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Horizontal History

📅 January 13, 2016 By Tim Urban

Most of us have a pretty terrible understanding of history. Our knowledge is spotty, with large gaps all over the place, and the parts of history we do end up knowing a lot about usually depend on the particular teachers, parents, books, articles, and movies we happen to come across in our lives. Without a foundational, tree-trunk understanding of all parts of history, we often forget the things we do learn, leaving even our favorite parts of history a bit hazy in our heads. Raise your hand if you'd like to go on stage and debate a history buff on the nuances of a historical time period of your choosing. That's what I thought.

The reason history is so hard is that it's so *soft*. To truly, fully understand a time period, an event, a movement, or an important historical figure, you'd have to be there, and many times over. You'd have to be in the homes of the public living at the time to hear what they're saying; you'd have to be a fly on the wall in dozens of secret, closed-door meetings and conversations; you'd need to be inside the minds of the key players to know their innermost thoughts and motivations. Even then, you'd be lacking context. To really have the complete truth, you'd need background—the cultural nuances and national psyches of the time, the way each of the key players was raised during childhood and the subtle social dynamics between those players, the impact of what was going on in other parts of the world, and an equally-thorough understanding of the many past centuries that all of these things grew out of.

That's why not only can't even the most perfect history buff fully understand history, but the key people involved *at the time* can't ever know the full story. History is a giant collective tangle of thousands of interwoven stories involving millions of characters, countless chapters, and many, many narrators.

And you know humans—that's not how they like things. The human brain really, really likes to *simplify* things. History provides the context of our world and our lives, because each of us is a character in this grand story—and the last thing we want to believe is that the story is too complicated and mysterious for us to understand.

Fairy tales are satisfying, because the plot is crystal clear—there are good guys and there are bad guys and there's only one side of the story. Children identify with the good guys—the *us* guys—and they detest the bad guys—the *them* guys—and everyone's happy. Stories written for adults aren't that different—you loved *Shawshank* and *Braveheart* and *Star Wars*, right?

So when it comes to the story we're all a *part* of, we most certainly want to feel the same way. We want history to be simple and clear, with good guys and bad guys, and we'd like to make sure that our ancestors, our ethnic group, our nation, and all the other tribes we belong to are Aladdin in the story—not Jafar.

The problem with this is that not everyone can be Aladdin. *Someone* has to be Jafar, right? Well, no. Not if there are many different story-tellers. Since no one is ever telling anything close to the full, real, *complete* story, in all its complexity—as we said, no one even *knows* the full story—each historian, each ruler, and each society creates their own fairy tale version of what went down in the past. When things are unsatisfyingly multi-faceted, we pick the facet we like best. When there are knowledge gaps, we make things up. When there are questions of motive, we pick one that fits nicely into the narrative.

This leaves us with plenty of tools to leave every story with a proper Aladdin and a proper Jafar and allows us to make sure that Aladdin is exactly who we want him to be.

The US is a good example. A huge number of people in today's world have been told a story of the US in which the US is Aladdin, and a huge other number of people have heard the same story with the US as Jafar. Some people will claim to have a more nuanced view, but deep in their heart, when they see an American flag, they see either a good guy flag or a bad guy flag. (One of the major political divides in

the US stems from liberals thinking conservatives over-Aladdinize the US and conservatives thinking liberals over-Jafarify the US while Aladdinizing the other side.)

This is the same phenomenon behind the stark opinion divide around Israel and Palestine. Hoards of people on both sides of what is an *insanely* complicated story are red in the face with ire at the other side, completely positive that their side is Aladdin and incensed that anyone could ever call the other side Aladdin and their side Jafar. Only with the stark clarity of a fairy tale could people ever feel so unshakingly sure.

Of course, it's not that there are no good guys or bad guys in history. History is a pretty ugly story—what else would you expect from a species of primitive biological animals—and accountability for that ugliness isn't spread out evenly amongst all people. To an extent, the definition of words like good and bad, right and wrong, and hero and villain lie in the eye of the beholder—but there's also plenty of human behavior that qualifies as objectively good or bad.

So it's not that there are never objective Aladdins and there are never objective Jafars—it's that almost none of us has any idea what the fuck we're talking about. Point to a historical event and tell me that there was a true Aladdin and Jafar going on, and I'll acknowledge that that might be true. Tell me that you know who was who, and in most cases I'll shake my head.

Which brings me to me. Blogging about history is asking for trouble. Portray nearly any story or person as an Aladdin or a Jafar and you'll feel the wrath of both the people who believe the opposite situation and the people who think you've oversimplified the situation. Portray something in a nuanced and educated way and you'll get yelled at by people who believe *both* of the one-sided views. Nothing people's tribal fires to the table like history. I've learned this [from experience](#).

It doesn't make me any less excited to write about history—but it makes me want to research the hell out of a part of history before I write about it. Only by reading a bunch of varying accounts and opinions can you start to form a clear picture of what we know and don't know.

That's why for this post, I'm not gonna tell you shit. Rather than dive into the weeds of what happened when, and why, I'm going to focus on one of the rare elements of history that's indisputably black-and-white—*who* happened when.

Because before we can responsibly start arguing with each other about Aladdins and Jafars, we need to get the basic timeline and characters of the story clear.

But I'm going to lay things out a little differently than you're probably used to.

Normally, we learn about history's storylines in isolation. We might have a strong sense of the history of physics breakthroughs or the progression of western philosophical thought or the succession of French rulers—but we're not as clear on how each of these storylines relate to each *other*. If you think of history like a tangle of vines growing upwards through time, studying one type of history at a time is like following the path of one particular vine while ignoring the other vines around it. It's understanding history in a *vertical* sense.

And while vertical history has its merits, it doesn't leave you with an especially *complete* picture of any one time. An econ buff in the year 2500 might know all about the Great Depression that happened in the early 20th century and the major recession that happened about 80 years later, but that same person might mistake the two world wars for happening in the 1800s or the 2200s if they're a little hazy on the history of wars. So while an econ buff, that person would have a pretty poor understanding of what our modern times are all *about*.

Likewise, I might know that Copernicus began writing his seminal work *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* in Poland in the early 1510s, but by learning that right around that same time in Italy, Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, I get a better picture of the *times*. By learning that it was right while both of these things were happening that Henry VIII married Catherine of Aragon in England, the 1510s suddenly begins to take on a distinct *personality*. These three facts, when put together, allow me to see a more three-dimensional picture of the 1510s—it allows me to see the 1510s *horizontally*, like cutting out a complete segment of the vine tangle and examining it all together.

A blog post is limited in its ability to examine all of history horizontally. But I've taken two separate cracks below that I think can work together nicely to help us take a horizontal view of different times. Both involve a lot of names.

