Twitter Thread by David Frum



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Lizzie Collingham is one of my favorite social historians working today. I finished the latest of her books, Biscuit, on Christmas Day. #FrumReads4

Collingham's "Biscuit" is the history of hard-baked bread from ancient times to the box of cookies in the grocery aisle. As always with her work, "Biscuit" uses the device of a foodstuff to open a wide eye upon the surrounding culture. 2/x #FrumReads4

Biscuits, in the British usage of that word, were among the very first industrial foodstuffs. They enabled the British empire - Royal Navy sailors lived upon them - and were in turn enabled by that empire to discover a global market. 3/x

Collingham self-presents in a self-effacing way. Her short biography notes that she writes "in a garden shed." She includes recipes for the foods she writes about. Do not be deceived. Collingham's theme over her career is a grand one: the interaction of cultures over time. 4/x

Collingham's "Curry," enraged Hindu chauvinists by demonstrating how Indians synthesized their cuisine from their interactions with others. The word "vindaloo" is an amalgam of the Portuguese for wine and garlo, vinho and alho. Tea-drinking was mimicked from the British. Etc. 5/x

All cultures are syncretic cultures, Collingham patiently teaches - and British culture of course most of all. Twice-baking bread to preserve it can be traced to the ancient Greeks. Medieval Muslim bakers added sugar and flavorings to make the first sweet biscuits. 6/x

The split between the UK terms biscuits scones (a soft bread made of biscuit flower) and the different US usage of cookie and biscuit reveals the influence of Dutch and German folkways in North America. 7/x

Cultures do not, however, interact always on equal terms. That's also a theme through Collingham's book, and most especially of her most ambitious: a food history of World War II. 8/x https://t.co/hPnhCQd6c3

The military historian Richard Overy wrote of Collingham's WW2 food book that it "tranforms our understanding of a subject that had previously seemed so well-worn and familiar. ... It will now be impossible to think of the war in the old way." This is no overstatement. 9/x

The second world war was started by dictators who believed that their countries - Germany, Japan, Italy - could best address their food scarcity by imposing deprivation on others. The question, "Who would eat, who would hunger, who would starve" was central to all combatants.

The Nazis and Imperial Japanese intentionally imposed starvation on conquered nations. Vietnam suffered more deaths by famine under Japanese rule than in 30 years of almost non-stop war after 1945. The Nazis planned to starve 30 million Soviets to meet their food goals. 11/x

The Allies too faced terrible choices. The Soviets allocated hunger among their own people. British subjects in Bengal starved despite food sufficiency elsewhere in India because scarce shipping was assigned to other imperial purposes. And the United States ... 12/x

The spirit of "America First" was not extinguished at Pearl Harbor. US leaders believed they must maintain high standards of living at home, even as Russians fainted in their factories and Bengalis died in their fields. 13/x

Collingham's title "Tastes of War" suggests an entertaining tour through recipes for Spam and eggs. Instead, it's among the most indispensable books you will ever read on 1939-45. And while her subsequent books have been less harrowing ... 14/x

... they have been no less illuminating, especially The Hungry Empire, Collingham's history of how 18th and 19th Britain built itself a global food supply chain - and a global export market for British processed foods. https://t.co/vxie2EYmX3 15/x

The story of the 21st century is that all of us, Americans too, live at the end of global supply chains of a complexity few of us can even begin to understand. Collingham's books teach how those chains were built - and how they have become literally matters of life and death. END