

Common Historical Misconceptions

David Worsick for IFWA, June 2022

Some Examples of How Wrong Our Perception of History Can Be

We are constantly being bombarded by popular but grossly incorrect descriptions of history. Countries and religions lie about their history, often totally unaware of the errors they believe. Here is a list of important (at least in my old mind) historical delusions. Their importance is often not so much about historical effect, but pernicious delusions that nobody challenges. The Common Man/Woman/Whatever does not know the truth about so much of history.

1. ***Ancient Egypt was never completely conquered until Alexander the Great. No, a Negro kingdom to the south had conquered Egypt for a significant amount of time.*** So the pharaohs were Negro at that time. Then they were pushed out so pharaohs were white again. Then Greeks conquered Egypt and adopted their religion but didn't interbreed with the Egyptians, so the last pharaohs were light-skinned Greeks (including Cleopatra). Then the Romans took over and there were no pharaohs, only governors. Later on, Arabs moved into the country and installed themselves as rulers. By the way, there was a female pharaoh: Hatshepsut, 1478 – 1458 B.C.
2. ***Hannibal brought elephants through the Alps into Italy: Barely true.*** The elephants were a northern African big-eared species, smaller than the African type we know, and now extinct (probably over-hunted by the Romans). Only one elephant survived the journey to see Italy. It didn't live long enough to see battle. So it was a waste of time and poor pachyderms to move elephants across the Alps.
3. ***The Roman Emperorship started with Augustus: No. Not by name.*** The Romans did *not* call the Empire's leader "Emperor" until the Christian era. The pagan Romans called him Caesar (pronounced "Kai-sar", not "Sees-her"). By the way, the "Vomitorium" was the *exit* out of the Roman banquet hall. What were you told that term meant?
4. ***Pagan Rome fell to the barbarians. No, absolutely not!*** The Roman Empire became Christian, got used to Christianity and *then* it fell, or at least the western half, to the invading foreigners. Many of these foreigners, such as the Vandals, converted to Christianity shortly after arriving. Northern Europe, including Britain, lost so much land to the Pagans, and Christian Africa lost their land to the Moslems. The eastern half fell to the Turks at the start of the Renaissance.
5. ***The Roman army looked the same throughout its history. No, they had three distinct phases.*** The troops fighting the Carthaginians looked significantly different than the classic Caesarian troops or the Christian troops. Early armies had very little armour, small helmets and favoured light spears and oval shields. Their swords were the same, though, short and worn on the right side. These were the armies fighting Hannibal. Classical troops had standardized armour, big shields, short swords worn on their right and heavy spears that everybody sees in shows about Jesus (his real name was Jeshua ben Josef, by the way). These were the Armies of Caesar and

the following civil war. Christian Roman troops had simple helmets, no body armour, short throwing spears and long swords worn on the left. And pants. The Roman Empire wore pants in its old age.

6. ***The Christians were defeated in Africa solely by superior Islamic skill, tactics and strategy. No. The Christians caught the Plague.*** The first appearance of Bubonic Plague was extremely important: the Justinian plague, which crippled Christendom and totally missed the Arabs. Many of the forts that the Jihadis had proudly captured were barely manned or completely abandoned.
7. ***Rome was more advanced than Medieval Europe. Hard to say.*** Rome had paved roads, water wheels and an efficient Imperial government while Medieval Europe had dirt roads and petty kingdoms. Now this gets complicated.
 - a. The Romans paved their roads because they walked or they used slow ox carts to move stuff. The Medieval times had better horsemanship: stirrups and horse collars. Horses don't like paved roads because it's hard on their hoofs. Romans, by the way, had horseshoes. Roman seamanship was cowardly and limited in range. Greeks and Romans sailed keeping land in sight. Medieval seamanship was far more advanced. They preferred to ship by water (go, Venice, go!). Medieval European captains sailed straight across the Mediterranean, no land in sight, and Vikings sailed from Scandinavia to Britain or France and back. And the Islamic and Chinese captains weren't slouches either. No wonder the Vikings landed in the Americas first. See no land for days, no problem.
 - b. The Medieval culture quickly caught up with Roman military and then surpassed it. They mastered steel-making and armour fitting that the Romans didn't have. Fortifications and the engines to reduce them became significantly more advanced than the Romans.
 - c. The Medieval culture had access to Hindu mathematics (through the Arabs), developed better accounting methods, and quickly caught up to the Romans on mechanics. Windmills appeared. Watermills were used for factories using machine-powered hammers. They developed better writing styles, figuring out that separating words and sentences from each other and adding punctuation made reading much easier. The concept of the book, from Africa apparently, also helped. Who would want to read War and Peace on a scroll?
8. ***There is always only one Catholic Pope. Nope. At one time there were two opposing Medieval Catholic popes.*** One was based in Avignon, France and one in Rome. They spent their time excommunicating each other until the Pope of Rome was able to buy off the Pope of Avignon.
9. ***Christianity has been consistent in its beliefs until the Catholic-Protestant clash. No way. Early Christianity is much different from Middle Christianity, which is much different from Modern Christianity.*** We aren't sure what early Christians believe because of the lack of information, but the spread of Christianity after the barbarian invasions was inspired by the image of Christ defeating death. It wasn't until the Middle Ages that the concept of Jesus/Jeshua dying to absorb sin from us mortals developed. Also, the belief that the remains of saints can help pardon your sins also developed that time, not before. And the incredibly diverse and contradictory beliefs of splinter groups would take multiple volumes to explain.

