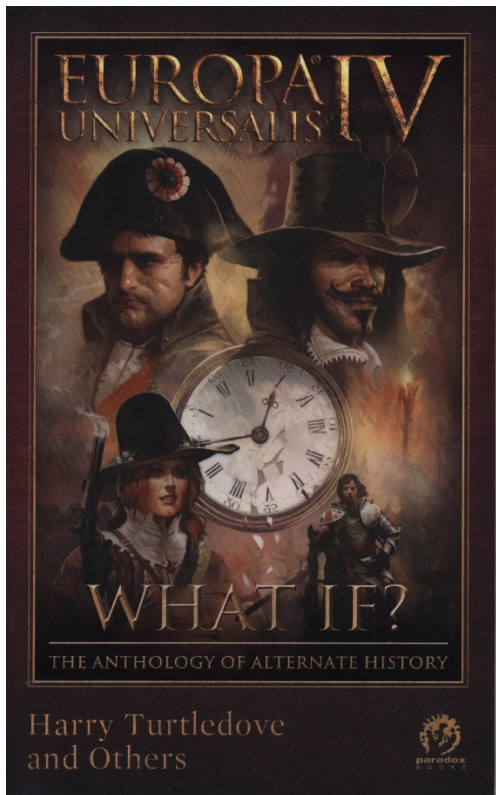


What If? The Anthology of Alternate History

A Review by Rich Barbuto

What If? was inspired by the world of Europa Universalis IV, a strategy game by Paradox Interactive. It is a collection of thirteen short stories. Each story is set in an alternate universe, a universe set on its course by a single change in historic events. In the case of this collection, the change in history occurred sometime during the span of years covered in Europa Universalis, that is, 1444 to 1821. That does not mean that the story takes place during that span, only that the event that triggered the alternate world occurred within those years. In fact, a couple stories take place in the twentieth century.



The authors are a fine bunch of writers. Harry Turtledove is featured. His story takes place in central Europe in 1772, in a small city that has just changed hands from the king of Poland to the emperor of Austria. Nine of the other writers are seasoned and published in a variety of venues. However, the publisher, Paradox Books, also included three stories that were winners in a writing contest! Interestingly, one of my colleagues entered the contest and wrote a really good piece that traced events after Napoleon wins at Waterloo. I had a great read, but of course, the Napoleonic period, and the Waterloo Campaign in particular, are the focus of my solo gaming. My friend didn't win, however. But the three award-winning stories are also very engaging, satisfying reading.

How did I come by this book anyway? Actually, it was a birthday gift from one of my sons. Dan plays Europa Universalis and was aware of the publication. He also knows that the bulk of my "reading for fun" books are alternate histories that feature a large component of warfare. Well, he picked out the right book! I've read a story a day and am sorry that the stories ran out.

So, what does this all mean for the solo wargamer? Well, for the most part it is a source of scenarios for potential games at the tactical and campaign levels. The scenario that caught my attention in particular was an 1812 invasion of Russia by French, Prussian, and British armies with a British general in charge. While most of the stories have a strong military flavor, a few do not. These are still good reading, but perhaps not enough to generate a robust game scenario. Wargaming aside, anyone who enjoys alternate history will probably enjoy these tales. They are a quick read with interesting characters and unexpected climaxes. The alternate universes are all believable, and that is important to me and probably to some of you as well. So, this is good entertainment and a source of ideas for \$13.99.

What If? was published by Paradox Books in 2014.

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