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Niall Ferguson, ed. *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals.* New York: Basic Books, 1999. x + 548 pgs. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-02322-6.

Reviewed by R. B. Bernstein (New York Law School)
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The Promise and the Perils of

Whether dealing with students or with general readers, historians confront a vexing problem – the belief that history had to happen the way it did happen. Responding to this problem, historians seek to demonstrate the power of the contingent and unforeseen – in other words, to show that the history that has happened is only one of a myriad of possible ways it could have happened.

Paradoxically, although human beings have speculated for centuries about how history could have happened other than it did, only recently has "virtual history" – also known as "counterfactual history" or "alternative history" – attracted serious attention from professional historians. Previously, historians either disdained "what if?" or indulged it as a shame-faced diversion from more serious scholarly endeavors. Alternative history has fallen mostly to popular writers, and in particular to writers of science fiction, who have made it an enduring subgenre that has produced work sometimes profound and sometimes merely silly. By contrast, drawing on the time-honored tradition of the Socratic analysis of fact patterns both real and hypothetical, legal scholars regularly indulge in "what if?" speculations – often driving their historian colleagues to distraction by their breathtaking assumptions about what is and is not historically possible.

Hence the question lurking at the core of the volume under review: How can historians harvest the promise of "what if?" without risking its perils?

Virtual History is the brainchild of Niall Ferguson, a fellow and tutor in modern history at Jesus College, Oxford, and the author of a formidable history of the House of Rothschild and a challenging study of the First World War, *The Pity of War*. Ferguson has enlisted eight colleagues in writing a series of essays on various junctures in history that could have gone in ways quite different from what actually happened. Writing with verve and erudition, Ferguson and his colleagues demonstrate that counterfactual historical speculation can be a valuable and enlightening enterprise – if (and this is a big "if") undertaken with respect for historical evidence, plausibility, and implausibility.

In his long, occasionally digressive introduction (pp. 1-90), Ferguson traces the history of alternative history, offering a series of meditations on the competing philosophies of determinism and contingency in history – a natural dichotomy, as determinism is, at bottom, the claim that history had to happen the way it did happen. Ferguson is on firm ground in elucidating the interplay between the competing claims of determinism and contingency; his closing pages, which borrow from the realm of the sciences, enlisting "chaos theory" to justify the claims of contingency and alternative history, are shakier.

John Adamson, a Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, launches the main enterprise with "England Without Cromwell: What if Charles I had avoided the Civil War?-" (pp. 91-124). Adamson identifies a critical moment in 1639 during the Scottish Crises when, had Charles I acted decisively, he might have deflated the building momentum of Protestant and Parliamentary opposition to his Personal Rule, thereby redirecting the course of English (and perhaps Anglo-American) constitutional and political history.

J. C. D. Clark, the Joyce and Elizabeth Hall Distinguished Professor of British History at the University of Kansas, throws down another gauntlet in "British America: What if there had been no American Revolution?" (pp. 125-174). Pointing out that "[h]istory labours under a major handicap in societies suffused with a sense of their own rightness or inevitability" (p. 125), Clark argues that, if the constitutional history of England had taken a course more favorable to the ideas and principles of the Stuart monarchs of England and their supporters, the result might have gutted fatally the ideas and principles on which Americans resisting English policy relied in the 1760s and 1770s. Clark does not take account of

the work of John Phillip Reid on "the two constitutions" of the British Empire and the conflicts between them that lacked a clear and generally authoritative means of resolution. Nonetheless, his essay does raise fascinating questions about the institutional and political settings of political and constitutional argument.

"British Ireland: What if Home Rule had been enacted in 1912?" (pp. 175-227), by Alvin Jackson, Reader in Modern History at the Queen's University of Belfast, raises a question with profound, even agonizing significance for our own time. Throughout the nineteenth century, Home Rule for Ireland had been a recurring proposal to resolve a constitutional anomaly – the status of Ireland in the British Empire. Jackson shows why Home Rule constantly fell short every time its adherents proposed it –and then plausibly suggests the consequences if the advocates of Home Rule had prevailed on their third and last attempt to achieve it, in 1912. In Jackson's view, Home Rule possibly could have produced a democratic, pluralist Ireland – but the gravity of the political risks and the likelihood of failure could have brought a result not only contradicting the hopes of Home Rule's advocates but perhaps even worse than the actual course of Irish and Northern Irish history since 1912.

Building on his own controversial study *The Pity of War*, Ferguson then takes center stage with his essay "The Kaiser's European Union: What if Britain had 'stood aside' in August 1914?" (pp. 228-280). In *The Pity of War*, Ferguson suggests that Britain's decision to go to war with Germany and its allies in 1914 was catastrophic for Britain's future development; in this essay, Ferguson boldly outlines an alternative history in which Germany would have won the First World War, leaving Britain truculent but unscathed.

Based on his interpretation of Germany's pre-war aims, Ferguson concludes that Germany would have consolidated its victory into a recognizable variant of the European Union under German hegemony; that Russia had a better chance of transition to a constitutional monarchy or a parliamentary republic than a slide into civil war and Communism; and America would not have been drawn into European affairs. Moreover, Ferguson suggests, the severe strains that the First World War brought to the world economy would have been abated if not evaded by a swift German victory and British abstention, and a victorious Kaiser would have been a preferable alternative to the weak democracy and power vacuum that allowed the rise of Fascism, Nazism, and Hitler.

