The history of the 20th century is marked by two great narratives: nations locked in savage wars over ideology and territory, and scientists overturning the received wisdom of preceding generations. For Paul Johnson, the modern era begins with one of the second types of revolutions, in 1919, when English astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington translated observations from a solar eclipse into proof of Albert Einsteins general theory of relativity, which turned Newtonian physics on its head. Eddingtons research became an international cause célèbre: No exercise in scientific verification, before or since, has ever attracted so many headlines or become a topic of universal conversation, Johnson writes, and it made Einstein into sciences first real folk hero. Einstein looms large over Johnsons narrative, as do others who sought to harness the forces of nature and society: men like Mao Zedong, a big, brutal, earthy and ruthless peasant, and Adolf Hitler, creator of a brutal, secure, conscience-less, successful, and, for most Germans, popular regime. Johnson takes a contentious conservative viewpoint throughout: he calls the 1960s Americas suicide attempt, deems the Watergate affair a witch-hunt ... run by liberals in the media, and deems the rise of Margaret Thatcher a critical element in Western civilizations recovery of freedom--arguable propositions all, but ones advanced in a stimulating and well-written narrative that provides much food for thought in the course of its more than 800 pages. --Gregory McNamee

My Personal Review:
Paul Johnson is opinionated and a good writer and this history is very readable. National Review named it one of the top 100 books of the century and, although Im not a political conservative, I found myself in agreement with much of what Johnson says.

Modern Times begins with the end of World War I and focuses on the personality of actors on history rather than impersonal trends or philosophies of history. Johnson sums up his own philosophy with a quote
from Alexander Pope: The proper study of mankind is man. His opinion of the 20th century cast of characters is scathing more often than not.

He trashes Woodrow Wilson -- a sound judgment in my opinion -- defends Harding, claims Coolidge was a good President, is lukewarm toward Hoover, considers Roosevelt frivolous and empty-headed, favors Truman, and adores Eisenhower. Churchill is his great hero. The totalitarians -- Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler -- are depicted as venal gangsters. Johnson is unflinchingly anti-Communist throughout, an opinion that proved sound when the rot of the Soviet Union and its satellites became obvious in the late 1980s. (The first edition of this book was published in 1983.) Nehru, Gandhi and many other third world personalities get tossed into the category of lawyer/politicians with little to recommend them as leaders of countries.

Fault can be found with Johnson; minor errors of fact and questionable statements dot the book -- and he rushes breathlessly on without defending many of his opinions. However, if he argued them all out the book would be 10,000 pages long and dull as an airline steak knife. It is perhaps his tendency to be provocative that makes this history interesting -- as so many others are not.

I found particularly informative Johnsons description of how the Cold War started and his view that Hoover and Roosevelts policies prolonged the Great Depression rather than eased it. Many other interesting gems are hidden in Modern Times. Read it. If youre a liberal youll be infuriated now and then, but this is an intelligent and stimulating book about 70 years of the most violent and eventful century in the history of mankind.

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