

The Best History Books

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THE 125 BEST HISTORY BOOKS:

25 Ancient History (Pre-Enlightenment):

Guns, Germs & Steel –Jared Diamond

The History of the Ancient World –Susan Wise Bauer

The History of the Ancient Near East 3,000-323 B.C. –Marc Van De Mieroop

Egypt, Greece, and Rome –Charles Freeman

The Peloponnesian War –Donald Kagan

Persian Fire –Tom Holland

A War Like No Other –Victor Hanson

The Greeks –H.D.F. Kitto

Augustus: The Life of Rome's First Emperor –Anthony Everett

How Rome Fell –Adrian Keith Goldsworthy

Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic –Tom Holland

The History of the Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire –Edward Gibbon

The Closing of the Western Mind –Charles Freeman

Abraham –Bruce Feiler

Lost Christianities – Bart Ehrman

Framing The Early Middle Ages –Chris Wickham

The History of the Medieval World –Susan Wise Bauer

The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe –Patrick J. Geary

Byzantium I, II, III –John Julius Norwich

Lost To The West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire –Lars Brownworth

Sailing From Byzantium –Colin Wells

A Distant Mirror –Barbara Tuchman

An Economic & Social History of the Ottoman Empire vol. I & II –Inalcik / Faroqhi

The Formation of Islam –Jonathan P. Berkey

From Dawn To Decadence: 1500 to the Present –Jacques Barzun

50 The Enlightenment / Early U.S. History (pre-WWI):

The Philosophy of The Enlightenment –Ernst Cassirer

The Enlightenment –Margaret C. Jacob

The Enlightenment vol. I & II –Peter Gay

A Revolution of the Mind –Jonathan Israel

Radical Enlightenment –Jonathan Israel

American Colonies –Alan Taylor

A People's History of The United States –Howard Zinn

The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789 –Robert Middlekauf

Revolutionaries –Jack Rakove

1776 –David McCullough

The Radicalism of the American Revolution –Gordon S. Wood

The Creation of the American Republic –Gordon S. Wood

Original Meanings –Jack Rakove

Novus Ordo Seclorum –Forrest McDonald

The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution –Bernard Bailyn

Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815 –Gordon Wood

American Creation –Joseph Ellis

American Sphinx –Joseph Ellis

John Adams –David McCullough

Thomas Paine –Craig Nelson

Alexander Hamilton –Ron Chernow

Washington: The Indispensable Man –James Thomas Flexner

Washington: A Life –Ron Chernow

The First American: Ben Franklin –H.W. Brands

Benjamin Franklin –Walter Isaacson

The Days of The French Revolution –Christopher Hibbert

Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution –Simon Schama

The Rise of American Democracy –Sean Wilentz

What Hath God Wrought: The Trans. of America, 1815-1845 –Daniel Walker Howe

The Age of Jackson –Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

American Lion: Andrew Jackson –Jon Meacham

Team of Rivals –Doris Kearns Goodwin

Lincoln –David Herbert Donald

With Malice Toward None –Stephen B. Oates

Abraham Lincoln –James M. McPherson

Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era –James McPherson

Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution –Eric Foner

From Colony To Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776 –George C. Herring

The Metaphysical Club –Louis Menand

The Mind & The Market – Jerry Z. Muller

The Worldly Philosophers –Robert Heilbroner

Freethinkers –Susan Jacoby

The History of Western Philosophy –Bertrand Russell

American Colossus –H.W. Brands

The Age of Revolution –Eric Hobsbawm

The Age of Capital –Eric Hobsbawm

The Age of Empire –Eric Hobsbawm

The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt –Edmund Morris

Theodore Rex –Edmund Morris

50 The Modern Era (WWI to present):

The Age of Extremes –Eric Hobsbawm

The Proud Tower –Barbara Tuchman

The Guns of August –Barbara Tuchman

A World Undone –G.J. Meyer

The First World War vol. I, II, III –Hew Strachan

The First World War –John Keegan

A Peace To End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire –David Fromkin

