



In the Balance

Harry Turtledove

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From Pearl Harbor to panzers rolling through Paris to the Siege of Leningrad and the Battle of Midway, war seethed across the planet as the flames of destruction rose higher and hotter.

And then, suddenly, the real enemy came.

The invaders seemed unstoppable, their technology far beyond human reach. And never before had men been more divided. For Jew to unite with Nazi, American with Japanese, and Russian with German was unthinkable.

But the alternative was even worse.

As the fate of the world hung in the balance, slowly, painfully, humankind took up the shocking challenge . .

From the Paperback edition.

In the Balance Details

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From Reader Review In the Balance for online ebook

Ben Babcock says

Without a doubt the Second World War is one of the most influential and significant events to occur in the past hundred years. The scope of this war was magnified and bigger than ever in every way: in the countries involved, in the technology and tactics developed and deployed, and in the atrocities committed. And so World War II has seared itself onto the collective consciousness of our species as something never to be forgotten. It was a watershed time, and it acted as a catalyst for some of the most dramatic changes in our society. Were it not for World War II, the twentieth century would have progressed differently—but exactly how that might have happened isn't necessarily straightforward. No doubt that's why World War II is such a powerful lure for authors of alternate history.

Alternate history, of course, is kind of Harry Turtledove's thing. He's written enough of it—and in sufficient quality—to be called “the Master of Alternate History” by some critics. Such titles do not get bestowed lightly. Yet my own recent experience with Turtledove left me less than lukewarm. I kept *Worldwar* on my list, though, because I have vague memories from when I was younger of reading another book about Lizard-like aliens called the Race on Earth—I suspect it was part of Turtledove's *Colonization* trilogy. So I decided to go back to where the series begin: World War II, 1941, with the Race arriving in orbit to make Earth the fourth world in its stultifying empire.

They find this a tad difficult, because their 800-year-old intelligence is out of date. They were expecting to be facing armoured knights, swords, maybe some extremely primitive forms of gunpowder-based weaponry. Unlike the Race, however, which thinks in terms of millennia and changes even more slowly, humanity advances in fits and starts. In 800 years we've managed to get to the point where we are speculating about nuclear weapons. And none of this bodes well for the Race's invasion fleet.

Turtledove tells his story through a large cast of characters from around the world. First, props to Turtledove for including a Chinese character. We spent a lot of time in World War II in Grade 10 history, and it was admittedly Canadian-centric for a good reason. But you know what? I know almost *nothing* about China during World War II. I knew that Japan invaded, but that was it. So as someone who recognizes this gap in my knowledge but was a little too lazy to do anything more than look it up on Wikipedia, I commend Turtledove for including this perspective, as limited as it might be.

Juggling so many characters can be challenging, both for the author and for the reader. I kept wanting to follow some of the characters for longer periods of time—and of course, there were a few I would be happy never to see again. Also, with so many different characters, their voices start to sound the same. I don't really question Turtledove's decision to include such a large cast—it's about the only way he could cover so much territory—but the price is a narrative that, at times, is very flat. Combined with what I feel is a somewhat indulgent length, this means that *Worldwar: In the Balance* is not necessarily a smooth read. However, depending on your own tastes, there could be a few mitigating factors.

Firstly, of course, there's how much you're interested in World War II. Turtledove had obviously done his research. He provides a glimpse into the wartime operations along various fronts: Britain, France, Russia, China, and the United States. Even though the war itself gets put on hold to fight the alien threat, this is still a world where the war is happening, with all the attendant nationalistic impulses, cultural enmities, and political tensions. Those are what make the temporary alliances between, say, Russia and Germany, so fascinating.

I have to confess I'm not all that into World War II, either its history or its non-history. I recognize its

significance as an event and will read the occasional book set during it, but it's not exactly a setting I seek out. It's difficult to articulate my reasons for this, although I am sure it is partly the result of how meticulous true World War II fans are about their details. I'm not a details person when it comes to history; I like the grand, sweeping, political intrigue of it all. Give me a king marrying six women in succession, and we'll tango.

Secondly, *Worldwar: In the Balance* is very much still a story of war, even if it's no longer the same war. Instead of Allies versus Nazis, it's humans versus the Race. I have to admit that I'm rather disappointed with the armament the Race brought: their technology seems only marginally superior to the stuff the humans are using. This is a species that can cross the gaps between stars at half the speed of light! Sure, I understand that their pace of technological innovation is slower than humanity's—but even so, we tend to assume that anyone who has managed feasible interstellar travel is going to have better technology than bullets, tanks, and helicopters. Turtledove has set up what makes for the most interesting fight instead of what is perhaps the most plausible scenario from a science-fiction standpoint.