Which leads me to the inevitable disclaimer about *who* I chose to include. I tried to remove my own biases by gathering the names from a handful of lists by publications like *Time*. I searched the internet for things like "most influential people in history" and "most important people in the Middle Ages" and "most famous people of the 19th century" and "most powerful Chinese emperors" and ended up with a big pile of names, some of whom I'm familiar with, others I'm not. That said, between the fact that the

lists I used were by publications targeting English-speaking people and that I inevitably leaned more towards people I had heard of, the group of names will skew America- and Euro-centric, with places like Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia probably underrepresented. This isn't entirely by accident, though—this post is only useful if you've heard of the people, and I intentionally chose names I thought a large portion of Wait But Why readers would know. In other words, merit wasn't the only criteria—household fame mattered too. And yes, I missed a lot of people—with limited space on the screen, the names had to be a sampling, not an exhaustive list.

Horizontal History—First Crack:

For my first crack, I present to you a big pile of famous names, organized by birth decade—kind of a “2,600 Under 2,600” list. The purpose is to help orient ourselves on when people lived, especially *in relation to each other*.

Having a clear picture of generations is very easy when you think about currently-living people. For example, I know that Mark Zuckerberg is around my age while Vladimir Putin is about the age of my parents and George H.W. Bush is about the age of my grandparents. On the other side of things, Prince George—the one world-famous baby—is the age of my kids if I had kids. I know this without having to think about it:

Decade of birth

↓

The age of my kids that I don't have →	2010's	Prince George
My age →	1980's	Mark Zuckerberg
My parents' age →	1950's	Vladimir Putin
My grandparents' age →	1920's	George H.W. Bush

If I list people by birth decade instead of generation, it still makes sense. People born in the 70s and 60s feel older than me but not as old as my parents, and people born in the 30s and 40s feel older than my parents but younger than my grandparents:

The age of my kids that I don't have →	2010	Prince George
	2000	Honey Boo Boo
	1990	Miley Cyrus
My age →	1980	Mark Zuckerberg
	1970	David Beckham
	1960	Barack Obama
My parents' age →	1950	Vladimir Putin
	1940	Paul McCartney
	1930	Pope Francis
My grandparents' age →	1920	George H.W. Bush

But this is much harder for generations that aren't currently alive, and it gets less and less clear the farther back you go. Quick! Name the oldest member and youngest member of this group: Nietzsche, Darwin, Freud, Marx, Gandhi, Tolstoy, Twain. Not that easy, right? And that's only going back 200 years. But by laying them out by birth decade, you can get oriented:

1860	Mahatma Gandhi
1850	Sigmund Freud
1840	Friedrich Nietzsche
1830	Mark Twain
1820	Leo Tolstoy
1810	Karl Marx
1800	Charles Darwin

Since a generation is typically about 30 years, you can move three or six lines down from a name to see who they viewed as their parents' or grandparents' ages during their lifetimes, and you can go the same distance up to see who they viewed as their kids' or grandkids' age. So Darwin would have seen

Twain as some young kid and he would have shaken his old man fist at Gandhi from the rocking chair on his porch. Meanwhile, Nietzsche would have seen Marx as a guy his dad's age and Freud as a contemporary, though a bit younger.

Two people more than seven or eight lines away from each other on the list probably were not ever alive at the same time, which means they were likely not that clear about each others' generation, in the way I'm not really clear on whether Hemingway was in my great-grandparents' generation, my great-great-grandparents' generation, or some other age.

Using this decade list tool, let's look at a whole group of famous historical figures to see who was the same age as whom, who shook their old man fist at whom, and who was and wasn't alive at the same time. The decade colors are in a three-way cycle, so you can jump to rows of the same color above and below to quickly go up and down by generations (i.e. if you take a name on a green line, one green line down is their parents' age, three green lines up is their great-grandchildren's age, etc.). For people alive today and in the past century, I couldn't come close to including every famous person, so I just picked a sampling.

