we will be free or we will be martyrs'. ...In the decade which followed Castro's triumphant march into Havana.. the Cuban Revolution provided inspiration for Black Power activists, opponents of the war in Vietnam, South African freedom fighters, Latin American revolutionaries and radical students in Britain, Europe and the United States.*

Andrew Roberts: *History will remember Castro primarily for the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, during which he acted as the pawn of Khrushchev's Soviet Union in what was in retrospect a madcap schemes to station hostile nuclear missiles only 90 miles from the USA. He will be remembered for overthrowing the profoundly corrupt pro-American dictatorship of Batista which he proceeded to replace with his own Marxist-Leninist, anti-American regime that came too soon to reply on terror and detentions to survive....History will conclude that Castro's death could not come quickly enough for his people.'*

Tanya Harmer (LSE): *Fidel Castro changed the world, defying the logic of global power and geography. From a small island 90 miles from Florida, the revolutionary regime he led posed a radical challenge to the United States, global capitalism and colonialism. Remarkably this challenge proved far more consistent and enduring than the Soviet Union's.... Castro was a man of his times, who channeled widespread desire for change. His revolution addressed pressing problems and provided a alternative to moderate reform efforts cut short by elites.'*

Mark White (Queen Mary, University of London): *'reflecting on the early days of the revolution, when many in Cuba and elsewhere hoped Castro would bring progressive, enlightened, democratic leadership to Cuba... Castro seems to provide proof of Lord Acton's famous dictum: 'Power tends to corrupt and power corrupts absolutely.'*

Podcasts for historians that you might not have heard of....

TRUMPCAST: this began during the Republican primaries to chronicle the then-candidates misdeeds. Essential listening for the US's new political dark age. Best episode: historian Anne Applebaum dissects Russia's attempts to interfere in US politics (long before Russian hacking became a post-election scandal).

REVISIONIST HISTORY: this is an odd one. Malcolm Gladwell takes a personal journey through past events to see if they can be reinterpreted or new insights can be drawn. How does a car accident outside Chicago reveal the truth about mass delusion?

PHILOSOPHIZE THIS! Steven West, the writer-presenter of this wise and accessible series about the history of philosophy, began making these because he felt other podcasts were pitched too high. There are not nearly 30 episodes. Each one focuses on a different philosophical school or thinker—from Pre-Socratic Philosophy to Montaigne.

MORE OR LESS—which proves that statistics are not boring.

THE SELLOUT BY PAUL BEATTY

This won the Booker Prize at the end of 2016. It is not an easy book but, if you can take the strong language, it's pretty brilliant—in an abrasive kind of way.

And it's funny—in a way that most books that are supposed to be funny rarely are. What's more, it's about racism which is simultaneously painful and thought-provoking and just funny. To get the most out of it, you need to be on top of your civil rights history. Me's alleged crimes echo the facts underlying critical segregation cases such as Dred Scott and Plessy vs Ferguson.

The African-American protagonist's first name is never revealed. His last name is Me. His opening line in the book runs 'this maybe hard to believe, coming from a

black man, but I've never stolen anything.'

Me lands himself in the Supreme Court in a race case—for the keeping of a slave and trying to reintroduce segregation (in Obama's America). The case is therefore entitled Me v The United States of America. As Me writes about his hometown 'Dickens' which has been swallowed up by gentrifying Los Angeles: 'Apartheid united black South Africa, why couldn't it do the same for Dickens?'

The Sellout is so jammed full of satirical cultural and political references that you almost need to read every line twice. There's not much time to really follow the plot but maybe, in this book, the plot isn't really point. It is more like a series of stand-up routines. As I said—not an easy

book but a rewarding and relevant one given the racism and legacy of slavery which seem so prominent in contemporary politics. If you want a softer view of Los Angeles or need some respite from ugly politics, go see LaLa Land.

