

**Best books of 2019: History**

Tony Barber

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Tony Barber selects his must-read titles

The Boundless Sea: A History of the Oceans, by David Abulafia, Allen Lane £35/Oxford University Press, RRP \$39.95

It is hard to do justice to the historical sweep and richness of detail of Abulafia's latest epic work of maritime scholarship. A companion to *The Great Sea*, the Cambridge professor's history of the Mediterranean, *The Boundless Sea* is nothing less than a history of humanity written from the perspective of the oceans.

Greece: Biography of a Modern Nation, by Roderick Beaton, Allen Lane, RRP£30/University of Chicago Press, RRP\$35

Beaton's carefully balanced narrative history sets Greece's recent troubles in the context of recurrent patterns of political conflict, social change and economic upheaval since the 1821-32 war of independence. An impressive, up-to-date survey that deserves to be the standard English-language work on the subject for years to come.

Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior, by Catherine Hanley, Yale University Press, RRP£20/\$30

Our understanding of medieval European monarchies is becoming more textured as a result of the attention that a lively new generation of historians is devoting to women rulers of that epoch. Hanley's biography of Matilda, the daughter of Henry I who fought to become queen of England in the mid-12th century, is a fine example of the genre.

To Begin the World Over Again: How the American Revolution Devastated the Globe, by Matthew Lockwood, Yale University Press, RRP£25/\$30

Lockwood casts the birth of the US in a new and exciting light by describing the way the 18th-century revolution affected the rest of the world, especially the British empire. In a book of impressive analytical scope, Lockwood tells his story with engaging detail, backed by unfailingly good scholarship.

The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894–1924, by Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, Harvard University Press, RRP£28.95/\$35

The mass killings of Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Christians in the late Ottoman era and early 1920s have been the subject of several excellent studies in recent years. The Israeli historians Morris and Ze'evi add value by knitting together the three main episodes of violent persecution in a comprehensive narrative.

Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty, by Norman M Naimark, Belknap Press, RRP\$29.95/£23.95

Naimark has few peers as a scholar of Stalinism, the Soviet Union and mid-20th-century Europe. Here he selects seven case studies, from Denmark and Finland to Austria and Albania, to illustrate the complexity of Stalin's

objectives after the second world war as European leaders on both sides of the emerging Iron Curtain strove to reclaim national sovereignty.

Without the Banya We Would Perish: A History of the Russian Bathhouse, by Ethan Pollock, Oxford University Press, RRP\$34.95

Anyone who has spent time in a Russian steam bath never forgets the experience. To soak up Pollock's entertaining and scrupulously researched history of the banya has much the same effect. Original scholarship and readability at their very best.

The Story of Silver: How the White Metal Shaped America and the Modern World, by William L Silber, Princeton University Press, RRP£24/\$29.95

Silber's book is mostly about silver in America, rather than the world, but it is a delightful and instructive history, nonetheless. He is especially good on Franklin D Roosevelt's revival of bimetallism in the 1930s, and on the manipulation of the silver market in the 1970s and 1980s by Nelson Bunker Hunt, a Texas oil billionaire.

Tell us what you think

What are your favourites from this list — and what books have we missed? Tell us in the comments below

The Russian Job: The Forgotten Story of How America Saved Russia from Famine, by Douglas Smith, Picador, RRP£25/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, RRP\$28

The US famine-relief campaign in Russia after the Bolshevik revolution and civil war was one of the largest and most effective humanitarian efforts of the 20th century. This now-almost-forgotten story of US-Russian relations receives superb treatment from Smith, author of Former People, a study of the destruction of the Russian aristocracy.

Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre, by Kim A Wagner, Yale University Press, RRP£20/\$32.50

This is the most detailed, authoritative account of what was arguably the most shameful episode in the British empire's history. Wagner, a scholar at Queen Mary, University of London, describes the 1919 massacre of Indian civilians at Amritsar in harrowing detail, placing the atrocity in the context of panicky British memories of the anti-colonial uprising of 1857.

Tony Barber is the FT's Europe editor

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