Really Famous People, By Birth Decade

2010	Prince George							
2000	Honey Boo Boo	Sasha Obama	Winston Urban					
1990	Malala	Justin Bieber	Malia Obama					
1980	Mark Zuckerberg	Prince William	Lionel Messi	Roger Federer	Taylor Swift	Usain Bolt	LeBron James	Natalie Portman
1970	Larry Page	Elon Musk	Tiger Woods	David Beckham	Kanye West	Leonardo DiCaprio	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	Angelina Jolie
1960	Barack Obama	J.K.Rowling	Michael Jordan	Diego Maradona	Princess Diana	David Foster Wallace	Tom Cruise	David Cameron
1950	Michael Jackson	Steve Jobs	Angela Merkel	Osama Bin Laden Tom Hanks	Bill Gates Xi Jinping	Jerry Seinfeld Tim Berners-Lee	Vladimir Putin Madonna	Tony Blair Oprah Winfrey
1940	Bill Clinton Stephen Hawking	George W. Bush Bob Dylan	Paul McCartney Bruce Lee	Muhammad Ali Steven Spielberg	Pelé Jack Nicklaus	Donald Trump O.J. Simpson	Bob Ross Robert De Niro	Billy Joel Meryl Streep
1930	Neil Armstrong Jim Henson	Elvis Carl Sagan	The Dalai Lama Robert Redford	Pope Francis Harvey Milk	Sylvia Plath John Williams	Mikhail Gorbachev Charles Manson	Warren Buffett Stephen Sondheim	Yuri Gagarin Pavarotti
1920	Martin Luther King Shirley Temple	Anne Frank Marilyn Monroe	Margaret Thatcher Kurt Vonnegut Grace Kelly	Queen Elizabeth Audrey Hepburn John Glenn	Fidel Castro Akio Morita Judy Garland	George H.W. Bush Andy Warhol Paul Newman	Pope John Paul II Jack Kerouac Andrei Sakharov	Pol Pot Marlon Brando Sidney Poitier
1910	John F. Kennedy Jonas Salk Alan Turing	Richard Feynman J.D. Salinger Ted Williams	Frank Sinatra Red Auerbach Lucille Ball	Nelson Mandela Jackson Pollock Jacque Cousteau	Mother Teresa Ronald Reagan Jackie Robinson	Rosa Parks William Shockley Orson Welles	Sam Walton Sir Edmund Hillary Ingrid Bergman	Billie Holiday Vince Lombardi I.M. Pei
1900	Howard Hughes Walt Disney	Salvador Dalí Deng Xiaoping	George Orwell Charles Lindbergh	Salvador Allende Kurt Gödel	Katharine Hepburn Ray Kroc	John Wayne Ayatollah Khomeini	Louis Armstrong Aaron Copland	Enrico Fermi Estée Lauder
1890	Mao Zedong Dwight Eisenhower	Amelia Earhart Nikita Khrushchev	Hemingway Golda Meir	Al Capone Humphrey Bogart	Charles de Gaulle Ho Chi Minh	Alfred Hitchcock George Gershwin	Babe Ruth C.S. Lewis	J.R.R. Tolkien Cole Porter
1880	Adolf Hitler Pablo Picasso	Franklin D. Roosevelt Alexander Fleming	Charlie Chaplin Helen Keller	Niels Bohr David Ben-Gurion T.S. Eliot	Igor Stravinsky Robert H. Goddard James Joyce	Virginia Woolf John M. Keynes Eleanor Roosevelt	Georgia O'Keeffe Edwin Hubble Ataturk	Erwin Schrödinger Jawaharlal Nehru Coco Chanel
1870	Albert Einstein	Winston Churchill	Joseph Stalin	Vladimir Lenin	Maurice Ravel	Orville Wright	Piet Mondrian	
1860	Henry Ford	Mahatma Gandhi	Marie Curie	Czar Nicholas II	Claude Debussy Rudyard Kipling	Neville Chamberlain Frank Lloyd Wright	Scott Joplin Henri Matisse	H. G. Wells Leo Baekeland
1850	Sigmund Freud	Nikola Tesla	T. Roosevelt	Vincent van Gogh	Kaiser Wilhelm II	Oscar Wilde Arthur C. Doyle	Billy the Kid Woodrow Wilson	Emperor Meiji Max Planck
1840	Thomas Edison	Claude Monet	Friedrich Nietzsche	Tchaikovsky	Renoir	Alexander G. Bell	G. Westinghouse Edvard Grieg	Antonín Dvořák Karl Benz
1830	Mark Twain	John Rockefeller	Edgar Degas	Lewis Carroll	Andrew Carnegie	Emily Dickinson	Sitting Bull	Dmitri Mendeleev
1820	Louis Pasteur	Leo Tolstoy	Florence Nightingale	Susan B. Anthony	Dostoyevsky	Harriet Tubman	Lord Kelvin	Gregor Mendel
1810	Queen Victoria	Otto von Bismarck	Charles Dickens	Karl Marx	Søren Kierkegaard Charlotte Brontë	Frederick Douglass Henry D. Thoreau	Herman Melville Franz Liszt	Frédéric Chopin Walt Whitman
1800	Abraham Lincoln	Charles Darwin	Edgar Allan Poe	Joseph Smith	Brigham Young	Ralph W. Emerson	Benjamin Disraeli	John Stuart Mill
1790	Michael Faraday	Cornelius Vanderbilt	Franz Schubert					
1780	Simon Bolivar	Davey Crockett						
1770	Beethoven	Johnny Appleseed	Georg W.F. Hegel	Jane Austen				
1760	Napoleon	Andrew Jackson	John Dalton					
1750	Mozart	Marie Antoinette	Alexander Hamilton	Robespierre				
1740	Thomas Jefferson	Antoine Lavoisier						
1730	George Washington	John Adams	James Watt	Joseph Haydn	Thomas Paine			
1720	Adam Smith	Immanuel Kant	James Cook					
1710	Rousseau	Emperor Qianlong						
1700	Benjamin Franklin	Carl Linnaeus	Leonhard Euler					
1690	Voltaire							
1680	J.S. Bach	George F. Handel						
1670	Peter the Great	Antonio Vivaldi						
1660	Jonathan Swift							
1650	Edmond Halley	Johann Pachelbel						
1640	Isaac Newton	Elihu Yale						
1630	Louis XIV	John Locke	Van Leeuwenhoek	Benedict Spinoza				
1620	Blaise Pascal	Sir William Penn						
1610	Jean-Baptiste Colbert							
1600	Charles I of England	Rembrandt						
1590	Oliver Cromwell	René Descartes						
1580	Thomas Hobbes	John Smith						
1570	Johannes Kepler	William Harvey	Mulla Sadra					
1560	Shakespeare	Galileo	James I of England	Francis Bacon				
1550	Sir Walter Raleigh	Edward Coke						
1540	Tokugawa Ieyasu	Mary, Queen of Scots						
1530	Elizabeth I	Oda Nobunaga	Ivan the Terrible					
1520	Raphael Holinshed							
1510	Gerardus Mercator	John Knox	Andreas Vesalius					
1500	John Calvin	Charles V						
1490	Henry VIII	Suleiman I	Jacques Cartier	William Tyndale				
1480	Martin Luther	Magellan	Raphael	Hernan Cortes	Babur			
1470	Michelangelo	Copernicus	Pizarro					
1460	Machiavelli	Ponce de León	Lorenzo de Medici	Guru Nanak	Erasmus			
1450	Leonardo da Vinci	Columbus	Amerigo Vespucci	Ferdinand & Isabella	Bartolomeu Dias			
1420	Ivan the Great	Sandro Botticelli	Warwick the King-Maker	Mehmet the Conqueror	Marsilio Ficino	William Caxton	Jack Cade	Vlad the Impaler

Each year in the left column represents the first year of the decade for that row. So the 1990 row is people born in the 1990s, between 1990 – 1999.

Okay so that's the last 200 years. Lots of impressive people—nicely done everyone. Some notes:

- Martin Luther King and Anne Frank being born the same year always weirds me out.
- The Wright Brothers were born in different decades and it seemed silly to include both of them. Sorry Wilbur.
- The oldest decade with currently-living people is the 1890s. As of January 2016, there are two living people who were alive in 1899: the US's Susannah Mushatt Jones and Italy's Emma Morano.

Beethoven and Napoleon were one year apart in age. Beethoven admired Napoleon and dedicated his third symphony to him. But when Napoleon declared himself the emperor of France, Beethoven flipped his shit, screaming, "So he is no more than a common mortal! Now, too, he will tread under foot all the rights of Man, indulge only his ambition; now he will think himself superior to all men, become a tyrant!" before running over to the symphony, grabbing the dedication page and tearing it up. Beethoven was an unpleasant man.

Mozart wrote his *Requiem* in 1791, the same year the US forefathers were writing the Bill of Rights.

Shakespeare and Galileo's careers happened concurrently. Galileo discovered Jupiter's moons in 1610, about the same time Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest* (1611). While the two of them were busy at work, Tokugawa Ieyasu was expelling Christianity from Japan (1610) in his new role as the country's shogun, marking the beginning of the 260-year reign of the Tokugawa shogunate. Across the Atlantic ocean, John Smith was founding Jamestown and having his head saved by Pocahontas (1607).

Okay we're about to hit the Middle Ages. Because it's super hard to stay a household name for many centuries, the commonly-known famous people are about to thin out considerably. So instead of having one row for every decade, we'll start having one row for each 30-year generation. That means now, each name is one row above their parents and two above their grandparents, etc. The numbers on the left correspond to the first year of the row's 30-year period. So the first row, which says 1420, covers everyone who was born between 1420 – 1449. Every name listed below here was a really big deal at the time, but very few of them are true household names today. I bolded the names I thought were best-known today.

