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Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes To War



Synopsis

From the acclaimed military historian, a history of the outbreak of World War I: the dramatic stretch from the breakdown of diplomacy to the battles—the Marne, Ypres, Tannenberg—that marked the frenzied first year before the war bogged down in the trenches. In *A Catastrophe* 1914, Max Hastings gives us a conflict different from the familiar one of barbed wire, mud and futility. He traces the path to war, making clear why Germany and Austria-Hungary were primarily to blame, and describes the gripping first clashes in the West, where the French army marched into action in uniforms of red and blue with flags flying and bands playing. In August, four days after the French suffered 27,000 men dead in a single day, the British fought an extraordinary holding action against oncoming Germans, one of the last of its kind in history. In October, at terrible cost the British held the allied line against massive German assaults in the first battle of Ypres. Hastings also re-creates the lesser-known battles on the Eastern Front, brutal struggles in Serbia, East Prussia and Galicia, where the Germans, Austrians, Russians and Serbs inflicted three million casualties upon one another by Christmas. As he has done in his celebrated, award-winning works on World War II, Hastings gives us frank assessments of generals and political leaders and masterly analyses of the political currents that led the continent to war. He argues passionately against the contention that the war was not worth the cost, maintaining that Germany's defeat was vital to the freedom of Europe. Throughout we encounter statesmen, generals, peasants, housewives and private soldiers of seven nations in Hastings's accustomed blend of top-down and bottom-up accounts: generals dismounting to lead troops in bayonet charges over 1,500 feet of open ground; farmers who at first decried the requisition of their horses; infantry men engaged in a haggard retreat, sleeping four hours a night in their haste. This is a vivid new portrait of how a continent became embroiled in war and what befell millions of men and women in a conflict that would change everything.

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Customer Reviews

Guest Review of "Catastrophe 1914" by Max Hastings
By Scott Anderson Author of Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East, Scott Anderson is a veteran war correspondent who has reported from Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Northern Ireland, Chechnya, Sudan, Bosnia, El Salvador and many other strife-torn countries. A contributing writer to the New York Times Magazine, his work has also appeared in Vanity Fair, Esquire, Harper's and Outside. He is also the author of novels Moonlight Hotel and Triage and of non-fiction books The Man Who Tried to Save the World and The 4 O'Clock Murders, and co-author of War Zones and Inside The League with his brother Jon Lee Anderson. To truly understand the grim march of twentieth century history, one must start with World War I and to truly understand that horror show, one must look at its cataclysmic first few months. It was during this time that Europe saw sweeping military offensives, great pitched battles, and such staggering body-counts that the powers turned to the stagnation of trench warfare almost as a matter of national survival. This is the period British historian Max Hastings sets out to examine in Catastrophe, and the result is nothing short of a masterpiece. The power of this book operates on several levels. Due to the political and military complexity of World War I as well as, perhaps, a certain nationalistic chauvinism most histories of it tend to be decidedly local; a reader might learn a great deal about the battle of the Somme, for instance, but virtually nothing about what was occurring at the same time elsewhere. By deftly moving from one battlefield to the other, Hastings is able to create a mosaic of the carnage visited upon Europe in the opening days of the war, and to show how those fronts were interconnected. Certainly no other general World War I history that I've read gives the commensurate attention to the slaughters that occurred on the Serbian and Galician battlefronts in 1914 that Hastings provides here. To accomplish this, he has wisely avoided that tendency so common among military historians - barraging the reader with a blizzard of commanders' names and regimental designations that can make reading about combat such an ironically-dull task. Instead, by bringing us the voices of the young men from all sides caught in the maws of these battles, we not only get a visceral sense of what it looked and sounded and smelled like, but an appreciation for the commonality of the horror befalling

them. Those wanting a tactical, blow-by-blow account of the Russian disasters at Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes, for example, will have to look elsewhere – Hastings dispenses with these twinned battles in a mere dozen pages – but for everyone else, the description of ordinary Russians slowly dawning to the realization that they are doomed is both wrenching and unforgettable. Perhaps most remarkable, given his focus on the personal and the small, telling detail, Hastings’s voice also carries the mantle of authority; very early on, the reader realizes the author has done the heavy spadework of examining the myriad political and military controversies of the period, and come to a studied conclusion. Chief among these is the enduring debate over who was most responsible for starting the war, and in recent years a whole spate of revisionist histories have sought to redirect blame toward Britain or France or – most improbably – Russia. While Hastings is ultimately dismissive of these alternate theories (it really was the Germans and Austro-Hungarians’ fault), he does so decorously and only after entertaining the revisionisms long enough to show their contradictions. Similarly, the battlefield decisions of Sir John French, the first British field marshal of the war, have been argued over for nearly a century now, but it’s very hard to see what needs to be added to Hastings’s elegant comment that French’s conduct, “in the field was little more egregious than that of his counterparts of the other European armies.” In contemplating this project, it surely crossed Hastings’s mind that his book would inevitably be judged against another work that covers almost precisely the same time period, Barbara Tuchman’s 1962 classic, *The Guns of August*. With *Catastrophe*, that period now has two classics. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

