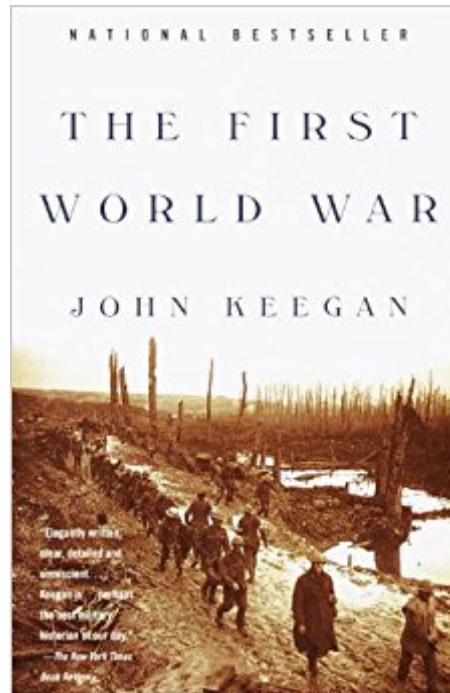




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The First World War



Synopsis

The definitive account of the Great War and national bestseller from one of our most eminent military historians, John Keegan. The First World War created the modern world. A conflict of unprecedented ferocity, it abruptly ended the relative peace and prosperity of the Victorian era, unleashing such demons of the twentieth century as mechanized warfare and mass death. It also helped to usher in the ideas that have shaped our times--modernism in the arts, new approaches to psychology and medicine, radical thoughts about economics and society--and in so doing shattered the faith in rationalism and liberalism that had prevailed in Europe since the Enlightenment. The First World War probes the mystery of how a civilization at the height of its achievement could have propelled itself into such a ruinous conflict and takes us behind the scenes of the negotiations among Europe's crowned heads (all of them related to one another by blood) and ministers, and their doomed efforts to defuse the crisis. Keegan reveals how, by an astonishing failure of diplomacy and communication, a bilateral dispute grew to engulf an entire continent. But the heart of Keegan's superb narrative is, of course, his analysis of the military conflict. With unequalled authority and insight, he recreates the nightmarish engagements whose names have become legend--Verdun, the Somme and Gallipoli among them--and sheds new light on the strategies and tactics employed, particularly the contributions of geography and technology. No less central to Keegan's account is the human aspect. He acquaints us with the thoughts of the intriguing personalities who oversaw the tragically unnecessary catastrophe--from heads of state like Russia's hapless tsar, Nicholas II, to renowned warmakers such as Haig, Hindenburg and Joffre. But Keegan reserves his most affecting personal sympathy for those whose individual efforts history has not recorded--"the anonymous millions, indistinguishably drab, undifferentially deprived of any scrap of the glories that by tradition made the life of the man-at-arms tolerable." By the end of the war, three great empires--the Austro-Hungarian, the Russian and the Ottoman--had collapsed. But as Keegan shows, the devastation extended over the entirety of Europe, and still profoundly informs the politics and culture of the continent today. His brilliant, panoramic account of this vast and terrible conflict is destined to take its place among the classics of world history.

Book Information

Paperback: 528 pages

Publisher: Vintage (May 16, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0375700455

ISBN-13: 978-0375700453

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 1 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 392 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #18,898 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #20 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Military](#) #22 in [Books > History > Military > World War I](#)

Customer Reviews

Despite the avalanche of books written about the First World War in recent years, there have been comparatively few books that deliver a comprehensive account of the war and its campaigns from start to finish. The First World War fills the gap superbly. As readers familiar with Keegan's previous books (including The Second World War and Six Armies in Normandy) know, he's a historian of the old school. He has no earth-shattering new theories to challenge the status quo, no first-person accounts to tug on the emotions--what he does have, though, is a gift for talking the lay person through the twists and turns of a complex narrative in a way that is never less than accessible or engaging. Keegan never tries to ram his learning down your throat. Where other authors have struggled to explain how Britain could ever allow itself to be dragged into such a war in 1914, Keegan keeps his account practical. The level of communications that we enjoy today just didn't exist then, and so it was much harder to keep track of what was going on. By the time a message had finally reached the person in question, the situation may have changed out of all recognition. Keegan applies this same "cock-up" theory of history to the rest of the war, principally the three great disasters at Gallipoli, the Somme, and Passchendaele. The generals didn't send all those troops to their deaths deliberately, Keegan argues; they did it out of incompetence and ineptitude, and because they had no idea of what was actually going on at the front. While The First World War is not afraid to point the finger at those generals who deserve it, even Keegan has to admit he doesn't have all the answers. If it all seems so obviously futile and such a massive waste of life now, he asks, how could it have seemed worthwhile back then? Why did so many people carry on, knowing they would die? Why, indeed. --John Crace, .co.uk --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In a riveting narrative that puts diaries, letters and action reports to good use, British military historian Keegan (The Face of Battle, etc.) delivers a stunningly vivid history of the Great War. He is equally at ease and equally generous and sympathetic in probing the hearts and minds of lowly