1390	Gutenberg	Joan of Arc	Henry V of England	Montezuma I	Masaccio	Pope Pius II	Jan Van Eyck	
1360	Donatello	Henry V	Brunelleschi	Leonardo Bruni	Zheng He	Yongle Emperor	Christine de Pisan	Vlad the Impaler must have been some kind of guy.
1330	Catherine of Siena	Geofery Chausser	John of Gaunt	Charles the Wise	Tamerlane	John Gower	William Longland	
1300	Demetrios Kydones	Casimir III	Giovanni Boccaccio	Francesco Petrarch	Guy de Chauliac	Petrarch		
1270	Robert the Bruce	William Wallace	Marsilius of Padua	William of Ockham	Duns Scotus	Dante Alighieri		I have no idea if William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, and Longshanks are actually famous outside of <i>Braveheart</i> fans, but I was excited to see that they were real people, so they got bolded.
1240	Marco Polo	Osman I	Siger of Brabant					
1210	Kublai Khan	Thomas Aquinas	Longshanks	Roger Bacon	Louis IX			
1180	St. Francis	Frederick II	Albertus Magnus	Simon de Montfort				
1150	Genghis Khan	Fibonacci	Richard the Lionheart	Emperor Song Taizu	Pope Innocent III	Baldwin IV	Blondel the Minstrel	Dominic de Guzman
1120	Saladin	Maimonides	Frederick I					
1090	Pope Urban II	Hildegard of Bingen	Thomas Becket	Peter Lombard				
1060	Peter Abelard	Adelard of Bath	Godfrey of Bouillon					
1030	El Cid	Alexius Comnenus	Peter the Hermit	Su Shi	Shen Kuo			
1000	William the Conqueror	Leo IX						
970	Leif Eriksson	Cnut the Great	Sancho the Great					
940	Erik the Red							
910	Otto the Great							
880	Abd al-Rahman III	Henry the Fowler						
850	Zhu Wen							
820	Alfred the Great	Rollo the Viking	Charles the Fat					
790	Charlemagne							
760	Harun al-Rashid	Egbert the Saxon	Emperor Xianzong					
730	Pepin							
700	An Lushan							
670	Charles Martel	Emperor Xuanzong	Guo Ziyi	Venerable Bede	Tariq ibn Ziyad			
640	Willibrord							
610	Husayn ibn Ali	Hasan ibn Ali	Wu Zetian					
580	Ali ibn Abi Talib	Umar	Khalid ibn al-Walid	Maximus the Confessor				
550	Muhammad	Abu Bakr						
520	Gregory the Great	Emperor Wen	Alboin					
490	Amalasuntha	Theodora	Belisarius	Athalaric				
460	Justinian	Clovis	St. Benedict					
430	Odoacar	Childeric I	Theodoric the Great	Justin I				
400	Atilla the Hun	Leo the Great	Theodosius II					
370	Alaric the Visigoth	Genseric the Vandal	Marcian					
340	Augustine of Hippo	John Cassian						
310	Valentinian I	Basil of Caesarea						
280	Damasus							
250	Constantine	Maximian	Aurelius					
220	Gordian III	Diocletian						
200	Philip the Arab	Gallienus						
170	Ardashir I	Maximinus Thrax						
140	Commodus							
110	Marcus Aurelius							
80	Antoninus Pius							
50	Trajan	Hadrian	Domitian	Sextus Pompei				
20	Ovid	Nero						
10 BC	Jesus	Paul the Apostle	Mary Magdalene	Vespasian	Claudius			
40 BC	Agrippa II							
70 BC	Cleopatra	Augustus	Virgil	Tiberius				
100BC	Julius Caesar	Mark Antony	Brutus	Lepidus	Herod the Great			
130BC	Marcus Cicero	Spartacus	Pompey					
160BC	Sulla	Gaius Marius	Mithridates VI					
190BC	Tiberius Gracchus	Scipio Aemilianus						
220BC	Cleopatra I Syra							
250BC	Hannibal	Scipio Africanus						
280BC	Qin Shi Huang	Fabius Maximus	Emperor Kōgen					
310BC	Archimedes	Hiero II	Ptolemy II					
340BC	Pyrhus of Epirus							
370BC	Alexander the Great							
400BC	Aristotle	Ptolemy I	Darius III	Philip II of Macedon				
430BC	Plato							
460BC	Hippocrates	Aristophanes	Democritus					
490BC	Socrates	Phidias	Zeno					
520BC	Pericles	Xerxes I of Persia						
550BC	Leonidas							
580BC	Confucius	Buddha	Pythagoras	Darius I				

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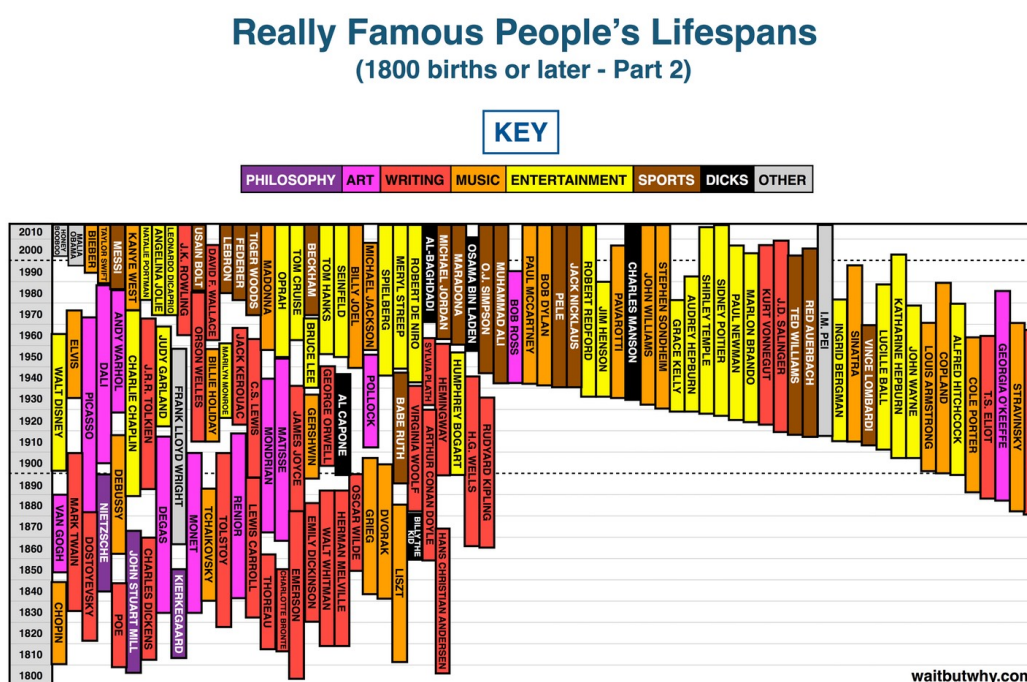
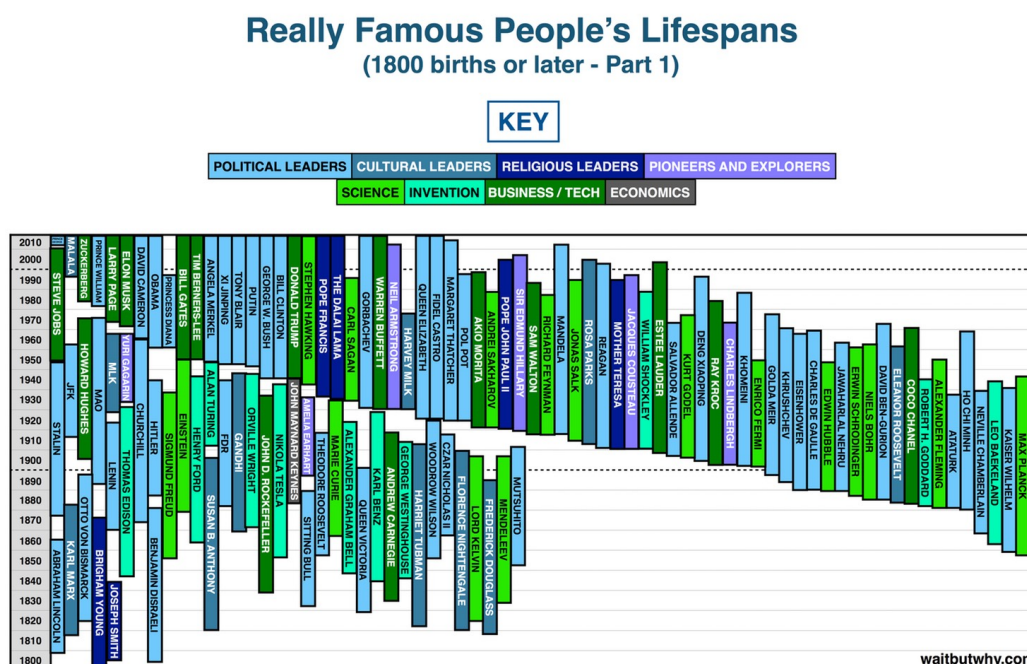
Okay how did that go? Fun? Icky? I can't quite tell. In any case, let's move on.