The Russian Revolution –Sheila Fitzpatrick

A People's Tragedy –Orlando Figes

The Road To Terror –Getty / Naumov

The Great Terror: A Reassessment –Robert Conquest

The Lords of Finance –Liaquat Ahamed

Fascists –Michael Mann

The Rise & Fall of the Third Reich –William Shirer

The Third Reich vol. I, II, III –Richard Evans

Freedom From Fear: The American People In Depression & War, 1929-1945

–David M. Kennedy

The Second World War –Martin Gilbert

A World At Arms –Gerhard Weinberg

FDR –Jean Edward Smith

FDR: Traitor To His Class –H.W. Brands

Eleanor Roosevelt: Vol. 2 –Blanche Wiesen Cook

Postwar –Tony Judt

Grand Expectations: The U.S., 1945-1974 –James T. Patterson

Wealth & Democracy –Kevin Phillips

The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth –Benjamin Friedman

John Kenneth Galbraith –Richard Parker

India After Gandhi –Ramachandra Guha

Truman –David McCullough

The Great War for Civilization –Robert Fisk

The Dead Hand –David E. Hoffman

The Devil We Knew –H.W. Brands

House of War –James Carroll

Killing Hope –William Blum

Legacy of Ashes –Tim Weiner

Anti-Intellectualism In American Life –Richard Hofstadter

The Age of Reform –Richard Hofstadter

Eisenhower vol. I & II [abridged as **Soldier & President**] –Stephen E. Ambrose

Einstein –Walter Isaacson

Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life –Jon Lee Anderson

The Years of Lyndon Johnson vol. I, II, III –Robert A. Caro

Dereliction of Duty –H.R. McMaster

The Trial of Henry Kissinger –Christopher Hitchens

Nixonland –Rick Perlstein

The Untold History Of The United States –Oliver Stone

The Looming Tower –Lawrence Right

The Shock Doctrine –Naomi Klein

A Brief History of Neoliberalism –David Harvey

Restless Giant: The U.S. From Watergate To Bush v. Gore –James T. Paterson

The Age of Reagan –Sean Wilentz

70 OTHER GOOD HISTORY BOOKS:

Before The Dawn —Nicholas Wade

The History of the Peloponnesian War –Thucydides

The Age of Augustus –Werner Eck

Caesar: Life of a Colossus –Adrian Goldsworthy

The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire –Edward Luttwak

The Fall of the Roman Empire –Peter Heather

The Fall of Rome And The End of Civilization –Bryan Ward-Perkins

Empires & Barbarians: The Fall of Rome & the Birth of Europe –Peter Heather

Early Christianity –Charles Freeman

The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia –Rene Grousset

Empires of the Silk Road –Christopher Beckwith

The Horse, The Wheel, and Language –David Anthony

The History of The Mongol Conquests –J.J. Saunders

The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages –Chris Wickham

Barbarians To Angels: The Dark Ages Reconsidered –Peter Wells

The Making of the Middle Ages –R.W. Southern

Chronicles of the Crusades –Jean de Joinville

God's War: A New History of the Crusades –Christopher Tyerman

Genghis Khan & The Making of the Modern World –Jack Weatherford

Byzantium –Judith Herrin

The Byzantine Wars –John Haldon

The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire –Edward Luttwak

The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age –Halil Inalcik

Mohammed, Charlemagne, and the Origins of Europe –Richard Hodges

The Pursuit of Glory: Five Revolutions that Made Modern Europe –Tim Blanning

Isaac Newton –James Gleick

Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life –Nicholas Phillipson

Economic Sentiments –Emma Rothschild

His Excellency: George Washington –Joseph Ellis

James Madison & The Creation of the American Republic –Jack Rakove

Thomas Paine & The Promise of America –Harvey J Kaye

A Peoples' History of the American Revolution –Ray Raphael

The Age of Federalism –Stanley Elkins

Rescue My Heart At Wounded Knee –Dee Brown

The Long, Bitter Trail: Andrew Jackson & The Indians –Anthony Wallace

This Republic of Suffering –Drew Gilpin Faust

For Cause & Comrades –James McPherson

Standing at Armageddon –Nell Irvin Painter

Origins of the New South –C. Van Woodward

Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr. –Ron Chernow

The March of Folly: From Troy To Vietnam –Barbara Tuchman

The Arabs: A History –Eugene Rogan

A History of The Modern Middle East (4th Edition) –William Cleveland

Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed The World –Margaret Macmillan

A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 & the Price We Pay Today –David Andelman

The Great Influenza –John M. Barry

The Balfour Declaration –Jonathan Schneer

Reawakened Nation: Birth Of Modern America: 1896-1929 –Bruce Schulman

Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers In Chicago –Lizabeth Cohen