soldiers in the trenches or examining the thoughts and motivations of leaders (such as Joffre, Haig and Hindenburg) who directed the maelstrom. In the end, Keegan leaves us with a brilliant, panoramic portrait of an epic struggle that was at once noble and futile, world-shaking and pathetic. The war was unnecessary, Keegan writes, because the train of events that led to it could have been derailed at any time, "had prudence or common goodwill found a voice." And it was tragic, consigning 10 million to their graves, destroying "the benevolent and optimistic culture" of Europe and sowing the seeds of WWII. While Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War* (Forecasts, Mar. 8) offers a revisionist, economic interpretation of the causes of WWI, Keegan stands impressively mute before the unanswerable question he poses: "Why did a prosperous continent, at the height of its success as a source and agent of global wealth and power and at one of the peaks of its intellectual and cultural achievement, choose to risk all it had won for itself and all it offered to the world in the lottery of a vicious and local internecine conflict?" Photos not seen by PW. 75,000-copy first printing; simultaneous Random House audio. (June) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Excellent summary of the war and its many theaters. I recommend reading "Sleepwalkers" first to get an understanding of how the war came about. Both books are very sobering and give one the impression that nothing much has changed, other than then lethality of weapons. The world still operates with the same political and diplomatic machinations, hyper patriotism, prejudice and tribal animosity as it did in 1914 that made possible and sustained the complete breakdown of civilization and the horrendous slaughter in Western Europe, one of unimaginable magnitude Follow up both of those books with "All Quiet on the Western Front" for a more personal understanding of the horror of that war and the human cost even among the survivors, and ask yourself if anything has changed, and if there is hope for the human race.

In 1914 Europe's leaders could have maintained peace among its prospering powers. Instead they blundered into The Great War. Guided by ancient prejudices and traditions, they subjected the world to over four years of carnage and suffering that destroyed millions of lives regardless of nationality, race, religion, age or gender. This is a complex story that did so much to shape the unstable world of today. Keegan, an Englishman, is a preeminent historian and a fine author who presents an informative, accessible narrative. No small achievement given the enormity of his subject. The Great War ruined so much but it left a legacy of damage and loss that the English have never quite reconciled. It devastated The British Empire and a generation of their young men. Their future as a

leading world power ended in 1918. Their loss is part of the national conscience to this day; not some specious, fading memory of heroes, great battles won and ultimate triumph. A formidable and dispiriting subject but a terrific read for anyone interested in military history, geopolitics and how the world got into the mess it is in today. Sadly The Great War wasn't "The war to end all wars".

I have just read Margaret McMillan's book about the lead-in to WW I. It was very detailed on diplomatic and other history of Europe from about 1880 to 1914. I wanted to read about the war itself, so I ordered and read this book because I have been happy with some previous Keegan books. Keegan recovered the area covered by McMillan, but much more briefly. As to the war itself, I felt Keegan did a fine job covering the futilities of the trench battles and the attempts to work around the trenches, from Gallipoli to the Eastern Front and the Bolshevik Revolution, again fairly briefly. The War's end and the reasons for the end were covered quite well and I feel I understand a good deal more now. Sadly, Keegan is no longer with us, but this was a fine book and *The Face of Battle* was a very great book.

If you are looking for a book that tells you the names and positions of every platoon that served in the Great War, how they moved, where the battles were fought and the terrain (there is so much about the soggy terrain in Flanders) etc., this is the book for you. It almost seems to have been written as a text book for classes on the history of military strategy. One warning - get yourself a good atlas - the maps in the book are worthless, which is a shame because the author is so specific about locations. If you are not interested in all of those details, do not buy this book. If you want to explore the social, political and military effects of the war, and learn what the life of a World War I soldier was like there is a great set of lectures in the Great Courses Series on the War. It is a bit pricy, but worth it. Of course there is also *All Quiet on the Western Front* - a masterpiece.

One cannot go wrong with Sir John Keegan. In depth analysis and decently illustrated. Large volume of a very complex war.

I've always searched for a good one volume history of WWI, which are not easy to come by. I thought he did a great job of giving the reader all the overarching strategic decisions, explaining why each time a new version of trench warfare offensives really made the general think it would work this time...when all previous attempts had failed. 4 stars only because his sentences are contorted at times. I'd recommend reading this along with Rogan's *"Fall of the Ottoman Empire"* since Keegan

gave that topic short coverage.

As we work our way into the Centennial of the world's first cataclysm, we need to review the events, why they happened, and what the lessons are for today. The biggest thing that stands out to me is allowing a set of plans to run ahead of common sense. If allies are intent on doing stupid things, you don't have to follow along. Don't let your 'friends' drag you into bad ideas. The second is don't let the generals set the agenda. They are not as smart as they think they are. The last is, make your enemies into friends asap. If you don't, another war may be right around the corner. Keegan's book is a high level overview, but a great starting place to dive deeper into the events that started a hundred years ago.

As an American, WW1 is glossed over pretty frequently. Even popular media tends to ignore the first world war in favor of the second. This provided a solid understanding of The Great War's causes and how it changed the face of warfare, politics, and the direction of history.

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