

Historical Research



If you haven't figured it out by now, I read a lot of history. I absorb history books. Been doing so since high school. People ask me what time period of history I specialize in. If you take a look at the picture above, you will see that "specialize" is not in my vocabulary, although I find military history tends to drive the big events of all time periods.

When reading any history, you have to go in first and foremost with the knowledge that the victors write the history. It is also written in a time when major biases can colour how events are interpreted. In many cases, around a hundred years need to pass before a black and white version of events can pass onto unbiased research. Documentation from both sides of an event generally only gets looked at after the generation of people who lived through the event have passed on. That's why I like history that is at least seventy to one-hundred years old. Historians studying older times can put events into the perspective of the people and the times they lived in, allowing them to see around the biases and find the true causes of them.

For instance, it turns out that Abraham Lincoln and the Federal Republicans were not that concerned about slavery. It wasn't that big issue in the North. But industrialization in the northern states and the expansion west being dominated by people from there was a concern for the South, which was a more agrarian society. They were slowly losing their power in federal politics. So, Secession from the Union was seen as their way of protecting their way of life. If they could have just held off from firing on Fort Sumter in 1861, there may not have been a Civil War. Looking at agrarian society history, however, the Confederate States would have slowly become a very poor

nation and likely have fallen apart or gone bankrupt by the early 1900's. In the 1860's, they were already being left behind by the northern states.

But because there was a war, it became expedient for Lincoln and the federal government to rally around freeing slaves as a cause for the war. Nothing focuses a populace like an easy-to-understand reason. It is only through studies carried out in the mid to late twentieth century, unaffected by the emotions and biases of those time, that a long view of events could be effectively examined. Remember, Emancipation wasn't an executive order from Lincoln until September of 1862, over a year after the start of the war. It was also right after the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest battle of the war. Things weren't going so well for the North at the time, so a rallying cause was needed to keep the populace engaged in the conflict. Slavery was handy. Everyone at that time just took it as gospel that ending slavery was the cause all along and that perception persisted well into the twentieth century.

It also leads to faulty conclusions to view history from the perspective of our present values. How people thought a hundred, two-hundred, or a thousand years ago guided how they reacted to events in their time. For instance, people followed their king blindly into wars based solely on their king's ego being bruised and fought with vigour just to get him revenge. You can find instances of this all the way up to World War One. As it turns out, the Austrian royal family didn't even like Franz Ferdinand, but it was a great excuse to slap Serbia down and neither the Russians supporting Serbia, or the Germans trying to talk them down, could stop them.

Yes, I said the Germans tried to talk them down. The Czar and the Kaiser actually spent time trying to diffuse the situation together. They failed and four years later, millions of soldiers were dead and all three monarchs were thrown off their thrones.

Doing effective historical research requires an open mind. If you go into it with certain biases, they will colour your results. And it isn't easy. Biases are inherited from your parents and how events are viewed could be distorted by a lens set in place centuries ago. Technologies may change and our view of the world will be vastly different than it was for people as little as thirty years ago, but human nature doesn't change all that much. People have been asking "What's in it for me?" since the dawn of time. Not colouring your view of history while researching and making sense of it takes quite bit of soul searching of your own personality.

I consider human nature first and foremost in my novels. It drives the motivations of my characters and makes them real. Applying actual historical events and chronology fills out my adventures. I find them very fun to write AND I get to read more history books.