The Great Bull Market: Wall Street In The 1920's –Robert Sobel

1929 –John Kenneth Galbraith

John Maynard Keynes –Robert Skidelsky

The Second World War –John Keegan

Franklin D. Roosevelt & American Foreign Policy –Robert Dallek

The Ethnic Cleansing Of Palestine –Ilan Pappé

The Great Cold War: A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors –Gordon Barss

The Making of the Atomic Bomb –Richard Rhodes

Mao: The Unknown Story –Jung Chang, Jon Halliday

Mao's Great Famine –Frank Dikotte

Parting the Waters: America In the King Years –Taylor Branch

1967: Israel, The War, & The Year that Trans. the Middle East –Tom Segev

A Fiery Peace In A Cold War –Neil Sheehan

A Bright, Shining Lie –Neil Sheehan

Dispatches –Michael Herr

Vietnam: A History –Stanley Karnow

The Pentagon Papers –George Herring

Where The Domino Fell: America & Vietnam –Olsen/Roberts

The Wars of Watergate –Stanley Kutler

The Prize –Daniel Yergin

The Global Cold War: 3rd World Interventions & The Making of Our Times – Odd Arne Westad

The Cold War: A History Through Documents –Judge / Langdon

Also noteworthy are Arthur Schlesinger's many books, including *The Imperial Presidency*, *Cycles of American History*, *War & The American Presidency*, *The Age of Roosevelt* vols. I, II, II, and *A Life in the Twentieth Century*. There are also worthwhile books by Norman Stone, Tony Judt, and other great scholars.

One must sift through endless trash-pulp, brazen revisionism and outright propaganda to find the few gems of bona fide history. I did my best to find those gems. The 185 books listed above meet high standards of historical scholarship.

It is good to keep in mind that there is much to learn from informed, insightful works of fiction as well. Books like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, George Orwell's *1984*, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mocking Bird*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, several Upton Sinclair books, and the Gore Vidal novels can all teach us important things about history—things that no work of non-fiction can capture so poignantly.

It should also be noted that documentaries are a valuable resource for learning history. For example, regarding the American Civil War, Ken Burns' documentary is indispensable, capturing things that no mere writing can capture.

Omitted were *far*-ancient histories of Egypt / Africa, Mesopotamia, Hindu culture, China / Southeast Asia, and the Americas (Aztecs, Incas, Mayans, Native American tribes, etc.), since these topics—though important in their own right—are of tertiary relevance to understanding modern society. For such purposes, ***The Cambridge Ancient History*** vols. I, II, III is wonderful (though this requires reading thousands of pages and spending over a thousand dollars).

Other highly involved resources fall outside the scope of the current compilation. As with the MIBYs, I limit the listing to works that are accessible to the typical reader—especially in terms of length and cost. Regarding the American Civil War, for example: Allan Nevins' 8-volume *The Ordeal of the Union*, Bruce Catton's 3-volume *Centennial History of the Civil War* and Shelby Foote's 3-volume *The Civil War* aren't appropriate for the present purposes.

Meanwhile, this list attempts to limit the selections to those that offer general, "big picture" coverage. William C. Davis' *Lincoln's Men*, Charles B. Flood's *Grand & Sherman*, Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering*, and Charles Royster's *The Destructive War* are great books on the Civil War, yet approach the history from particular angles and themes. In addition, there are various specialized books that concentrate on only certain aspects of the Civil War (e.g. certain personalities, certain battles), and therefore are relevant for narrower interests. This criterion for selection (for this list) applies to all major historical events.

Some historical figures do have significant “big picture” relevance, and thus warrant a place on this list. Such figures must be more than just personalities covered for curiosity seekers. Thus, no matter how great the book may be, resources that don’t meet this standard of relevance are not included.

Fascinatingly, it is very difficult to find a fantastic biography of Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, or Thomas Jefferson (other than the one for each that is listed). Barring the exception in each case, the major biographies for each figure all seem to have significant flaws, biases or shortcomings (e.g. overly-romanticized depictions, like Forrest McDonald’s and Richard Brookhiser’s works on Hamilton). Books on James Madison by Garry Wills and Ralph Ketcham are underwhelming. That only a single biography that is universally praised can be found for each figure is surprising.

It is also unfortunate that there is a paucity of attention devoted to one of the most important Founding Fathers, Thomas Paine. That a Pulitzer Prize winning book (Joseph Ellis’ *Founding Brothers*) neglects Paine is nothing short of tragic.