Finally, *Worldwar: In the Balance* ends on a cliffhanger. There is no resolution to the overall conflict. This disappointed me, after over 500 dense pages of incredibly detailed descriptions and back and forth. I really could have used a nice denouement: not necessarily something that ties up every loose end, but enough for the work to stand alone. As it is, I probably will read the sequel—but not any time soon, and probably not before I try another Turtledove series that might be more to my liking. Still, if cliffhangers entice you, this book might be a nice match.

These factors combined to tempt me to dismiss this book. Little of its content or characterization grabs me or my interests. Yet, objectively speaking, it isn't that bad. As a work of alternate history both its premise and its execution offer a compelling story: really, what *would* have happened if an alien threat arrived while we were in the middle of World War II? How would the Allies, the Nazis, Russia, and Japan have reacted? And really, how would the aliens react if they were expecting a much different Earth than the one they got? In a way that reminds me of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Turtledove engages in fascinating speculation as to how Earth's topology and climate influenced the rapid development of our species vis-à-vis the more sedate pace of the Race. Does our tendency for conflict—not to mention our ability to love—give us an edge? By raising such questions, both explicitly and implicitly, Turtledove elevates *Worldwar: In the Balance* from a mere “what if” story to a work that truly represents the nature of alternate history. I cannot say I loved this book, but neither can I deny its power or its presence as a work of speculative fiction.

Stephen says

3.5 stars. This is Book 1 of Harry Turtledove's massive alternate history WW2 epic and I will say at the outset that I definitely enjoyed this enough to go on to the next book. I was really torn between 3 and 4 stars on this one as I loved the premise and the set up but there were some slow parts that were less than compelling. I decided it was either going to be a very strong 3 or a weak 4. I ended up going with a strong 3 since the first book in the series and I wanted to give the next book room to improve.

As for the plot, my lead in picture really says it all. The premise is simple and spectacular. In late 1941, after World War II has raged for over 2 years and armies from almost every nation are fighting all across the globe, the Earth is suddenly invaded by an alien army called The Race. Here are the basics:

1. Expectations: The aliens sent probes to Earth in preparation for the invasion but the latest information they had was from over 800 years ago (around 1100 A.D.). Since The Race is hundreds of thousands of years old and has hardly advanced technologically for millennia, they did not expect any change in the Earth's level of technology in only 8 centuries. When they see how far Earth has advanced they are more than a little pissed.

2. Technology: Despite their faulty intelligence on Earth's level of technology, the aliens are still vastly superior to man in that department. I would describe them as similar to what the United States is today. They have the equivalent of modern jet fighters, modern tanks, automatic weapons....PLUS ATOMIC BOMBS. However, they were expecting to be up against horse-riding knights in armor and so things are not as comfortable for them as they had hoped. Basically, we have more guns and bullets but theirs are MUCH BIGGER and we have much better ability to adapt and improvise.

3. Alliances: The most interesting element of the story is the alliances that form once the invasion begins. At the time of the invasion, you have Hitler and Stalin go at it in the east, the Japanese have just bombed pearl harbor and London is in flames. Now all of a sudden, you have Hitler, Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt, Yamamoto, Mussolini and their senior personnel having to work together. It makes for some wonderful tension to the story. At the same time, you have the some groups like the Polish Jews in Warsaw and the Chinese from Manchuria who first see the aliens as liberators against the Nazis and Imperial Japan. All of this creates such a wonderful dynamic and the author does a very credible job of investing the stories with real life.

I am only really scratching the surface here but I think the above is enough to give you the gist of the plot and the kind of story that the author was trying to write. This is an attempt at a credible, historically realistic "what if" that tries to make the fantastic element (alien invasion) appear plausible. I think the author took an incredibly difficult premise and succeeded, for the most part, in telling a very compelling story.

This leads me to my final comment about expectations going into the story. I think you will enjoy the story more if you are coming to it as a World War II historical fiction story that happens to include aliens added on for spice. Alternatively, if you approach this as a typical SF alien invaders story with World War II added as backdrop, you may be disappointed by the level of historical detail and the pace of the plot. This is a massive World War II story that will cover 4 volumes of which this is only the first book. All told, the 4 installments will span some 2500+ pages so be prepared for detail and well developed plot lines. RECOMMENDED!!

Ahmed says

Review of the First and Second books.

This series, I imagine, is self-consciously styled after Tolstoy's "War and Peace".

Also, it is not the sort of series where a book can stand alone and provide any sort of meaningful conclusion. The "Balance" is just one big book, broken for length, not plot.

The "Balance" is the story of a war, drawn out across several years and numerous characters. The war is WWII, with the added twist of an alien invasion midway through. So, it is an alternate-history novel with a science-fiction twist.

