

HISTORY BULLETIN

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Does War drive History?

The Locomotive of War by Peter Clarke

A new book by the excellent historian Peter Clarke claims that war is the 'primary mover of history'. In this he is echoing Trotsky's claim that 'war is the locomotive of history' by which Trotsky mainly meant the Bolshevik Revolution. This aims to be a 'big idea' book, considering how the world has been shaped by great forces. Clarke claims that war is the greatest of these. The problem is that war itself has been shaped by socio-economic forces and individuals tend to have a inconvenient way of getting wrapped up in history as well. In fact Clarke spends a fair amount of time on the role of 'great men' such as Woodrow Wilson and Lloyd George. In fact, Clarke's main concern is the First World War.

Reviews suggest that this is a flawed book but Clarke is always worth reading. This book will provoke discussion—you don't have to agree with his premise, just have convincing reasons to argue against it.

RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY ART

In 1932 the State Russian Museum in Leningrad staged an exhibition of Soviet art created since the revolution in 1917. The aim was to introduce the 'proletariat' (workers) to great new Soviet artists. There were three thousand paintings and sculptures. On the last day of the exhibition, tired of waiting in temperatures of minus 15, crowds broke down the gallery doors and the police had to be called.

No one knew at the time that this would be the swan song of the experimental and avant-garde which had swept Russia since 1917. Stalin was about to crack down on anything and anyone remotely off-message.

One hundred years after the revolution, the Royal Academy in London has a major exhibition bringing together the avant-garde and socialist realism. There are portraits of Lenin and Stalin along with prosaic objects such as head scarves which were made to celebrate Soviet success. The works are punctuated by details of



Russian history, putting the artists in the context of their times.

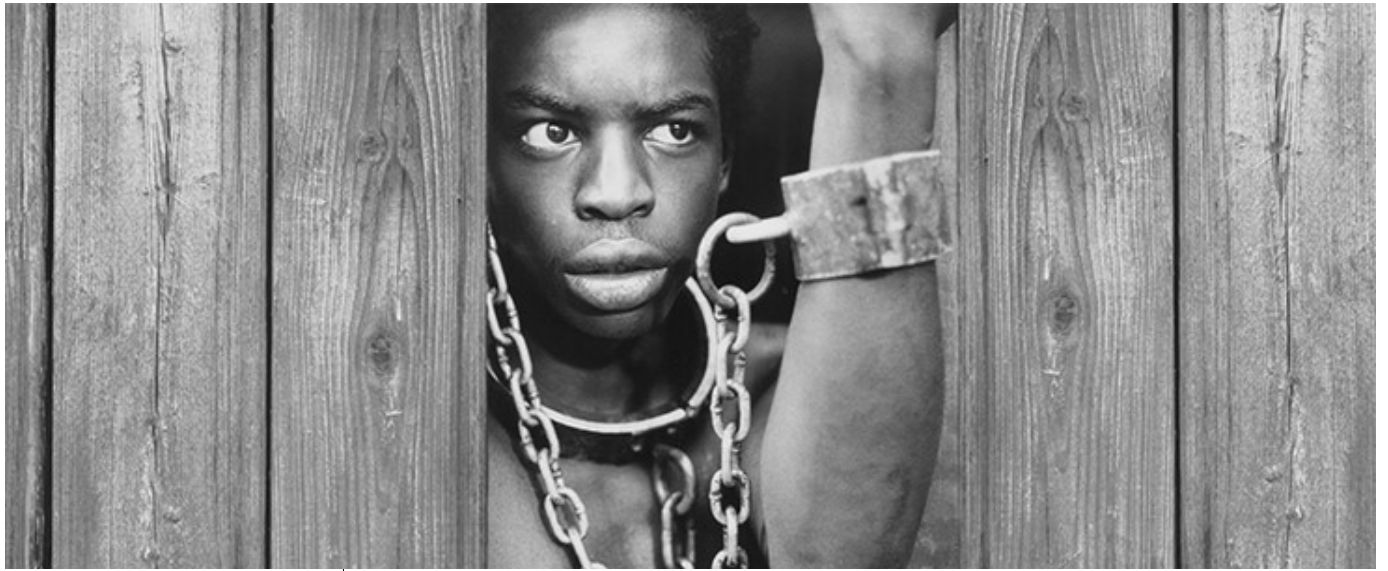
Many of these artists did not survive. Some fled—such as Chagall. Filinov died of famine; Punin died in a gulag. Some committed suicide. The survival of the art itself owes much a Russian-born Greek called Costakis, who worked at the Canadian embassy in Moscow, collecting unfashionable 'lost' art as a hobby.

