Turning Points: The Role of Counterfactuals in Structuring Historical Narratives

Abstract

Philosophers of history and historians disagree over the role counterfactuals should play in historical narratives. The primary argument for counterfactuals, provided by Nolan (2016, 2013) and Sunstein (2016) is that insofar as historians offer causal explanations and not merely narrative chronicles of events, they will have to trade in counterfactuals. But the need for counterfactual reasoning in history goes beyond causal explanation. One example that I present in this paper is the identification of turning points, points in an historical narrative where the fortunes of historical actors change. Even aside from the use of turning points in explanation, causal or otherwise, I argue that merely identifying an event as a turning point is a counterfactual matter: an event \( e \) is a turning point if and only if there is no counterfactual scenario after \( e \) occurs whereby a historical actor achieves (or fails to achieve) their aims.

Introduction

While disciplinary distrust of counterfactuals now belongs only to the history of philosophy, it is still very much alive in history itself. Richard Evans (2014) continues the tradition of Edward Carr (1961) and David Fischer (1970) of associating counterfactual history with the flights of fantasy more appropriate to novels like *The Man in the White Castle* than to serious historicizing. Philosophers such as Daniel Nolan (2016, 2013) and Cass Sunstein (2016) counter that this counterfactual prejudice is not merely unnecessary but harmful to historical inquiry. The historian doesn’t merely tell us *that* something happened but *why* it happened. These why-questions require delving into causal explanations, and such explanations require delving into counterfactuals.

An unstated assumption of this disciplinary dialectic is that the need for counterfactual reasoning arises when the historian takes on the task of explanation and not merely chronicling what happened. The latter activity, it is assumed, is the documentation of actual occurrences: first this happened, and then something else. But this ignores that getting the actual facts right itself requires delving into alternative possibilities. If we want to narrate the production of a vase by a glassblower, part of that narrative will include whether or not the vase produced was fragile.

As with the glassblower, so with history. The way a historian structures a narrative relies on counterfactual judgments. One kind of counterfactual hinge in such a structure is the *turning point*, a point in an historical narrative where the fortunes of historical actors change sufficiently to block of certain courses of events\(^1\). More formally: an event \( e \) is a turning point if and only if

\(^1\) John Beatty (2016) makes similar claims about turning points in the history of science. While he relies on the formalism of a branching tree of possibilities, my focus is instead on how to interpret the counterfactuals that underlie disputes about where to place turning points in a historical narrative.
there is no counterfactual scenario after $e$ occurs whereby a historical actor achieves (or fails to achieve) their aims.

I start with a historical discussion of the turning point for the Nazis in World War II, and present a disagreement about when this turning point occurred. After providing a diagnosis to understand the nature of the disagreement, I turn to a toy example of Tic Tac Toe to get a better conceptual grip on turning points in a setting devoid of extraneous historical details a world war provides. I conclude with an explication of the semantics of these historical counterfactuals, and defend a Lewisian account against recent criticism by Julian Reiss (2009).

**Historical Example: The Defeat of the Nazis in World War II**

While the Nazis officially surrendered to the Allies on May 7th, 1945, their capacity to achieve their imperialist and genocidal aims was eliminated years before. This is the turning point of the war, the moment when then genuine possibility of Nazi success was closed off.\(^2\)

A common historical task is to identify when such turning points happen. Regarding the Nazis, Richard Evans (2010) and Adam Tooze (2008) assert that the Nazis could no longer achieve their military aims when Operation Barbarossa failed to take Moscow in 1941. The German Minister of Armaments, Fritz Todt, made such an assessment:

> [He] had already concluded during the Battle of Moscow in November–December 1941 that the war could not be won. Not only were British and American industrial resources stronger than Germany’s, but Soviet industry was producing better equipment on a larger scale, better adapted to fighting in the depths of winter. German supplies were running short. Industrialists were advising Todt that they would not be able to match the military production of Germany’s enemies. (Evans 2010, 321)

Evans himself, later in the chapter, agrees with Todt’s judgment: “The writing was already on the wall in 1942, as Todt had realized” (Evans 2010, 333). Tooze makes a similar claim in *Wages of Destruction*:

> Even before it had fully unfolded its murderous aspect, the Third Reich’s effort to destroy the Soviet Union, to create a lasting empire in the East and to completely overturn the balance of global power had come undone. (Tooze 2008, 486)

But we can ask if the date should be pushed back further. James Holland argues as such, placing the date of the turning point back to the Nazi failure to achieve victory during the Battle of Britain. Holland does so by agreeing with Winston Churchill: “If Hitler fails to invade or

\(^2\) The moment when the Nazis lose the genuine possibility of success is also the moment the allies gain an increased opportunity for victory. Not all turning points are symmetric: symmetry requires at least that the conflict be zero sum and only have two combatants.
destroy Britain, he has lost the war,’ Churchill said in the summer of 1940. He was right.” (Holland 2011).