10. ***The Mongols couldn't be stopped by anything but the death of the Khan. No, they were stopped three times: in the Middle East, in Poland and in Japan.*** The Mongols actually lost in the Islamic lands because the Arabs had grain-fed horses with better stamina than the Mongolian grass-fed horses (and a lack of grass in the desert didn't help, either). The Mongols stopped in Eastern Europe because they encountered the Black Forest (you really wanna take cavalry into a dark, grassless coniferous forest?) and then they suffered defeat by the Muscovites. They failed in Japan because the Samurai built a long wall that stopped them on the beaches and samurai got smart enough to jump aboard the invading ships and fight them in close quarters. Then a storm came along and sank the river craft that the Mongols were using for ocean travel and for sleeping (Rock-a-bye Mongol, you're gonna drown, and all of your army is going down). The Japanese named that storm the Divine Wind (Kamikaze).
11. ***The Bubonic Plague was called the Black Death. No. They called it the Great Mortality while it was around.*** Our common name for it came much later. It killed off one third of Europe and a good portion of Islamic Africa. Afterwards, the Turks decided to move into Turkey from the east (yeah, waiting a bit *before* visiting Europe was a good idea for them).
12. ***Who won the Spice Competition? Can you guess? Portugal won.*** In the struggle for the spice trade, Venice was trying to keep Turkey from dominating the spice trade, but both lost because Portugal, in the 1500's, had learned to sail around Africa to India. They took control of the spice trade by controlling the source. Both the Venice and Turkey empires started to decay at that point. Spain was preoccupied with precious metals and chilies from Mexico.
13. ***Almost everybody in the Middle Ages thought the world was flat when Columbus sailed. No. Most scholars thought it was round.*** Sure, the peasantry were flat-minded, but the educated people knew about the two arguments: A ship's sails can be seen from a distance before you see the ship's body, and you can measure the difference between the sundial's shadows at noon at widely spread locations and get an estimate of the radius of the earth. They thought that the earth was far bigger than Columbus thought *and they were correct*. They just didn't think there were two new continents in the middle. And I'm writing this course from one of those two previously unknown continents.
14. ***The Spaniards did not bring women over to the New World until late. No. Women came within twenty years of Columbus's return.*** Cortez, in 1519, sailed to Mexico from the colony of Cuba with a good number of Spanish maidens with his men, including two mistresses of his. The Aztecs called themselves Mexicans, not Aztecs. And the leader of the Aztec was named Moctecuhzoma, not Montezuma (regardless of the U.S. Marine's song). The Mexicans had years earlier found a shipwrecked Spanish man who taught some of them how to speak Spanish. Also, the Spanish called themselves Andalusians and Castilians, not Spanish, as the areas never conquered by the Moslems, the parts reconquered earlier and the recently reconquered parts of Spain weren't acting as a united country yet. And the Spanish troops didn't have the classic Morion, with its tall semi-circular flange, at this point yet. Their helmets had a rim around the bottom, but came to a point at the top.
15. ***George Washington never made a mistake. Really? The Battle of Jumonville Glen.*** When the Virginia governor sent George to guard a British fort being built on the boundary with French-claimed land, and the French sent a small force to tell the British to leave as that was French

land (ignore the natives of course), Washington's troops and some natives fired upon them, killing many, including a French ambassador. Admittedly, the Virginia governor's instructions were rather militant and not even told to Britain. Accounts of the battle are conflicting. French troops captured Washington and made him confess in writing to assassinating the ambassador before letting him go. France then declared war on a surprised Britain, beginning the French and Indian war. Two years later, Spain and Austria joined in on behalf of France and Prussia joined in on Britain's side. That's how the devastating Seven Year's War was started by George Washington.

