

The extraordinary closeness of our 2016 presidential election is getting plenty of attention. Very few political analysts at the time predicted that Hillary Clinton could lose the election. Even Donald Trump didn't really believe that he would win, which was obvious in the choice of a modest venue for the election night party. Analysts are just beginning to explore the "what ifs" of this moment in history.

What if they overlooked the rising tide of people left jobless by the new technologies making old-style manufacturing or mining obsolete? What if they missed the misogyny that had gone underground and viral against an elite woman becoming president? Did they miss the racial animus of people resenting the "identity politics" that had become so popular among the better educated?

Although our intelligence agencies recognized clandestine Russian interference, they and outgoing President Obama were reluctant to interfere or seem to choose sides. The entire election campaign was a succession of shocks and surprises, words and actions that would have unseated any other candidate left Donald Trump untouched. He courted the disgruntled and won the grudging admiration of some otherwise cautious conservatives. The Russian interference did not create something new; it simply exploited and magnified our already poisonous differences. Historic novelists in the future will have a "what if" story to tell.

I am recommending one new book and one older one that take on "what ifs" in events that changed the world: both of them on the eve of World War II.

Munich by Robert Harris, is solid history, telling the story of the 1938 meeting between Britain's Neville Chamberlain's diplomats and Hitler and his men. Hitler was agitating to go to war with Czechoslovakia over their imaginary "mistreatment" of their German-speaking minority. Britain and France had agreed to protect the Czechs, but this would mean going to war with Germany. The post-World I disarmament of the British and French was the result of war fatigue. Although they were the winners of that conflict, the death toll and expense left the public viscerally anti-war.

We have come to know Chamberlain as a cowardly figure, the great appeaser, who knuckled under to the bully, Hitler. But there may be another side to this. At the three-day meeting with Hitler in Munich, Chamberlain thought he could talk to Hitler man to man. Hitler insisted that his demand to absorb the Czech Germans into Germany was no different than his absorption of Austria and that he had no further territorial designs. There would be peace, not war.

Chamberlain's appeasement might have been less motivated by cowardice (peace at any cost) than by the realization that Britain was not ready to defend itself. They were rearming, but needed more time. His decision was to sacrifice Czechoslovakia (which the British were not ready to die for) and draw the line at Poland, which was the trigger starting the war when the Nazis invaded.

The fictional part of this novel is the invention of two young diplomats, both translators, one English and the other German, former schoolmates at Oxford. The two reconnected at the conference and worked together in the hope of a different outcome. One comment in the book gave me pause. The German was explaining to his British friend why he had joined the Nazi party: "Everyone said (people like me) 'Oh, he's a terrible fellow, Hitler, but he's not necessarily all bad. Look at his achievements, aside from this awful medieval anti-Jew stuff: it will pass.'" This sounds creepily familiar.

The other book, December 6, is by the wonderful Martin Cruz Smith, author of a series of detective novels about an honest Russian police detective, a loner in corrupt late and post-Communist Russia. This stand-alone book covers the day before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a bad choice for the Japanese. The protagonist is a young American, a child of missionaries, who has made Japan his home. He runs a popular nightclub (think of Rick's Place in Casablanca) and sees what is coming. He spends the entire day of December 6 trying to head it off. What a big "what if" this is!

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