This is a fantastic exhibition. You don't have to know a lot

about art to work out what is going on. A lot of the imagery is very obvious. The contrast between the experimental paintings and the propaganda 'socialist realist' paintings is striking. Those studying Nazi Germany can draw parallels with the art produced in Weimar and the Third Reich—when Hitler effectively turned the clock back.

The exhibition is on until April 11th. It is best to book in advance and avoid busy times.



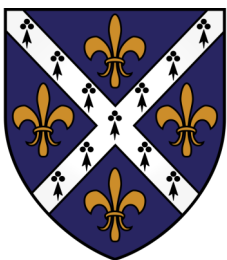


Roots: the saga of an American Family caused a sensation when it hit TV screens in 1977. Based on a novel by Alex Haley (who helped Malcolm X write his autobiography) it was said to be one of the most important cultural works of the US in the C20th. The book tells the story of a family, descended from an C18th African, Kunta Kinte. Haley referred to the work as 'faction', claiming to have traced his own ancestry back to Kinte through oral history. Haley won the Pulitzer prize but then became mired in controversies about whether he had plagiarised his work and whether any of it was 'true'. **Roots** has been remade for TV with an all star cast. It is available on Netflix and Amazon Prime –well worth watching for the story. Look up the details of the accompanying controversies. Is it possible to get the 'truth' from oral history?

**Julia Wood History Prize:
St Hugh's College, Oxford**

Sixth Formers considering applying to Oxford or Cambridge should think about giving this essay prize a serious attempt. The choice of subject is left open and essays do not have to be submitted until the end of July 2017. The prize is £500 and a seriously enhanced Oxbridge application.

The loss of AS levels makes it harder for college to differentiate between good candidates, hence the appearance of more entrance tests. These essay prizes are a good way of demonstrating your worth and commitment as well as introducing you to genuinely independent study.



IS COUNTER FACTUAL HISTORY WORTH THINKING ABOUT?

The BBC's new Sunday evening series imagines Britain after the Battle of Britain has been lost. This is alternative history. The Germans landed near Ashford in Kent and Canterbury was declared an 'open city'. Churchill was executed in Berlin following a court martial; George VI was held in the Tower of London but the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret escaped to New Zealand.

The series, like **the Man in the High Castle**, is 'counter factual'. Is it a waste of time for historians?

Aficionados of 'what ifs' claim that the past can be opened up by demonstrating the myriad opportunities, freeing history from the straight-jacket determinism. There are many problems with this. One issue is that 'what ifs' tend to focus on a 'kings and battles' view of events where one accident could have changed the course of history. This as-

sumes that history is uncomplicated—that events are not the result of greater forces than single individuals.

Would the First World War really have been avoided if Franz Ferdinand had escaped assassination?

Despite this, some counterfactual ideas are thought – provoking. The historian John Keegan pondered what would have happened if Hitler had chosen to attack Syria and Lebanon in the summer of 1941 rather than the Soviet Union. This is more plausible than the execution of Churchill. Conquests in the Middle East might have opened up the USSR to attack from the south so that Barbarossa became a pincer movement rather than a blunt frontal assault.

In the meantime Sunday evenings are sorted.