This bears repeating: the science-fiction component is just a twist. The aliens psychology is anthropomorphic, and they even look quite humanoid (despite being egg-laying lizard-like beings!). The

realization of technical details is a little shoddy. Also, the historical development of technology is mixed up in certain places. Things get shoddier as the series advances, too.

One example of shoddy technological history, I think, is the conspicuous use of audio recording as a plot device in the first and second books. This is historically inaccurate, as the first audio tapes were developed in Nazi Germany toward the end of WWII, and used to record Hitler, then broadcast his speeches so he wouldn't have to be at the radio station. Later, they were adopted by US radio stations. Before that, audio recording quality was sub-par and quite recognizably not-live.

The characterization is good, but not outstanding, and a few characters are practically interchangeable. More variety here would have been welcome.

In the second book, characterizations gets derailed even more. Worse luck.

The pace is rather slow, drawn out, really, even stretched thin in certain parts. Every now and then, skipping a few pages (representing one character's PoV) is quite OK. The situation is even worse in the second book.

Overall, OK. I think I'll need to read more before forming a more definitive judgement; like War and Peace, this is really one giant novel split apart for convenience. Unlike War and Peace (which I'd never read), I think this one gets old and crappy rather quickly...

Shelly says

Parts of this I really liked but it was soooooo long that I kept getting antsy for the plot to move along. The story is set up as an alternative history where aliens invade the Earth right at the height of World War 2. I think the way Mr. Turtledove ties in all of the various warring countries into new factions based on the invasion is excellent. There were just so many point of view characters and so much going on that I never got a sense of momentum to the story. It was good and I am curious to see what happens next but I might wait awhile before reading book two.

David says

An interesting premise...reptilian aliens invading earth in the middle of WWII. But there is a definite lack of authorial skill at work here. Characters, plotting, story, dramatic incident are all flat and predictable. Dialogue is the worst kind of popular tripe. In the end it was a painful challenge just to finish the book.

I gave it two stars rather than one because the premise was amusing. If the writing had spent more time on constructing characters and fleshing out these I would have given it three. Needs an editor badly.

This is a shame because I was looking forward to the series.

Not recommended

Nick T. Borrelli says

Harry Turtledove writes great outlines of stories. Where he fails is filling a book with the meaty stuff that constitutes a compelling story. He does it once again here. Great idea for a story - an alien invasion of Earth around the time of WWII. After the aliens invade, the countries of the world must put aside their animosity toward each other and unify to throw back the alien threat. I love it. But Harry just doesn't give you enough to care about what happens. All of the historical figures are cardboard cutouts of their historical persona. None of the regular citizens of Earth are in any way interesting. The aliens aren't even that interesting quite frankly. There are some cool battle scenes but that's about it. Pedestrian alternative history fiction. Skip it.

Chip says

Having read the second in this series inadvertently first, I went back to enjoy the beginning and some of the detail I was missing. Again, Turtledove has created a wildly expansive book about multiple fronts of World War II. Our enemy is a powerfully alien race here to conquer the human race. Faced with superior technology, German, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Polish, American, British come up with unique ways to attack the naive Race. We get exposed to soldiers, generals, world leaders, scientists and general people all dealing with this war. This book just gets the story started for what seems to be an epic tale.

James says

The beginning of one of the best alternate history/science fiction sagas around - in this story, World War II is interrupted when an alien invasion fleet shows up to disrupt the human war, forcing the countries to postpone their war with each other to combine forces against the aliens. A large cast of characters, both real historical figures including politicians, soldiers and scientists, and fictional people; extensive period detail showing meticulous research and a real love of history on the author's part; and a believable but not predictable plot.

Michael Atkinson says

I've read alternate history series before, where the point of divergence is something like Lee winning the Battle of Gettysburg, or JFK not being assassinated. Here, the point of divergence is what would have happened if alien lizards invade during World War Two.okay then. Granting that premise, this is an interesting opener to an interesting series. The catch is that the alien lizards expected humankind to evolve and develop as slowly as they did, and the last time they checked on humanity was in the 12th century, when we had bows and arrows and knights on horseback. So they come back with their jet engines and bullets, and they expect to still be fighting knights on horseback, because how much could a civilization change in a mere eight hundred years?

Oops.

Needless to say, the Lizards are in much for a harder fight than they expected. An interesting premise, and I'm looking forward to seeing how it plays out.

Allie says

I found this book hard to get into, and never really forged any sort of attachment with it until the last 150 or

so pages. The characters seemed at times more like devices to demonstrate 'ideas', for want of a better word, rather than robust, developed characters. This is the nature of the book and, to some extent, the genre, however. I probably didn't enjoy it as much as other people for this reason, the military aspects not really grabbing my attention, and the political interactions and aspects perhaps a bit too simplistic.