Omitted are books that are more commentary / analysis books than “history books” proper. While the former must be based on history to some degree (and the latter inevitably contain some element of commentary / analysis), this list deals with “history books” proper.

Regarding works on the genesis of the U.S.:

Books on the “Founding” and the “Founders” are ubiquitous. There is so much garbage that has been printed on the topic, it is has become somewhat of a task to survey the mountains of pulp trash to route out the few gems. Books written by knowledgeable and honest (i.e. genuine) scholars are few and far between, but exist.

I’ve tried to route out any books involving bias. For example, regarding books on Thomas Paine, John Keane’s *Tomas Paine: A Political Life* is slightly biased toward the right (a difficult thing to do, since Paine was the quintessential progressive). Meanwhile, Christopher Hitchens’ *Thomas Paine’s Rights Of Man: A Biography* is a slightly romantic depiction of Paine. Eric Foner’s *Tom Paine & Revolutionary America* is interesting yet more concerned with an assessment of Paine’s social context than with Paine per se. Jack Fruchtman’s *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* may be worthwhile. All four are reasonably good books, but not the best. Consequently, it is the book by Craig Nelson and the book by Harvey J. Kaye that made the list.

My fallibility notwithstanding, I aimed to do the readers of MasonScott.org a service by doing the legwork for them. The books listed here are, without a doubt, the most excellent resources for

the layman on the origins of the U.S.

Some descent books may not have made the cut simply because they are of the wrong format (memoir-based) or not definitive works. For example, for interesting commentary on the First World War, *The Great War & Modern Memory* by Paul Fussell and *Cataclysm* by David Stevenson may be worthwhile.

Regarding the Cold War period:

There is—indeed—an endless supply of pulp trash (i.e. brazen revisionism and outright propaganda) on this contentious topic. It is therefore no easy task to find an un-slanted book on the Cold War—as most authors seem to have an ideological agenda (one way or the other) or some sort of ax to grind.

On the one hand, there are books that are too apologetic toward the U.S.S.R., such as Martin Walker's *The Cold War: A History*, Edward Pessen's *Losing Our Souls*, Craig and Logevall's *America's Cold War*, and Walter LaFeber's *America, Russia, & The Cold War*.

On the other hand, there are a slew of books that are too apologetic toward the U.S., such as two of John Lewis Gaddis's three major works on the topic (*The Cold War: A New History* and *We Now Know*). Meanwhile, the right-wing propaganda that has been churned out goes on and on and on—and is not even worth mentioning.

I was meticulous in only including books that were impartial, and exhibited marks of great scholarship.

For the Soul of Mankind by Melvyn Leffler, *The Global Cold War* by Odd Arne Westad, and *The Cold War* by Ronald Powaski seem to be relatively balanced—yet don't seem to have garnered much notoriety by scholars. *The Hawk & The Dove* by Nicholas Thompson is interesting yet—being more like a memoir than a history book—provides a very incomplete picture. George F. Kennan has some interesting analysis—though certainly biased toward the right. *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (three volumes), though highly regarded, isn't accessible to the typical reader (2,000 pages; \$500), so was not included.

Regarding the Korean War, the most thorough source is probably Allan R. Millett's 3-volume *The War For Korea*, yet it does not qualify for the common reader. I.F. Stone's *The Hidden History of the Korean War*, David Halberstam's *The Coldest Winter*, Clay Blair's *The Forgotten War*

, and T.R. Fehrenbach's *This Kind of War* are also worthwhile. Cummings' *The Korean War: A History* is not a history book; it is more of a left-wing polemic, so does not qualify. (That said, he makes some worthwhile points—all of which should be taken with a grain of salt.)

Regarding the Vietnam War, much of the “history” is written through an ideological prism—reflecting the orgy of biases on the Cold War in general. Those like John Prados write books from the left; while apologists for U.S. right-wing policy provide a significant distortion (e.g. George C. Herring's *America's Longest War*). Finding objective scholarship on this war is especially difficult. *The Vietnam War* by Mark Atwood Lawrence is okay, but underwhelming. Philip Caputo's highly acclaimed *A Rumor Of War* is a worthwhile book, but (like Frederick Downs' *The Killing Zone* or Karl Marlantes' *What It Is Like To Go To War*) is more of a memoir, not a history book. *Dispatches* by Michael Herr is worthwhile for journalistic accounts on the micro scale.

I did my best, and—as usual—welcome feedback from those who—for each historical period—are far more knowledgeable than I. I look forward to learning more by being made aware of the best history books available.