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# World History

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- Understand recent events, from the War in Iraq to climate change

**Peter Haugen**

*History writer*



# World History For Dummies®<sup>®</sup>, 2nd Edition

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# ***World History For Dummies®**, 2nd Edition*

**by Peter Haugen**



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## About the Author

**Peter Haugen** is the author of *Was Napoleon Poisoned? And Other Unsolved Mysteries of Royal History* (Wiley). A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, he has been a frequent contributor to *History* magazine and is among the co-writers of *The Armchair Reader Amazing*

*Book of History, mental\_floss Presents Condensed Knowledge, and mental\_floss Presents Forbidden Knowledge.* A veteran journalist and critic, he was a staff member at several U.S. newspapers, including *The St. Petersburg Times* and *The Sacramento Bee*, and has written about topics ranging from the fine arts to molecular genetics. Haugen was an adjunct instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and California State University-Fresno and is a proud veteran of the U.S. Army. He lives in Wisconsin.

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# Introduction

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The complete history of the world boiled down to 400-some pages and crammed between paperback covers? The idea is preposterous. It's outrageous. I'd be crazy to attempt it. So here goes.

No, wait. This book doesn't claim to be complete. It can't. Hundreds of other volumes are devoted to a measly decade or two — the World War II era comes to mind. To plumb thousands of years in one little book would be impossible. To skim across the surface, however, is another matter. If, while reading the following chapters, you hit upon an era, a personality, or a civilization that you'd like to know more about, there's no lack of places to find out more. You can turn to many far more complete accounts of the history of specific countries, such as the United States; continents, such as Europe; and events, such as the U.S. Civil War. You can find books about all these topics and more in this excellent *For Dummies* series. But if you want a simplified overview consisting of a collection of easy-to-read glimpses into major players and events that have made the world what it is today, then I'm your guide and *World History For Dummies*, 2nd Edition is your first-stop reference.

## About This Book

The history of the world is like a soap opera that has been running ever since the invention of writing. The show is lurid, full of dirty tricks and murder, romances and sexual deceptions, adventures, and wars and revolutions. (And, yes, treaties and dates.) Or maybe a better analogy is that history is like hundreds of soap operas with thousands of crossover characters jumping out of one story and into another — too many for even the most devoted fan to keep straight. All the more reason for an easy-to-use overview.

The most important thing to remember when paging through this book is that history is fun — or should be. It's not as if this is life-and-death stuff. . . . no, wait. It *is* life-and-death — on a ginormous scale. It's just that so many of the lives and deaths happened long ago. And that's good because I can pry into private affairs without getting sued. History is full of vintage gossip and antique scandal, peppered heavily with high adventure (swords and spears and canons and stuff). The more you get into it, the better you'll do when the neighbors drag out the home version of *Jeopardy*. Renaissance Italy for \$500, please.

## Conventions Used in This Book

Every field from brain surgery to refuse collection has a special vocabulary. History is no exception, but I tried to steer clear of historians-only words in this book. When such a word is unavoidable, I explain it in reader-friendly terms. As for other technical terms, I italicize them and then follow up with definitions and explanations. If you still think you may get lost amid the dates

facts, quotes, and other details, this section guides you through the conventions I use in order to help you better understand the book and access the information you want or need.

---

## What do I mean by “history”?

This isn't a stupid question. People apply the term *history* to fields other than, well, history. For example, scientists talk about geological history, and physicians talk about your medical history. There's also archeological history, in which experts use physical evidence to piece together the story of humankind before anybody wrote anything down. Even though historians often disagree about the details, history must be true or at least reasonably close to what really happened. Historians use educated guesses, too. I get into some of that in this book, but for the most part, I stick to documented human events.

History is also a written account (or at least on film or video). It often starts as *oral history*, but until the tale is set down in some permanent form, it's too easy for facts to get lost or changed. Things written down aren't immune to exaggeration, but there's something about the spoken word that invites outlandish embellishment. (Think about fishing stories or campaign speeches.) That's how history gets mangled and myths get made (that and cable news shows).

