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Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes To War



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book of 2013 A Kirkus Reviews Best Nonfiction Book of the Year World War I evokes images of the trenches: grinding, halting battles that sacrificed millions of lives for no territory or visible gain. Yet the first months of the war, from the German invasion of Belgium to the Marne to Ypres, were utterly different, full of advances and retreats, tactical maneuvering, and significant gains and losses. In *Catastrophe 1914*, acclaimed military historian Max Hastings re-creates this dramatic year, from the diplomatic crisis to the fighting in Belgium and France on the western front, and Serbia and Galicia to the east, and shows why it was inevitable that this first war among modern industrial nations could not produce a decisive victory. Throughout we encounter high officials and average soldiers, as well as civilians on the home front, giving us a vivid portrait of how a continent became embroiled in a war that would change everything.

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Customer Reviews

The fact that a century has passed since the tragic summer of 1914 does not limit the fascination with which so many study the outbreak of World War I. It never ceases to intrigue me, and I suspect many others as well, to read about the rising tensions of years before 1914, the Sarajevo assassination which triggered the actual conflict, the missteps and miscalculations that dragged country after country into the fighting, and most of all the first few battles that preceded the long, disastrous stalemate that lasted until 1918, the consequences of which still affect us today. Among the many accounts of the early war Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, published in 1962, still stands head and shoulders above the rest. But now at last it has a near equal companion: Max

Hasting's *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes To War*. The book begins with a Prologue on the Sarajevo assassinations, then recapitulates the diplomatic and military position of the various European powers before tracing the grim descent into conflict. Hastings chooses to begin his chronicle of the real fighting with the Austrian invasion of Serbia, which often gets overlooked in order to focus on the Germans, Russians, French and British. But the movements of the major powers, including the early battles of the Marne and Tannenberg and the bloody engagements at Ypres and Lodz, get plenty of attention, as do the naval maneuverings (including German shelling of British coastal cities and British aerial bombardment of Cuxhaven) and the actions of nations like Italy which remained non-belligerent in 1914.

I've read "Das Reich" and "Overlord," both of which left a deep impression on me that compelled me to take on his 600-page account of 1914. This work both overlaps with, and takes off from, Tuchman's "Guns of August." Hastings acknowledges his indebtedness to her work in a preface, and so he opens the door to the inevitable comparisons. Some of that influence is seen in his mirroring Tuchman's habit of using untranslated French, which continues to tax my long-forgotten high-school knowledge. His work is like "The Guns of August, September, October, November, and December," and so filled in many holes in my understanding of the events of 1914. Like Tuchman, he goes light on the origins of the war and the breakdown of negotiations after the assassination of Ferdinand and gets right into the more exciting fighting, which he describes well, but somehow without Tuchman's gift. Hastings includes a variety of sources and perspectives from first-hand eyewitnesses (diaries and letters are prominent throughout), which reveal how the war affected everyday people. Hastings does have a gift for using these sources to show that the war's truths were clearly evident to a few who lived them. Yet, his account is somewhat rambling at times, and his broader themes remain lost under the heavy weight of details. I missed the biting, revisionist criticism of "Overlord," or the coldly factual, pared down, but damning journalism of "Das Reich." He puts much of the blame for this war on the Germans, but even that conclusion is weakly argued and fumbled a bit in awkward diction; this is not the Hastings I remember or fell in love with.

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