Despite having pushed myself to finish it, I have no real inclination to read the rest of the series. I'd like to follow up with Barbara and Jens Larsson, Liu Han and Bobby Fiore, but definitely wouldn't trawl through another book in order to do so! Unfortunately the ending very much leads into the next book rather than allowing it to stand alone.

Mark says

If the sentence "Aliens invade during World War II" doesn't make you want to read a book, then there is nothing more I can add.

I would have filed this under three stars, guilty pleasure sort of thing, except for one thing that's not the particular book's fault: the eBook copy I purchased through B&N is one of the worst I have ever seen for typographical mistakes. These are all small things, but numerous, approaching and perhaps passing one per page.

The mistakes include things like extraneous punctuation "." ", " or quotes, or missing punctuation, like no "." at the end of what's clearly a sentence because the next word is capitalized. Other times, a word is rendered with the wrong spelling; for instance, "Germany" became "Gennany" (just once or twice), and in the same way "door" might appear once as "cloor". These nuisance mistakes abound. I can only conclude that no human being ever laid eyes on the manuscript in the process from transferring it into eBook form, because if this many mistakes were present in a paper book as it went to press, anyone involved would be fired.

I can appreciate, from a cost perspective, that there's not likely to be a strong return on porting a random obscure niche genre book from 1994 into eBook form, but if that's the case I would just have to say to the publisher: don't do it! Let it lie in the dustbin, or if it's being treated cheaply then sell it cheaply. If this book cost a dollar, I wouldn't complain about nuisance typographical mistakes no matter the quantity. At \$8, I paid full paperback price for second-class work.

Oh well. A fun enough read, but I don't like it enough to spend money on the rest of the series when I assume they will have the same quality of electronic transfer. I'll have to be more careful and view the free samples first in the future.

Mike (the Paladin) says

[A race of extremely long lived aliens who received their last intelligence of the human race about the time humans were leaving what is called the bronze age arrive here expecting humans to be about as developed technologically as they had been at that time. After all the reptilian invaders take thousands of years to move forward..

Bryan Alexander says

An entertaining alternate history, *_Worldwar I_* shows the pleasures and limitations of the genre.

It's simply fun to follow the working-out of implications and details, once the divergence (alien invasion) appears. Will underground movements ally with the new invaders? How will Axis and Allied nations join to stop the initially overwhelming foe? How do various historical characters appear: Patton, Molotov, Churchill? The invasion's conceit (aliens scoped us out centuries ago, and thereby didn't plan for 1940s technology) is entertaining.

The book uses a social novel approach, portraying dozens of characters in many plots. To his credit, Turtledove embraces the global nature of the second World War. Characters are drawn from rural America and China, British intelligence and Soviet fliers, Japanese military and Nazi tankers, Jewish fighters and exiles.

The aliens are somewhat interesting. Their culture has a single organizing idea, which becomes implausible over time. Some characters gradually emerge.

But the limitations... It's hard to do a social novel and have individual characters emerge. Think of how *_The Wire_* gives as a rich, multilayered view of Baltimore, while most characters appear as distinct people. In contrast, *_Worldwar_'s* characters are often thin perspectives, mobile optics giving us a quick sketch of what they see without developing much of an inner life.

This thinness leads to a failure of historical imagination. Most of the characters are or become nice people. Some start with racist ideas, which they shed through conversation. There aren't many true believers to represent Naziism, the Japanese empire, American white racism, or the Soviet Union. We can see progressive ideas unfold, but not the concepts they react against. Some representatives appear from time to time but only as placeholders, non-player characters in gaming language.

Worldwar also struggles to depict the impact of large historical events. Turtledove does a good job with individual scenes, like conversations in occupied Paris or the adventures of a German tank crew. But we don't get a sense of the vast horror that would accompany, say, (view spoiler). The weirdness and disorientation of first contact doesn't really appear, beyond a couple of characters being readers of *Astounding*. I'd contrast this, perhaps unfairly, with the way *_The English Patient_'s* main characters react to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, or the way Vonnegut establishes the horror of Dresden in *_Slaughterhouse-Five_*. Many of *_Worldwar_'s* events pass by like references to other books.

So: a fun book for alt.history buffs, but not much more.

Jordan says

This is a nice mix of historical fiction/counterfactual history and sci-fi. Harry Turtledove is good at mixing the genres, but he makes a few minor mistakes (i.e. inaccurate military references). If you are able to ignore these mistakes (which most people probably wouldn't pick up on anyway) this is a well-written series. It is a commitment though as it takes a while to read.

Jim Prevott says

for the audiobook. Good alt history start. Alien invasion interrupts WWII. The aliens equipped with advanced technology make amazing progress until the former foes band together to figure the common enemy. it's a fairly long book that follows several storylines of both famous historical figures and common people on both sides. First book in the series.