Horizontal History—Second Crack:

For my second crack at depicting history horizontally, I present to you A Psychotic Jumble of Colorful Vertical Bars That Might Be Awesome or Maybe Not I Can't Tell Here Either But I Think It Might Be Fun.

This time, I got more specific than birth decade and actually identified the exact birth year *and* the death year of each name, using a bar to depict their lifespan. While the above chart simplifies who lived when, the diagram below allows you to follow a single horizontal path along any year and see who was and wasn't alive at that time.

As I made the diagram, I ran into a big problem, which is that it looked like an upside-down L with way more names at the top than the bottom (because there are a lot more household names who were alive in the last 200 years than in previous centuries). Crunching all those recent names into blog width made the font tiny—so I solved the problem by cutting out about half of the recent names. *But*, before I did, I broke the complete list of 1800–2016 names into two groups by category and here they are below:

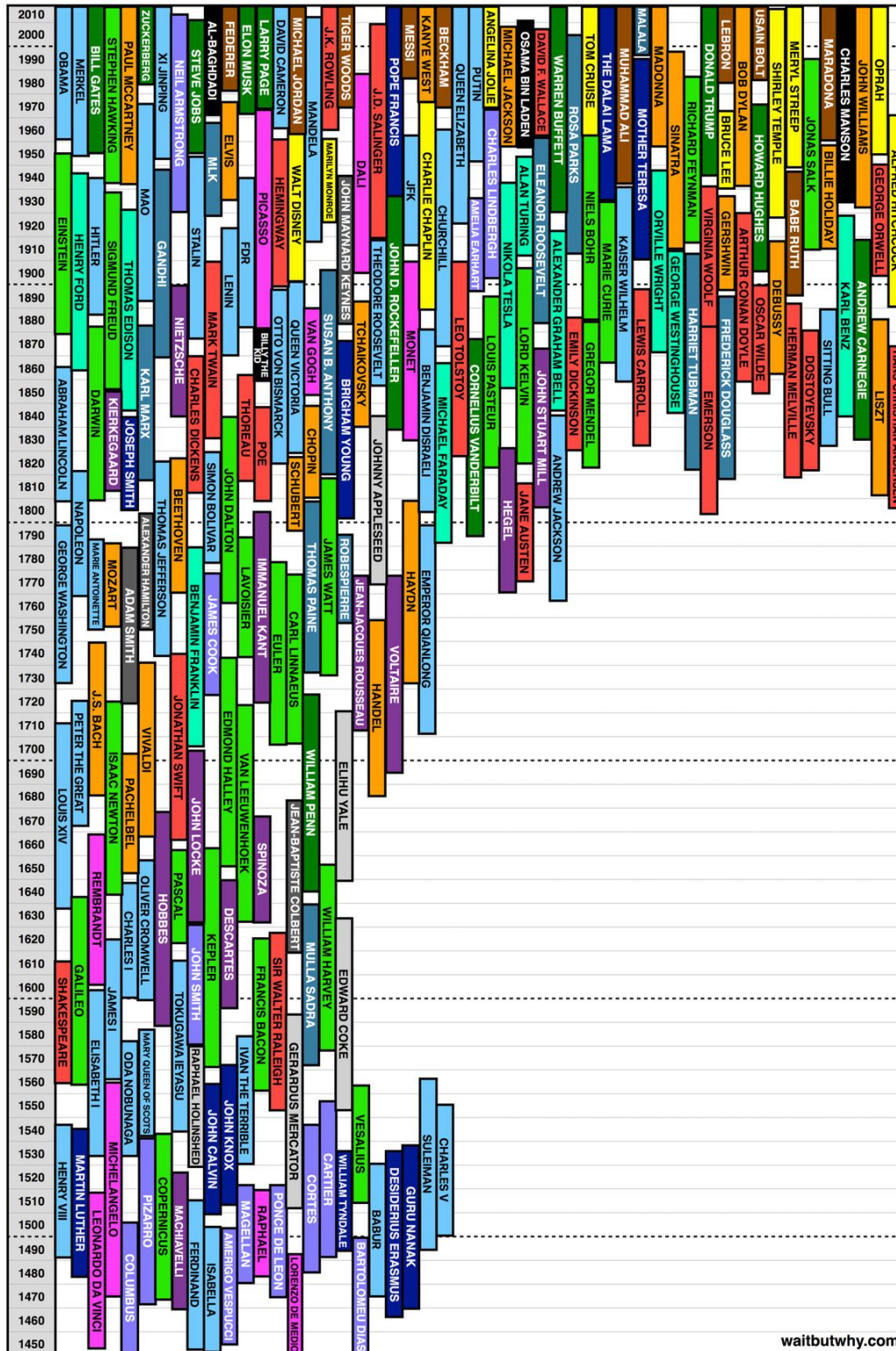


Okay now that that's out of the way, here's the big list (with only half of the total 1800–2016 names included). It goes back to 1450. Trace a horizontal line across to get a feel for what was going on during that particular time.