Andrew Roberts, formerly an Honorary Senior Scholar at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, explores a favorite scenario of novelists in "Hitler's England: What if Germany had invaded Britain in May 1940?" (pp. 281-320). After exploring a few variants on this scenario – whether standing up to Hitler would have worked; whether Britain could have coexisted peacefully with a victorious Hitler; whether a German invasion of Britain would have succeeded – Roberts focuses on the extent to which Britons would have collaborated with German conquerors, and reaches dismaying conclusions about how many Quislings would have been ready to do the Nazis' bidding. (Note that the essay's byline attributes it to Roberts alone but the contents page [p. vi] describes this essay as a collaboration between Roberts and Ferguson.)

In a companion piece to the previous essay, Michael Burleigh, Distinguished Research Professor of History at the University of Wales, Cardiff, and author of many histories of Nazi "racial science," outlines an alternative scenario: "Nazi Europe: What if Nazi Germany had defeated the Soviet Union?" (pp. 321-347). Burleigh explores the range of proposed policies within the Nazi regime for governing a conquered U.S.S.R., and suggests further that the historical evidence supports the view that Hitler's ambitions indeed ranged beyond Europe to world conquest. Thus, Hitler would not have stopped with a Nazi Europe.

Jonathan Haslam, a Fellow and Director of Studies in History at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and Assistant Director of Studies in International Relations at the Cambridge University Centre of International Studies, contributes "Stalin's War or Peace: What if the Cold War had been avoided?" (pp. 348-367). He poses three crucial questions, answering them differently from the way they actually turned out: (i) the United States does not develop nuclear weapons; (ii) the U.S.S.R.'s espionage program does not penetrate upper echelons of British and American intelligence; and (iii) Stalin restrains his ambitions to spheres of influence in ways compatible with Western leaders' expectations. Haslam concludes that Stalin and his allies were only slightly influenced by American nuclear weapons, so their lack would not have made much difference; that Stalin's lack of reliable intelligence could have made him more defiant or more accommodating based on his assessment of Western nations' firmness; and that even had Stalin adopted a more cautious and accommodating definition of spheres of influence acceptable to the West, conflict between East and West was likely anyway.

Diane Kunz of Yale University explores another favorite source of speculation, in her essay "Camelot Con-

tinued: What if John F. Kennedy had lived?" (pp. 368-392). Drawing on the extensive historiography of the Kennedy administration, Kunz defiantly – and persuasively – insists that "John F. Kennedy was a mediocre president. Had he obtained a second term, federal civil rights policy during the 1960s would have been substantially less productive and US actions in Vietnam no different from what actually occurred. His tragic assassination was not a tragedy for the course of American history" (p. 369).

The last essay is by Mark Almond, Lecturer in Modern History at Oriel College, Oxford. In "1989 Without Gorbachev: What if Communism had not collapsed?" (pp. 392-415), Almond actually explores why Communism did collapse, first in the Warsaw Pact nations and then in the U.S.S.R. itself. Almond posits that, rather than actual economic conditions, it was the miscalculations of the Gorbachev-led Soviet elite that led to the collapse of the Soviet system. Had Gorbachev and his colleagues cleaved to the ideological rigidity of their predecessors and taken a hard line at home and abroad, Almond suggests, they could have maintained their hegemony and the Soviet system and perhaps even profited from such events as the 1990-1991 Iraq-Kuwait crisis.

Ferguson concludes the volume with his daring "Afterword: A Virtual History, 1646-1996" (pp. 416-440). In this essay, he attempts to synthesize elements of each of the previous essays into an account of three hundred fifty years that increasingly departs from the history we know, leading to a world in which an increasingly besieged Anglo-American empire finally collapses in the face of a German-dominated European Union and a formidable, theocratic Russian Empire. In Ferguson's alternative history, the leading ideological forces are nationalism and religion rather than Communism, totalitarianism, and democracy.

A few observations are in order. First, the overall standard of *Virtual History* is high; at their best these essays illustrate the skills needed to launch a truly suggestive counterfactual historical speculation –mastery of the relevant primary sources and historical literature, a sure sense of plausible and implausible alternatives, and a due modesty on the part of the historian about what is and is not "inevitable" or "contingent." Second, most scholars who attempt virtual history focus on military "decision points" – a battle lost instead of won, a war avoided instead of launched – obvious points in the historical narrative at which events could have taken another path. A second favorite is to speculate on the presence or absence of key world leaders – growing out of the enduring controversy over the role of the individual statesman in national or world affairs. It is correspondingly more difficult, as Alvin Jackson's "British Ireland" suggests, to pursue alternate-history speculation in the realm of political choices, for politics (or "public choice") introduces so many complex and intractable variables as to make it increasingly difficult to chart an alternative course from a different political choice.

In sum, this book suggests the power and potential for enlightenment inherent in historians' posing key "what if?" questions. At the same time, *Virtual History* offers a caution for historians and legal and constitutional scholars who ask such questions as "What if Canada – or Vermont – had ratified the Constitution in 1788?" It is tempting, in light of the contrast between such airy speculations as these and the tough-minded essays gathered in this volume, to quote anew Alexander Bickel's wise counsel, "No answer is what the wrong question begets."

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