



# The Limits of History

By Constantin Fasolt

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## The Limits of History By Constantin Fasolt

History casts a spell on our minds more powerful than science or religion. It does not root us in the past at all. It rather flatters us with the belief in our ability to recreate the world in our image. It is a form of self-assertion that brooks no opposition or dissent and shelters us from the experience of time.

So argues Constantin Fasolt in *The Limits of History*, an ambitious and pathbreaking study that conquers history's power by carrying the fight into the center of its domain. Fasolt considers the work of Hermann Conring (1606-81) and Bartolus of Sassoferato (1313/14-57), two antipodes in early modern battles over the principles of European thought and action that ended with the triumph of historical consciousness. Proceeding according to the rules of normal historical analysis—gathering evidence, putting it in context, and analyzing its meaning—Fasolt uncovers limits that no kind of history can cross. He concludes that history is a ritual designed to maintain the modern faith in the autonomy of states and individuals. God wants it, the old crusaders would have said. The truth, Fasolt insists, only begins where that illusion ends.

With its probing look at the ideological underpinnings of historical practice, *The Limits of History* demonstrates that history presupposes highly political assumptions about free will, responsibility, and the relationship between the past and the present. A work of both intellectual history and historiography, it will prove invaluable to students of historical method, philosophy, political theory, and early modern European culture.

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## The Limits of History By Constantin Fasolt Bibliography

- Rank: #712248 in Books
- Brand: Fasolt Constantin
- Published on: 2013-09-25
- Released on: 2003-12-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .90" w x 6.00" l, 1.05 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 347 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Fasolt argues that all historical study inevitable is limited and distorted, in that it rests on historians' mostly unexamined political values and beliefs about time, eternity, truth, meaning, freedom, and responsibility. By showing how our political beliefs determine how we understand the past and the present and how we use this understanding to make our choices about the future, Fasolt argues that 'the study of history is in and of itself a form of political activity' and 'a dangerous form of knowledge.' . . . He illustrates his argument through an intriguing exploration of the writings of a significant early modern German political theorist and polymath, Hermann Conring (1606-81), especially Conring's interpretation of the Roman law doctrines of Bartolus of Sassoferato (1313/14-1357). This erudite, challenging, and highly readable exploration of the limits of historical study opens many controversial and rewarding vistas for historians and philosophers of history alike."

(*Choice*)

"In *The Limits of History*, Constantin Fasolt engages in traditional history in order to illustrate its limitations. The main subject of his book is Hermann Conring (1606-1681), a German historian who is best known for his argument against both the universality of Roman law and the notion that the Holy Roman Emperor held authority to rule the world. . . . History is more than just a form of knowledge. According to Fasolt, it is designed to uphold the modern belief that humans are free and independent agents and their actions determine the course of the past. . . . Thus, history is a form of self-assertion and is tantamount to taking sides by insisting on a certain order and eliminating rival orders."

(Amy R. Sims *History Teacher*)

"For Constantine Fasolt, the limits of history can be found not by a customary analysis of historical methodology but only by the study of history's foundational event, the historical revolution in the period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. That revolution was the key force in replacing the world of the Middle Ages dominated by custom, tradition, and universalism with one marked by liberty and its manifestations: the self-assertion, autonomy, and sovereignty of individuals and states. . . . Put simplistically, the medieval and modern worlds are separated by a categorical gap."

(Ernst Breisach *American Historical Review*)

"Some knowledge of the past is possible, and we can still differentiate good from bad history by using all the techniques established by the profession over the course of hundreds of years. But what is impossible is to divide the past from the present. To have demonstrated this conclusively is this book's major achievement, and Fasolt does so in beautiful language. The volume contains many sentences which practitioners of history should write down and keep before their eyes when practicing their craft."

(*German History*)

"Constantin Fasolt has written a brilliant critique of historical reasoning that lays bare the assumptions (and hence the limits) of all modern attempts to describe and decode the past. History as we know it, as Fasolt shows, is a form of self-assertion, a political action by which the past is first separated from the present and then treated as if immutable and sacred. In addition to this major theoretical insight, this book also contributes to our appreciation of the too little known German polymath, Hermann Conring, whose work exemplifies and clarifies Fasolt's point. In the process we learn to see our autonomy and modernity itself bound up in the revolutionary and irreversible invention of history as a discipline. What a great book!"

(H. C. Erik Midelfort, University of Virginia)

“Fasolt’s erudite, engaging, and wonderfully astute reading of Hermann Conring’s interpretation of Roman law results in a compelling argument that will make us rethink both the origins and the limits of historical consciousness. This is a brilliant contribution to contemporary discussions of history.”

(Dipesh Chakrabarty, University of Chicago)

“*The Limits of History* is a work of stunning originality. This is intellectual history of the highest order.”

(Allan Megill, University of Virginia)

#### From the Inside Flap

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#### About the Author

**Constantin Fasolt** is a professor of history at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *Council and Hierarchy: The Political Thought of William Durant the Younger* and the editor and translator of *Hermann Conring’s New Discourse on the Roman-German Emperor*.

#### Users Review

##### From reader reviews:

###### **John Charlie:**

The knowledge that you get from The Limits of History is a more deep you looking the information that hide inside words the more you get interested in reading it. It does not mean that this book is hard to be aware of but The Limits of History giving you enjoyment feeling of reading. The author conveys their point in a number of way that can be understood by means of anyone who read that because the author of this book is well-known enough. This particular book also makes your personal vocabulary increase well. It is therefore easy to understand then can go with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We recommend you for having this The Limits of History instantly.

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**Larry Mason:**

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