Really Famous People's Lifespans

KEY

POLITICAL LEADERS	CULTURAL LEADERS	RELIGIOUS LEADERS	PIONEERS AND EXPLORERS
SCIENCE	INVENTION	BUSINESS / TECH	ECONOMICS
PHILOSOPHY	ART	WRITING	MUSIC
ENTERTAINMENT	SPORTS	DICKS	OTHER

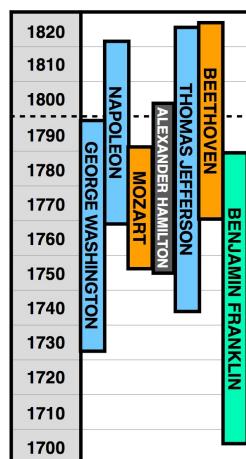


[Note: A number of people have requested a sideways version of this diagram. [Here it is.](#)]
Some overall thoughts:

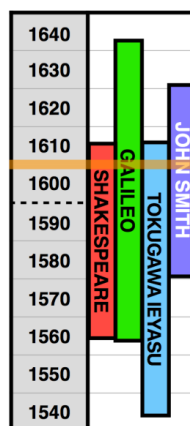
- **Lifespans are unfair.** Looking at people's lives visually really makes it clear when two people are born around the same time but then one of them randomly dies 30 years before the other.
- **Murder is dickish.** Another thing this diagram highlights. How not okay is it to cut someone *else's* bar short? JFK might have been on his way to a nice 85-year bar when this other guy just took a scissors and *snipped* his bar.
- **On the other hand, short lives were appreciated during the making of this diagram.** This was a nightmare of a puzzle, especially at the top, and while trying to fit a lot of bars into a small space, there were times I found myself saying, out loud, "Oh nice," when I'd look up someone's life dates and realize that they were murdered at a young age. Likewise, one factor that led to a number of the recent people being cut from the big diagram was living too long. Frank Lloyd Wright's a cool dude, but not 2.5 inches of diagram cool.
- **Some people aren't easily categorized.** I tried my best. You try putting Ben Franklin into a category.
- **Yeah, yeah, I said the whole "Aladdin and Jafar are in the eye of the beholder" thing and then I created a category for people who I deemed dicks.** I know. But it was fun to label certain people as dicks. Ya know?

Each little part of this diagram tells a story. Let's go through a few examples:

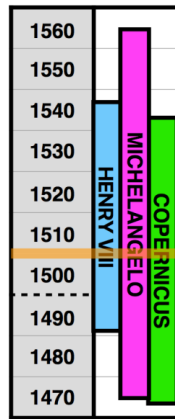
I mentioned in a box in the first chart that Mozart wrote his *Requiem* the same year the US forefathers were writing the Bill of Rights and that Beethoven had a love-hate relationship with Napoleon—but using the lifespan diagram, you can see both of these stories visually.



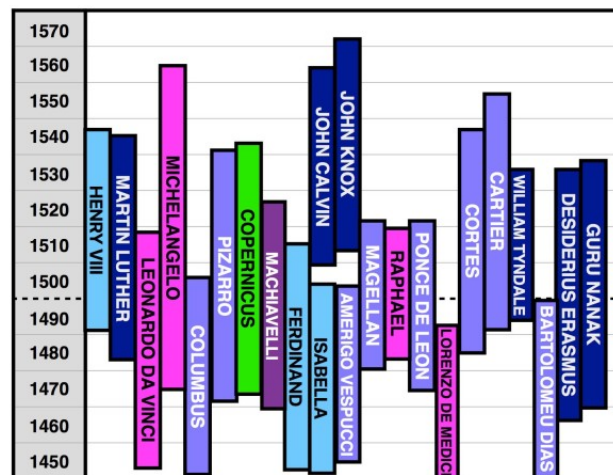
I also mentioned the major Shakespeare, Galileo, Tokugawa, and John Smith events that all happened right around the year 1610.



And in the intro, I referenced Copernicus's seminal work happening right when Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling and Henry VIII was marrying Catherine of Aragon.

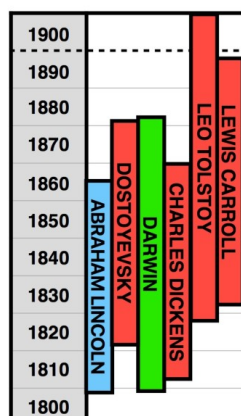


But if you look at the other stuff the diagram shows going on around that same time, it tells a bigger story:



While Copernicus, Michelangelo, and Henry VIII were happening, it was also the golden age of European exploration—look at all those light purple explorers!—and the precursor age to the oncoming Age of Imperialism. Simultaneously, you can see the Protestant Reformation brewing with the presence of all those dark blue religious figures. The one dark blue exception is Guru Nanak, who was over in Asia being the founding prophet of Sikhism (today's 5th biggest religion). Meanwhile, Michelangelo was part of something larger, as the other pink bars—and Machiavelli—remind us that the Italian Renaissance was in full swing.

Every time I look at the lifespan diagram, a new interesting horizontal pops out to me. Here's one more: People in the US associate the 1860s with Lincoln and the Civil War. But what we overlook is that the 1860s was one of history's greatest literary decades. In the ten years between 1859 and 1869, Darwin published his world-changing *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1861), Lewis Carroll published *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), Dostoyevsky published *Crime and Punishment* (1866), and Tolstoy capped things off with *War and Peace* (1869). These guys were all in their primes *at the same time*. So was Lincoln, before some cock snipped his bar off at the worst time possible.



So there's some horizontal history for you. Now go brush up so we can all be oriented the next time we yell at each other about fairy tales.

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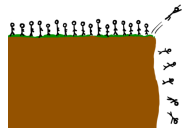
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Name



[gawkf ace](#) • a year ago

History is boring :/
nice article btw

^ | v • Reply • Share >



[Tony Cooper](#) → [gawkf ace](#) • a year ago

Don't tell me, you're a millennial, right?

