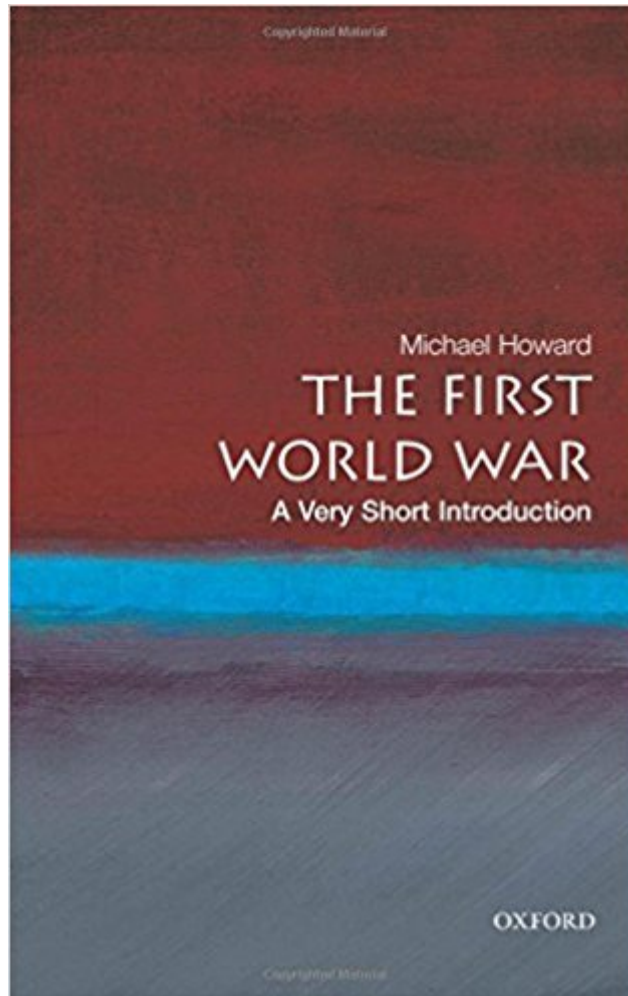




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The First World War: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

By the time the First World War ended in 1918, eight million people had died in what had been perhaps the most apocalyptic episode the world had known. This Very Short Introduction provides a concise and insightful history of the Great War--from the state of Europe in 1914, to the role of the US, the collapse of Russia, and the eventual surrender of the Central Powers. Examining how and why the war was fought, as well as the historical controversies that still surround the war, Michael Howard also looks at how peace was ultimately made, and describes the potent legacy of resentment left to Germany. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is a quite good very brief introduction to World War I. All aspects are covered, though concentration is on military events viewed from a high strategic level. Thus, only about a page is spent on the Battle of the Marne and surrounding events, but the reader is made aware of the basic movements and their importance. And, in one paragraph, the author conveys a better feel for the ebb and flow on the eastern front in 1914 than usually happens in more detailed histories. One is never going to lose sight of the forest for the trees in this book! There are spare but useful maps, some photographs, and a table of casualty figures. There are a few misprints, and some awkward syntax on occasion. Also, from a style viewpoint, I felt the author overused the phrase "as we have

seen". But those are minor quibbles about an overall excellent book.

I was surprised when the book arrived because not only is it just 170 pages, but the book is the size of a paperback so it's really almost an extended essay in length. A few nice pictures add atmosphere and some maps although they don't show every place referenced in the text, but do show places not referenced so that could have been better. I have never read WWI history but know a lot from popular culture. I knew about certain broad themes like the domino effect of alliances but overall it seemed like a highly complex and boring war. Yet I also knew this war was vital to understanding such things as the origins of WWII, the origins of the middle east conflicts, nationalism. The origins of the modern age. Imagine knowing a subject so well you could write an encyclopedia that had to be condensed down to a long essay. Michael Howard does this with incredible skill, because of the limiting length every sentence is a pure nugget of insight he makes no waste of the space provided. The major points of military, social and political are covered allowing one to see the entire war from start to finish in very short order and without spending months tramping through the trenches of detail and anecdote one might find in more lengthy or specific books. I rate this book highly because it did exactly what I was hoping for. A short easy to read high level overview of the war to provide a spring board to read more areas in detail in the future and to understand the war in relation to other larger historical forces.

Howard is a great historian and he manages to boil the First World War down to 135 pages. This is an informative work for those who do not have the time to invest in a more detailed book. It breaks down the war into an introduction, and the years of the war, plus the results of the war. If one is looking for specific information about battles, then this is not the book for the reader. As Howard relates in his introduction, there is still a lot of controversy about some aspects of the war. Howard relates the most popular versions, but the reader can still choose to second guess. This is good starter book for those interested in the First World War.

Having just emerged from Barbara Tuchman's "Guns of August", it was a relief to get the big picture view of the entire war, across all theaters (Western Front, Eastern Front, Italy, Balkans, Middle East). With so many distractions available, Howard does a great job of guiding us through the ebb and flow of the war. It was particularly helpful to get some insight into the domestic scene of the various combatants and how that affected the military outcome. I'd recommend this for anyone who wants (a) an intro that whets the appetite for further investigation, or (b) an overview to fill out some

gaps in 20th century history.

Military historian Michael Howard has written a brilliant condensation of the seminal event of the short twentieth century. In particular, Howard examines the dilemma of modern democracies engaged in a popular war with increasingly devastating consequences, and the difficulty politicians encounter in seeking peace without "betraying" the fallen. In fact, as Howard notes, accusations of just such a betrayal led directly to the rise of Nazism and a repeat of the slaughter on an even grander scale. Howard deftly summarizes the current theories on why the war happened, captures the horror of trench warfare and of mass assaults on fortified positions, and effectively illuminates why the war has influenced all subsequent events. For Americans, many of whom consider this war as merely a little known prelude to the Second World War, this book is an indispensable introduction. For those who know more, Howard clearly states, and supports, his opinion on many disputed topics, such as the role of German naval construction in fueling Anglo-German enmity, and leading to eventual British military intervention, which arguably made the war a world, as opposed to a European, war. There is a brief but excellent annotated list of further suggested reading.

Like all VSI, this is a very well written essay that cleverly summarizes a huge topic. The author focuses on the flow of military events. The first world war (usually known as 'the great war' to Anglo-Saxons) changed the way war was fought fundamentally and for ever. Howard leaves no doubt that the popular 'heros' of this war, like Lettow-Vorbeck, Lawrence of Arabia, Fock or Hindenburg/Ludendorff, did indeed matter little, or made things more bloody than would have been necessary, had they been less full of themselves. The price of shortness of this introduction is that socio-economic and political context and institutions are only cursory considered.

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