This debate over when the turning point towards Nazi defeat in World War II occurred is not clearly not a debate about when the Nazis were actually defeated. Rather, it is a debate about when Nazi defeat became inevitable. Thus, this debate is predicated on the use of counterfactual reasoning. To say that the turning point for the Nazis in World War II is after the failure of Operation Barbarossa or the failed Nazi invasion of Britain is to say that once these events came to pass, there is no counterfactual situation in which the Nazis achieve victory.

With this debate on the table, we can develop an account of turning points: an event $e$ is a turning point if and only if there is no counterfactual scenario after $e$ occurs whereby a historical actor achieves (or fails to achieve) their aims, and no prior event $e^*$ such that there is no counterfactual scenario after $e^*$ occurs whereby a historical actor achieves (or fails to achieve) their aims.

This account clarifies what Evans and Tooze on one side and Holland on the other are disagreeing about. Evan and Tooze argue that there is no counterfactual scenario after the failure of Operation Barbarossa where the Nazis succeed. Furthermore, no previous event, including the Nazi failure during the Battle of Britain, closed off the possibility of Nazi victory. Holland disagrees with this last claim: while Nazi success was not possible after the Operation Barbarossa, it also wasn’t possible after the Nazi defeat during the Battle of Britain either.

This debate is independent about the question of what caused the eventual Nazi surrender. This is important because the role of counterfactuals in historical inquiry are often conflated with causal explanation or assumed to underlie causal explanation (Nolan 2013; Evans 2014). Regardless of how these debates are settled, the issue of deciding on turning points is not a causal question, and thus is orthogonal to these disputes. While one could argue that the failure of Operation Barbarossa or the invasion of Britain was the cause of the eventual Nazi surrender, this isn’t required if one is merely identifying these events as turning points.

**A Toy Example**

When examining a game of Tic Tac Toe, we can also identify turning points. There are positions such that it is impossible to win; no matter where one place’s their X or O, their opponent will be able to place an X or O in a position to win the game$^3$. Take the following sequence:

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$^3$ Assuming perfect play after a given move.
When is the turning point? We don’t want to place it too late in the game because this misjudges when the possibility for victory was closed off. We can’t place the turning point all the way in Position 1 because of the importance of the center square. Your opponent still has an opportunity to place their O there, which would give them the opportunity to succeed (or draw) later in the match. We also don’t want to place it too late in the game. While there is no way for your opponent to win given position 5, this was also true earlier in Position 4. Your opponent was forced to place an O in between your two X’s in the bottom corners, which made position 5 possible.

But the turning point happened even before Position 4. In fact, the turning point occurred all the way at position 2. Once your opponent decided to place their O in the upper middle position, there was no scenario in which she could have won.

This toy example illustrates two features of turning points. The first is an incentive to look for earlier dates. While the possibility for victory might have been closed off in Position 5, it was also closed off all the way back at Position 2. To accurately depict the narrative structure of the game, we need to ensure that our dating of the turning point does not come after the genuine possibility of victory was closed off. The second feature this toy example illustrates is this hunt for earlier dates has limits. Placing the turning point at Position 1 does not provide an accurate narrative of the game because your opponent still has the opportunity to win given Position 1 if they place their O on the center square.

These principles are also at play in historical reasoning about turning points. Of course, World War II is a much more complicated beast than a game of Tic Tac Toe, and the counterfactual reasoning necessary is going to be much more subtle and take into consideration a wider variety of facts. But the procedure is still the same: assuming a subset of logical space, at what point is it true that 1) there is no path through that space for victory and 2) there is no earlier point such that there is no path to victory.
Analyzing Historical Counterfactuals: What is the right modality?

Returning to the historical dispute between Evans and Holland, we can see a similar dialectic as the Tic Tac Toe example. The success of Operation Barbarossa could have so turned the tide and led to Nazi victory, thus making it a candidate turning point. But even if this counterfactual is true, an earlier episode like the success of the invasion of Britain could have led to counterfactual success as well.