^ | v • Reply • Share >



[gawkf ace](#) → [Tony Cooper](#) • a year ago

Wha.. why how did u know :O
Don't tell me you are a psychologist !!
Actually do tell me 'n

...history as well as the map
^ | v • Reply • Share >



Carrie Zinck • a year ago

Would you mind if I ask what software you used for the end version? It's amazing and would be a fantastic multi-year add on for my homeschoolers as we dive deeply into history.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Kozma György • a year ago

I am using a filter . I search the legend of Pharaon and Moses - in each generation there is a key Rabbi (you seem to simply omit Jewish history) who is hoped to incarnate as Mashiah /Christ/ so he is watching the contemporary Pharaon (like in 1837 the Lubavicher rabbi Tzemach Tzedek watches the death of William IV - both families having a legend about being "sons of David" hence potential Meshiah/Christ/ figures...this is the main filter, i do not look up other families.) And they both have one thing in common: namely we do know the weekly Bible melody the rabbi uses /there is a weekly majority melody each week) and this melody appears in a contemporary Opera which the King probably saw (here it is Donizetti: Roberto Devereux, Essex). We can even see their mental images - in the kabbalah (a meshianic Jewish folklore from antiquity) they use childhood Body Part fantasie (used later by Freud): and here too the majority is either Breast or Back - like the opera heroes turn either in face of by back...and the visions and sounds produce a hormonal set-up (which may be inherited by us , descendants or neighbours of descendants and "resonated" in the present when we are on the same week with the same Bible portion.) it sounds a bit far fetched, but I tried to make it plausible. it is here. <http://historicweeklymelody...>

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Irene • 2 years ago

Was billy the kid really a dick?

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Hendu71 • 2 years ago

Any diagram that makes you turn your head sideways is useless.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Tony Cooper → Hendu71 • a year ago

You know, you could rotate the diagram 90 degrees instead of your head! :)

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Martins Divine Okoi → Hendu71 • a year ago

LMAO

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Mercardo • 2 years ago

Another good resource for an inverted view of history is a scholarly work by Manuel De Landa, "A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History" , which uses a similar concept to examine the intersection of linguistic, biological, and societal contributions.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Eugenio Perea • 2 years ago

You guys have to see this!!! <http://histography.io/>

37 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



ariador • 2 years ago

Awesome work, I'm tempted to google every name I don't know (There is a lot of them T_T)
But I kind of expected to see Herodotus(484 BC) at the end. Since he is the father of history and the first historiographer, it would be a full circle to start with him :) And this year is his 2500th birthday. I'm taking a class about him, and he is truly the master of storytelling <3

Some other people you might want to include as it seems there is still some space for more names:
Ibn Sina (980) (or Avicenna)'s works on medicine were taught for hundreds of years in the universities.
Ibn Battuta (1304) - the super underrated guy who had traveled for 29 years and wrote his travels.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Gizem Ünsalan • 2 years ago

This is wonderful! But how sad is it that there are so few prominent writers in the modern era? I would suggest at least adding George R. R. Martin - after all, the man does have a significant number of readers around the world waiting with bated breath for his next book...

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Phillip Ihmor • 2 years ago

Thanks for that nice post! Reminds me of David Rumseys histomap:

<http://www.davidrumsey.com/...>

It took him ages to get all the relevant data (those poor pre-internet days...). He then tried to put all important people into one map, including a weighted "importance" of a movement or country. Clearly, that is just his opinion and strongly biased, but it can be interesting and educational anyhow.

If you want some feedback on your map: Peoples lifespan are interesting, but as you pointed out with Anne Frank and MLK, they are not always "active" at the same age. So it doesn't really help to see their full life, when their impact was not steady all over their life.

Consider drawing cluster of movements or streams like "enlightenment" or "colonialism" or "european exploration". You used this grouping in your text - how come? I think, because this is more insightful than 3 names, of which we only know 2.

You could make a violin plot of the importance of a movement or idea. Like the one I quickly made here: <http://imgur.com/iZSCEfW> with some completely bullshit values. Making that correct would mean some major research though...

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



HeribertGenreith • 2 years ago

Hi great article. At "Really famous people, by birth decade" you missed Arminius 18 BC - 21 AC
<http://genreith.de/index.ph...> - without him the angloamerican world wouldn't even exist
<http://genreith.de/index.ph...>

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Vinay Kapadia • 2 years ago

This is totally awesome! But as a developer and gamer, I really appreciate the vertical version you made. It just feels better. In game development, a "vertical slice" is basically a small area of the game, but with everything in it. Basically the sideways chart allows us to take a "vertical slice" of history.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Some Body • 2 years ago

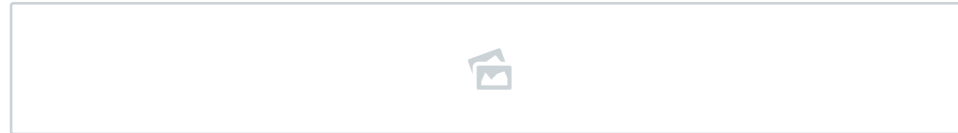
Erratum: You have Petrarch twice in the first chart (once with given name and once without).

^ | v • Reply • Share >



DrSuess • 2 years ago

This all reminds me of a book I got in the 90s called, "timechart history of the world".



21 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



John Sharrar → DrSuess • 2 months ago

I actually have this book. It's a wonderful curiosity!

^ | v • Reply • Share >



roxtoto • 2 years ago

>Hoard of people

You meant hordes, or you intentionally punned?

Great site, Tim. Awesome teaching, I'm relishing it.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Madame Blue • 2 years ago

So last night I was telling my daughter how we used to observe George Washington's and Abraham Lincoln's separately (before they were lumped into Presidents Day), on the 12th and 22nd of February. And as I was telling her this, I was googling Washington's birth date to jog my memory of which holiday was which (I don't feel that old, but it has been a while). To my great surprise, I found that Washington has TWO separate birth dates because WE SWITCHED CALENDARS during his lifetime (1752)! Horizontal history strikes again!

Congrats Tim on your TED talk. We won't, uh, be looking for it at all. So yeah, you know, no pressure :)

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Eugenio Perea • 2 years ago

I've always dreamed of a history classroom—a single classroom per school, where every grade would go learn history throughout the years—with a horizontal depiction of history along the wall.

Starting to the left from the door, a 6-foot high diagram would show everything that was happening in the various continents, century by century, in vertical segments, slowly advancing to the right around the room, ending right back at the door frame with the current century.

Horizontally, there would be sections for people, just like you've done, as well as architecture, science, politics, religion, art, etc. That way, we could tell that right around the time Notre Dame was finally being completed in Paris, the Aztecs were founding Mexico City; and see what was going on in Scandinavia while the great Chinese inventions were being developed.

Kids would go to that classroom, every week, and study each segment, and advance through the ages, while advancing through their years of school, and learn where we come from, as a species, and where we should be going.

So, thanks for this post. I Loved It.

9 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Yura Bogdanov • 2 years ago

Being inspired by the idea I made this visualization, check it out! <https://ybogdanov.github.io...>



27 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



robbphoenix → Yura Bogdanov • 2 years ago

Great work but a ton of very important, famous Indian historical figures are missing. I could give you a list of the names if that would help.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Yura Bogdanov → robbphoenix • 2 years ago

Sure, welcome! <https://github.com/ybogdano...>

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Jim Judges → Yura Bogdanov • 2 years ago

Excellent!