16. ***The Americans defeated Britain all by themselves. No, they had a lot of help from France and Spain.*** Fortunately, American media is getting rid of this delusion on its own, but there are still Americans claiming this. The Americans had two powerful allies who both had sent navies: the absolute monarchy of Spain and the not-quite-absolute-but-much-more-so-than-Britain French monarchy. France also sent so many troops that their government became impoverished. The French supporters of the American Revolution were executed in great numbers in the name of Freedom during the French Revolution Terror.
17. ***The Napoleonic wars were the first world wars. No, the very first 'world at war' was the Seven Year's War.*** And shame on you if you thought WWI was the first world war. This war involved five major countries and several minor ones. It waged as the French and Indian war in North America, a war in the Caribbean, the Far East, India and Spain, and fighting in the Germanic lands and the Holy Roman Empire, bringing the Prussian Frederick the Great to fame, French Canada to humiliation and separation from France, and India into the British Empire. It forced an impoverished Britain to raise taxes, causing the Americans to revolt. That American revolution inspired the bloody French revolution, which led to the Napoleonic wars, involving even more countries, which killed millions, convincing the Germans to hate other Europeans, and inflicted the novel War and Peace upon thousands of poor students.
18. ***The largest cavalry charges were in the Napoleonic wars. No, the Poles had a larger charge a century and a half before.*** Those wars did have very large charges, but the largest charge was the successful Polish Hussar charge against the Turkish besiegers of Vienna in the mid 1600's (go Poland!). Turkey never ever tried to take Vienna again.
19. ***The British were kidnapping American sailors in the Napoleonic wars, causing the US to start the War of 1812. No, the British were arresting British deserters.*** They had joined the Americans because they paid much better. At the start of the war, the British offered to meet American conditions and stop chasing deserters if the Americans abandon their attempt to seize Canada, but President Madison rejected the offer because he wanted Canada.
 - a. ***The battle of New Orleans wasn't the brilliant victory the Americans claimed.*** The swampy conditions and one mistake by a British officer caused the attack to fail over very difficult ground. The Americans did *not* have rifles (a Kentuckian rifle regiment hadn't bothered bringing their guns) but did have lots of cannon supplied by a French pirate who would murder everybody aboard any ship he caught, including women and children. Americans tend to treat this pirate as a hero. The "defeated" British army then captured an American fort with few losses. They left shortly after because they received news that the war was over. If the British had won the battle, nothing bad would have

happened. The British would still respect the Treaty of Ghent and the British general in charge was a stickler for preventing troops from misbehaving. The main effect of the battle was to let the pro-slavery racist Andrew Jackson become president and aggravate the conditions that will result in the American Civil War, along with some severe acts of ethnic cleansing of natives.

20. ***The Americans always respected international law. No. Just no.*** The Americans were notorious industrial spies, plagiarists and fraudsters in the first two thirds of the Victorian age, refusing to respect other countries' patents or businessmen. They published British and French-translated books without paying writers (including Dickens, who was never paid for any American publications of his work), copied other nation's technology without payment or even admitting that they hadn't invented these things and generally acting like China did in the late 1900's. Even their bolt-action Springfield rifles were a copy of the German Mauser rifle and the Mauser company successfully sued them for money. Only when the Americans had many patents and copyrights of their own did they start behaving. I bet that China will also start respecting International copyright and patents as more and more patents and publications start to come from the Chinese.
21. ***American Civil War: The Confederacy lost the battle of Gettysburg because of a reckless attack. No, the attack should have succeeded.*** What failed was the Confederate artillery not watching their "fall of shot". For about an hour before Pickett's Charge, the confederacy bombarded the North positions with the largest artillery barrage ever used by the South. However, their regular explosive shell supplier had an accident that blew up the factory, so their ammunition now came from a new factory who had messed up the calibration of the fuses. Shells in the civil war were of a rather new type, with a fuse that could be set to explode at a specific amount of time after being fired, so you could aim shells to explode over the heads of your targets. These new shells were defective; exploding *after* the time they were set for. The Confederate officers didn't bother checking to see where these shells were exploding, as they were concentrating on keeping the fire rate high. They also didn't wonder why the Union guns weren't firing at them, if they were causing so much damage. Therefore, many cows, some hospital tents and a lot of empty fields were horribly blasted well behind the Union line, but that line itself, its defenders and its cannons, were completely untouched. The Confederates attacked a fully manned, unshaken line of defenders instead of attacking heavily crushed defences. They lost about half the troops they had sent over.
22. ***Victorian armies didn't use camouflage because they were tradition-bound. No, there was a good reason it wasn't needed.*** They were still using black powder, which created so much smoke that hiding your position was near impossible. When smokeless gunpowder was invented, armies quickly adopted the field gray or khaki colours.
23. ***WWI: The Germans surrendered because of the strength of the American army. No, it was the Balkans that finally did them in.*** They had little trouble holding off the Americans. They had considerably more trouble holding off the other Allied troops, but they really started peace talks because their Bulgarian allies surrendered, giving the Balkans to the Allies and therefore threatening the complete collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were also running out of food and fuel because of the British blockade.