But we need to understand what kind of modality will be invoked for these historical counterfactuals. Metaphysical modality is too liberal: it doesn’t rule out superhuman interventions and thus cannot make sense of dating a turning point several years before the conflict is over. The Nazis had “options” in this sense even the day before surrender, but these options are not historically significant. But natural necessity is too conservative. Assuming determinism, failure would have been inevitable as soon as the conflict began. Thus it would be false that the Nazis still had options when Operation Barbarossa began that would have led to success. What we need is a type of modality in between metaphysical and natural to make sense of the relevant notion of having options.

The quote above from Minister Todt highlights the relevant accessibility relations between worlds for judging historical counterfactuals. The type of modality at issue carves logical space on the basis of facts about military effectiveness, the psychological dispositions of service members, economic facts concerning war production, and so on. Of course, how precisely such a modality carves up logical space is controversial, but this is actually beneficial for our purposes. This controversy makes sense of why there are conflicting dates for the turning point in the war. These different dates are underlined by differing views about what options were available to the Nazis at different points in the war. We can see a key function of historical inquiry as seeking to mark out the boundaries of this historical modality on the basis of military, psychological, and economic facts.

Given the importance of such facts, the Lewisian “miracle” model of counterfactuals is appropriate to apply in this case (Lewis 1973; Maar 2016). Some worlds in which the military, psychological, and economic facts are similar to the actual world are also worlds with different laws of nature which would allow “miracles” to occur. When judging the truth of historical counterfactuals, what is relevant are these facts, not what the laws of nature happen to be. Of course such laws are somewhat relevant, since they provide the backbone for understanding how munitions and factories work. But beyond this, they are not relied on when judging these counterfactuals.

This suggests that Julian Reiss (2009) is wrong in his criticism of Lewis’s account of counterfactuals for historical purposes. He suggests that instead of placing a miracle at a point in history, we look for worlds in which a historical event has changed because the events

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4 Beatty (2017) refers to the modality at issue as “historical or narrative possibility”.
leading up to it have changed. Thus if we want to judge whether World War II would have been averted if Chamberlain were not prime minister, we must consider a different possible history that would have led to someone else besides Chamberlain becoming prime minister.

But this is not how counterfactuals are judged when identifying turning points. What we want to know is whether after a certain event failure is inevitable given that the economic, psychological, and military facts are the same. If we opted for this new model of historical counterfactuals, turning points would be judged on the basis of a different set of facts, which is inappropriate for the historical purposes discussed here.

Alternative Accounts of Turning Points

The anti-counterfactualist could argue that turning points can be identified without recourse to counterfactuals. She might adopt what I call the “ebb and flow” model of turning points. One method of doing so would be to gauge the turning point in World War II by measuring military assets, such as territorial possessions, number of troops and munitions, and access to raw materials. In the early phases of the war, Nazi Germany increased the size of its empire as well as its military capacity, but eventually they began losing these assets until they had nothing left. On the ebb and flow model, the turning point of the war is when the Nazis began losing their military assets, when the ebb of acquisition turned into the flow of forfeiture. Such an identification does not rely on considering counterfactual scenarios.

The ebb and flow model runs into a number of difficulties. One is that not all turning points can be identified on the basis of the accumulation and loss of positive assets. The turning point in the Tic Tac Toe game discussed above is an example. Another problem is that the acquisition of positive assets can be misleading, the turning point of a narrative happening before the acquisition reverses. A common military strategy is to allow an enemy to increase their territorial holdings so as to deplete their supply lines, making them vulnerable to attack. Even though the combatant was acquiring military assets, the turning point of the battle happened before the acquisition halted given the opponents strategy and capacity to exploit it.

While these are problems, the most fundamental concern for the ebb and flow model is identifying why something is a positive military asset in the first place. Why are territorial possessions and access to raw materials the relevant assets to track, and not number of restaurants built or movies produced? Presumably because only the former increase the capacity of the belligerent to win the conflict. But while this explains why these are the assets tracked, it also reveals that deciding on what factors are military assets is a counterfactual matter: the space of historically possible worlds where a combatant wins the war is increased by having more raw materials, but not by building more restaurants. Thus the incentive for advancing the ebb and flow model, to do away with counterfactuals when constructing historical narratives, is undermined from within.
Conclusion

Use of counterfactuals makes historians justifiably nervous. We should never confuse the alternative histories provided by media such as *The Man in the High Castle* for historical inquiry which will inform us about our own past. But to rule out counterfactuals completely is an extreme turn in the opposite direction. A critical role of the historian is not just to present the past but to present the structure of the past, to teach us about the flow of events and which dates were especially crucial. Turning points are an important element of such a narrative structure. And since turning points are identified through counterfactual reasoning, such reasoning is essential to historical inquiry.
References