By the way I found this displayed best in the Chrome browser for me. In IE I couldn't see the text.

Thanks for sharing. :)

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



cas navey • 2 years ago

Very, Very cool! I would like to know what year YOU were born. I would BET that you were born in 1981. This article has the feel of someone who is a ROOSTER (in the Chinese Zodiac)

I know, because I am a rooster, and this is how I picture the world too. We are unique in the way we see things in the Who, Where and When - and especially by Hierarchy (who is "king of the mountain", who are people in the "in" clique, on the edge and who are the losers - we Roosters know the relationships of people just by watching them - and it is a very important thing to us...especially where WE stand in the group.) And TIME is HUGE! I always HAVE to know what decade someone did something to understand why they did it, or why they used the words that they did.

Do you find yourself saying, "Just think, next week at this time we will be on Vacation!" (and 2 weeks later, "Just think, last week at this time we were on vacation.") The past and time is super important to us, as are all the memories (all in their date-order in our minds!) Do you have a "feeling" for each decade as you study it? Like the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s? When I see a picture of someone from a certain decade, a whole feeling comes with it (same with songs, art, books, movies, tv) And when I go back in time, I get a feeling for those times as well. And I always set historical people in my mind's-eye-timeline, so that I can see their contemporaries next to them (throughout the world!)

So, to come up with :

"Darwin would have seen Twain as some young kid and he would have shaken his old man fist at Gandhi from the rocking chair on his porch."
is a Rooster looking through those people's eyes with that same Rooster-mindset.

Seeing that you started Harvard in 2000, if you were 18 when you started, actually makes your birth-year 1982. But maybe you started school late? Just wondering?

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Bapah • 2 years ago

P.S. I never use Facebook. It's possible to know too much about someone.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Kiki Fogg → Bapah • 2 years ago

What I do to avoid that is just not read all of it.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Bapah • 2 years ago

Not many recent comments here, but your Horizontal History is something I've thought about (not recently, unless you consider today recently) and was often curious about what else was going on "then" (whenever then was while I was thinking about it then).

I think I will think about it more, especially given the charts and arrows, which remind me of Arlo Guthrie's Massacre a lot. Nicely done.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



wobster109 • 2 years ago

Unrelated thing: was this drawn by you? I looked at the thumbnail and thought "that looks like WBW", and the character's name is Tim.

<https://www.washingtonpost....>

^ | v • Reply • Share >



This comment was deleted.



Vinh Tran → Guest • 2 years ago

59 -> 60 :1
60 ->61: 1
61 ->62: 1
62 ->63: 1
63 -> 64: 1
64 -> 65: 1
65 ->66: 1
66 -> 67: 1
67 ->68: 1
68 -> 69: 1

$1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1 = 10$

0 -> 10 is eleven. 1 -> 10 is 10.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Trumpty Dumpty • 2 years ago

This is fantastic. It actually made history interesting for me for the first time. What a great tool for students to visualize history, which will help in memorization.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



CR444 • 2 years ago

This is super useful if the "who" is know. It would be super useful if the trend at the time was noted. Once we have AR and can organize information 3 dimensionally perhaps more of history can be organized this way.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Ken Morrison • 2 years ago

Simply excellent. I suggest adding Booker T. Washington to 1856. This week I learned that Martin Luther King Jr.'s high school was named after Washington, who walked 500 miles to attend a college after high school.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



andrewbb@gmail.com • 2 years ago

Why is there a Facebook comments section and a Disqus comments section?

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Kiki Fogg → andrewbb@gmail.com • 2 years ago

Because why not?

^ | v • Reply • Share >



andrewbb@gmail.com → Kiki Fogg • 2 years ago

Maybe a common protocol for "messaging" would better organize it?

^ | v • Reply • Share >



cotpoe • 2 years ago

Brilliant article Tim. Nice effort in providing a big picture approach to history. Your framing of history as "horizontal" on the basis of people's birth/deaths is very well done.

A "Horizontal History" based on Events would be incredibly cynically illuminating if you wish to pursue it - pretty accurate depiction of "History repeats/rhymes" and the tragedy of events going around in cycles as in face of our mammoths,monkeys and whole cook behaviour - human thought remains largely unchanged through the ages.

A good knowledge of History and Critical Thinking are two pillars that are most important for an enlightened aware citizenry long acknowledged to be critical to any free society (example Plato notes it in his treatise). So of course every power structure (whatever "ism" they may follow) has sought to gain control over these two areas - history and education as soon as they come to power. It is Statecraft 101.

"Who controls the past, controls the future, who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell)

As you note, history is an illusion - any work of history is to some degree a fairy tale very much dependent on the biases, subjective perception, ideology and agenda of the author. There are two aspects of "Truth" of any event - a) What happened? and b) Why it happened?

The second question, why something happened - as you note is very complex - all the people and

[see more](#)

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Agape Ima • 2 years ago

Awsome I want the first one as a poster

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Carlos Chau • 2 years ago

Tim, what software did you use to make these diagrams?

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Damien S. → Carlos Chau • 2 years ago

I too would like to know this. Is there software one can plug text and years into, or is it laying out boxes in a drawing program, or what? I'd like to make some of my own.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Carlos Chau → Damien S. • 2 years ago

Its made using Mac's spreadsheet program 'Numbers'. Tim said it in earlier replies.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Michael Gertelman • 2 years ago

A great site about Horizontal History is this one:

<http://everyhistory.org>

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Nobody • 2 years ago

Why is Hitler not black?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Kiki Fogg → Nobody • 2 years ago

Because he also fits into one of the other categories (political leader). The black-labels don't.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Diya Arora → Nobody • 2 years ago

Perhaps since some people see him as an aladdin, and most like jafar. There are people who are called neo-natzis and think of him as a failed hero.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Nobody → Nobody • 2 years ago

(Labeled black)

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Mairsx • 2 years ago

I don't see any big difference in teaching history this way you suggest or the usual way when it comes to how muddled, boring, contrived and needlessly distorted it all looks.

Its fun for about a minute because its a novelty and we see some of the interesting names... but then it just starts to cause the old zoning out feeling.

That is precisely the mistake here, basing all this on interesting names and personalities.

There isn't that many of them and how much they are interesting to any person varies wildly, while the only common effect across all readers is that they will chose some small number of those as interesting and be more or less bored by or ignorant about the others.

So you end up losing interest of people, which is the problem with history lessons.

I happen to have a better solution. But it needs to be presented visually, which i dont have at the moment. Yet i could borrow something very similar to make a point.

Like this:



[see more](#)

^ | v • Reply • Share >

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203 comments • a year ago

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6 comments • a year ago

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344 comments • 3 months ago

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Rajpuria RC

Pl extend your time Chart of famous people to 4000BCE.You can do it .

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 15w



አሳለኝ ተስፋዬ ማኅሙድ

It's good to know western history but you missed Ethiopian History which we have more than 3000 years.

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