24. ***The Prohibition of Alcohol in North America banned every alcoholic drink. No.*** Depending on the state, you could actually make your own beer if you were a farmer, and your own wine if you had orchards. Just don't sell it. You could also take the popular cruises outside of the Six-mile ocean limit and then have drinks. Canada dropped prohibition early (and some of us then smuggled booze to the US) but the Americans kept Prohibition for years.
25. ***North American movies in the 1920's and 1930's were prim and proper. No, not until the Censor boards were created in the early Thirties.*** Not only did Europe never buy into censorship (e.g. Heidy Lamar, who also developed the technology required for the Internet during WWII, posed nude in some of her films), North American film companies were also getting very riské, both in content and nudity. Then North America suddenly became a bunch of prudes.
26. ***The Bolsheviks defeated the Russian government. No, comrade, that is all filthy lies.*** A woman's protest group convinced the Russian army to refuse to fire on other protesters and, having lost the Army and Navy, the Czar agreed to resign, without any violence needed. At this time, Lenin was in Switzerland. The Germans brought him and his fellow revolutionaries from Switzerland to Russian lands in a "sealed" train that was neither uncomfortable nor sealed, as the hardy Bolshevik leaders were able to get out to visit restaurants, hotels and bars during their trip. Then they staged a coup to remove the democratic leaders and install a dictatorship that forbade any talk of the women's part of the revolution or the willing resignation of the Royals. When the original revolutionaries revolted against the Bolshevik take-over, the civil war waged for several years, during which the top Bolsheviks ordered their troops to capture and execute two parents, three girls and one sick boy: the Romanovs. Then they lied about it, blaming local troops for the murders instead. The "Storming of the Winter Palace" in St. Petersburg never happened but the victorious Bolsheviks made movies re-enacting this fictional scene.
27. ***The Stalinist purges destroyed the entire Soviet officer corp. No, most of the officers were fired, not fired at.*** Many were killed, more were imprisoned but even more just had their military positions permanently terminated. Then the Fascists demonstrated the true ability of the Bolsheviks to run an army without these experts and the terminations became extremely temporary.
28. ***The Germans started WW2 by invading Poland. Actually, the Germans seemed to have wanted one strip of land.*** They were hoping that the Allies would let them seize the small strip of Polish land, called the Polish Corridor Land, which had separated Germany from a small German province called East Prussia (the Versailles treaty was a real disaster: German land surrounded by Poland, what were they thinking?). The Allies then declared war, forcing the Germans to decide whether to retreat or to try to take all of Poland. This is why the Polish campaign wasn't an ideal Blitzkrieg scenario. The Germans weren't ready for war yet and had to plan on the run.
- a. And we must also consider whether Japan's invasion of China in the Thirties was part of WWII.
29. ***Polish Lancers attacked German armoured cars in 1940. No, that was propaganda to make the Poles look stupid.*** A Polish corps of lancers attacked German infantry and actually defeated them (at this time there were few submachine guns in the German army so cavalry had a decent

chance against surprised riflemen). The cavalry then tried to escape from an attack by armoured cars, but the cars were too fast. When the Germans showed reporters the dead cavalry, they decided to create the lie about Poles charging tanks with lances.

- a. By the way, the one country which had success with cavalry in WWII was Russia, who knew when and where to use them against unsupported infantry.

30. ***The German Army had a superior tank force in 1940. No, many of their tanks were training tanks that were never intended for combat.*** They had to use them to bulk up their forces. Remember, they weren't ready for the invasion of Poland. The Allies failed to use their tanks efficiently. Unfortunately for the Allies, after Dunkirk, the Germans now had time to upgrade their tanks. Unfortunately for the Germans, the Russians also had time to develop a new tank.
31. ***The Germans completely avoided the Maginot defences. No, there were several forts that the Germans attacked, next to their main assault.*** A few defended themselves magnificently, but several were taken without excessive casualties. This was the first time the German 88 mm Flak gun was used against ground targets and it was impressive, even when the Stuka dive-bombers failed to penetrate the defenses. A major problem for the French was insufficient range for their guns. Many forts could simply be ignored.
32. ***Canada had nuclear intercontinental missiles during the Cold War.*** No, but we did have nuclear anti-aircraft missiles that would explode over *our* heads. Not a good plan, actually.