Some of the first stories ever written down were passed on by word of mouth for centuries before they ever were etched in mud or stone or on papyrus. They got pretty wild over the years; for example, Homer, a blind Greek poet, passed down a tale of the Trojan War based on a real military campaign, but many of his details are obviously myth. That stuff about Achilles' mom being a water nymph, for example, and the way she supposedly dipped him in the River Styx to make him invulnerable — forgive me if I don't buy that as exactly the way things went down. (Now, if Homer had told us Achilles was an alien from the planet Krypton. . . .)

## Positively post-historic

Because history needs to be set down in some kind of permanent record, it dates back only about as far as the written word, which some scholars say the Sumerians invented, at least in *pictograph* (or picture-writing) form, around 3500 BC. Among the best early record keepers were the Egyptians, who invented their own form of writing (called *hieroglyphics*) around 3000 BC. Before written history, it was *prehistoric* times.

## Making sense of AD, BC, CE, and BCE

The years 1492, when Columbus sailed, and 1620, when the *Mayflower* Pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts, are AD, just like this year. AD stands for *Anno Domini*. That's Latin for “Year of Our Lord,” referring to the Christian era, or the time since Jesus was born. Before that, I designate years as BC, or Before Christ. Historians now prefer CE, for “Common Era,” instead of AD; and BCE, for “Before the Common Era,” instead of BC. The new initials aren't tied into just one

religion. AD and BC, however, are what most people are used to. They're widely understood and deeply ingrained, so I stick with them throughout this book.

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The years BC are figured by counting backwards. That's why the year that Alexander the Great died, 323 BC, is a smaller number than the year that he was born, 356 BC.

Yet Alexander didn't think of himself as living in backward-counting years three centuries before Christ any more than Augustus Caesar of Rome wrote the date 1 AD on his checks. This system of dating years came about a lot later when scholars superimposed their calendar on earlier times. Given that Jesus actually may have been born a little earlier than 1 AD — perhaps in about 6 BC — the system isn't even particularly accurate. As the twentieth century came to a close, some self-proclaimed prophets thought the world would come to an end when the calendar turned over to year 2000. Obviously, it didn't happen then or in any of the years since. As for next year or the year after that, I make no guarantees.

In this book, you can safely assume that a four-digit year without two capital letters following it is AD. For example, William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066. For the years 1–999 AD, I use the AD; for example, Norsemen invaded Ireland and began building the city of Dublin around 831 AD. I also include the initials for all the BC years. For examples, Saul was anointed the first king of the Israelites in about 1050 BC, and the Roman general Marc Antony died in 30 BC.

The reason I say “around” and “about” when giving the dates of Dublin's founding and King Saul's coronation is that nobody knows the dates for sure.

Another thing that confuses some people when reading history is the way centuries are named and numbered. When you see a reference to the 1900s, it doesn't mean the same thing as the nineteenth century. The 1900s are the twentieth century. The twentieth century was the one in which four-digit year numbers started with 19. The nineteenth century was the one in which years started with 18, and so on. Why isn't this century, the one with the 20 starting every year, the twentieth? Because the first century began in the year 1. When the numbers got up to 100 (or technically, 101), it became the second century, and so on. Figuring the centuries BC works the same way (in reverse, of course): The twenty-first century BC is the one with years starting with 20, just like the twenty-first century AD.

## **Pardon my French, I mean Latin**

*For Dummies* books are intended to make complex topics easier to understand, and a large part of achieving that goal is avoiding hard-to-understand, experts-only language, especially if it's not in English. But like so many things in life, there are exceptions.

You'll find a very small number of Latin and other foreign words and phrases sprinkled throughout this book. I have to include them because I tell you about cultures and countries where English was unknown. With Latin, in particular, it's not just that this book's subjects include the important, influential Roman Empire, where everybody spoke Latin. I also cover Europe in the Middle Ages,

when Latin was the international language. Finally, I can't write about world history without covering the enormous influence of the Roman Catholic Church, an institution that for many centuries clung to Latin as its official means of expression. But don't worry. I promise not to use many such terms, and when I do, I'll explain what they mean.

## Perceiving and avoiding biases

Some intellectuals question the very concept of history. "Whose history are we talking about?" they ask. If the victors write history, why do we accept those big bullies' tainted point of view as true? What about the victims? What about the indigenous peoples, such as American Indians and Australian Aborigines? What about the women? Doesn't it stink that so much of history is so overwhelmingly about white men?

Yes, it does. And it's true that history is slanted. It's people writing about people, so prejudice is built-in. You have to factor in the biases of the time in which events happened, the biases of the time when they were written down, and the prejudices of the scholars who turn them over and over again decades and often centuries later. I can't change the fact that so many conquerors, monarchs, politicians, soldiers, explorers and yes, historians, have been men. It's just as true that conventionally taught world history still spends a fair amount of time on Europe — how it was shaped and how it shaped other parts of the world, including the Americas.

Are there other stories worth telling, other points of view, other truths? You bet. You find some of them in this book, lightly touched upon, just like everything else here. But to be honest, the tilt is toward a male-centered history of what has been called *western civilization*. Why? Because that view is built on well-documented, widely disseminated tales of how the world became what it is.

You may want to change the world, and that's often a noble ambition. You may just want to change the history books. Either way, it helps to know what you're up against.

Where I can, I nod toward the realities of the twenty-first century, as non-Western countries — notably China and India — have grown into major forces in both the global economy and global politics, and where developing nations such as resource-rich Brazil seem poised to play ever larger roles in shaping the world's history.

## What You're Not to Read

Although this book focuses on what you need to know about world history, I also deal with topics that, though useful, are less essential, at least during your first read-through. This skippable material includes:

**Text in sidebars.** Sidebars are shaded boxes that pop up here and there in the chapters. They deal with interesting subjects related to the chapter, but they aren't necessary reading in order for you to understand major topics.

**Anything with a Technical Stuff icon.** You may find this information interesting, but you won't miss out on anything critical if you pass over it.

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# Foolish Assumptions

As I wrote this book, I made some assumptions about you. They may be foolish, but here they are.

You've studied at least some history in school. You may even know quite a lot about certain historical topics, but you'd like to find out more about how it all fits together.

You've seen movies or read novels set in various historical eras, and you suspect they'd be more enjoyable if you were better informed about the time periods and the historical peoples featured.

At least once in your life you've encountered an obnoxious history know-it-all, one of those people who spews random facts about ancient Rome or the French Revolution. In the event that it happens again, you want the satisfaction of telling Ms. Smartypants she's wrong.

# How This Book Is Organized

I haven't laid out history in chronological order in *World History For Dummies*, 2nd Edition. Not quite. I try to tell stories in the order that they happened, but as I explain in Chapter 1, many different threads run through history, and they crisscross and influence each other. But if you sort out some of the many approaches you can take to history and some of the many topics within the threads are easier to understand and follow. With this in mind, I've divided the book as follows.

Each part is based on a broad topic such as civilizations throughout history, warfare throughout history, or the impact of religions and philosophies upon history.

Each chapter looks at a particular aspect or time period within the broad subject of the part.

Headings and subheadings isolate specific points within each chapter so that you can more easily get in and out of chapters and access just the information you need or want.

What follows is a breakdown of each part.

## Part I: Getting into History

This part includes perspective to help you connect with the past. Your ancestors of decades, centuries, and millennia past were essentially the same as you. True, they dressed differently and didn't have iPhones and cars and such. They may not have showered as often as you do, either, but they can still reveal things about you and how your world came to be as it is.



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