After writing almost exclusively about WWII, eminent historian Hastings (*Inferno*) turns his attention to the outbreak of WWI. Chronicling both the prelude to the war and its initial battles, he concentrates on events occurring between June 28, 1914, when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, and December 31, 1914, when soldiers on both sides of the conflict languished in trenches. Drawing on accounts generated from rarified diplomatic circles, seasoned military leaders, and ordinary citizens helplessly caught up in the international catastrophe, he examines the origins and the onset of the Great War in minute and vivid detail. Hastings, unlike many contemporary historians, refuses to indulge in any retrospective hand-wringing, concluding rather firmly that Germany and Austria must accept principal blame for the war and that it is an analytical and an ethical mistake to believe that it did not matter which side won. This compelling reexamination of the commencement of the conflict represents an important contribution to the

scholarship of the "war to end all wars." --Margaret Flanagan --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

This is a well written book on how the First World War started by a noted historian of the Second World War. While a lot of us are familiar with World War II, many are not familiar with the war before it. Without an understanding of what occurred then, it is hard to understand the reluctance of those nations trying to stop Hitler and others to resort to war without trying all other avenues first.

European nations paid an astronomical cost in the first few months of this war and this book details this in great detail without going into too much battle description in the grand sense instead keeping the view from the participants to make it more personal. This book also takes the reader away from the battlefields to show how the peoples of the nations involved in the war reacted over the 5 months discussed and how perspectives changed over the course of the victories and defeats that each nation dealt with. The author shows us the members of government along with their subjects dealing with changes imposed by the war always with the (hopeful) optimism that it will be over soon and all of the suffering and loss will be justified by the outcome. As the reality of the duration of conflict starts to dawn on them, it is recognized as a battle of endurance for the nations involved. His concluding chapter is one that I think all those who think they 'know everything' about this period of time should read. With over a century having occurred since the events depicted in this book, there is a tendency for modern readers to think that they could have just stopped. The author looks at this prospect from the view of all of the major combatants as well as giving some foreshadowing of what was to come for the participants in the years both during and after the war. In this last chapter, he shows the governments of the nations involved looking if there is a way to end the fighting, but none of them willing to end it except with an advantage that justifies the cost inflicted. Since this was never going to happen, the fighting will continue. I would recommend this book to anyone who is a fan of Max Hastings's books on World War II. He has lost none of his talent for relating these stories even with a change of wars being considered. Also, I would recommend this any readers of Barbara Tuchman's "Guns Of August". Her book written back in the 1960's was an eye-opening introduction to the same themes that are discussed in this book. This is a 50 year later successor to her book and belongs right beside it in any library of World War I.

Max Hastings, one of the best military historians has written another thoroughly researched, well written, riveting study of WWI, something that is hard to do considering all the literature on the topic. His study focuses on the root causes and the first year of the war, bringing new insights and new

analysis to his topic. However, although I agree that the the combatants didn't blunder into the war, the thesis of most historians, I cannot fully agree that it was Germany's sole responsibility for the war, when Hastings's own very balanced, and insightful analysis gives Austria Hungary equal, or almost equal, share for that nefarious distinction. The analysis of some early battles, and the performances of the commanders are brilliant. and sometimes very different than usually given. Well worth the read.

For readers of military history, Max Hastings requires no introduction. His major area of interest was WW-II and he has written brilliantly on the subject. He also wrote a compelling history of the Korean War and how, as the 100th anniversary of WW-I has been reached, he introduces the conflict in an incisively presented panorama of the events leading to the war and its opening battles. One of Hastings' major attributes is his lack of hesitation to pronounce judgement (take sides, if you will). In his recent books, this element has played a more prominent role and in "Catastrophe", he unhesitatingly weighs in against the Kaiser's Germany. He offers an abundance of reasons for so doing and all are convincing. He also slashes the reputations of such bunglers as Sir John French and offers nuanced judgements of others (e.g. Joffre and Churchill). A tendency amongst modern historians is to cite heavily from diaries, letters and other artifacts of the "common man" of the era. Perhaps Hastings overdoes it a bit in this area. Large sections of the book are devoted to this aspect of the conflict. Attitudes and perspectives are thus displayed, but in too much detail. Weighed relative to his other recent works, "Catastrophe" falls a bit short. Nonetheless, it is (as is always the case) phenomenally well-researched, lucidly presented and convincingly argued. Certainly, it occupies a worthy place in the Hastings corpus and is well worth reading. For many historians, WW-I was the beginning of the modern era, replete with mass murder, unrestrained atrocities and general carnage (though some might argue that Napoleon started the process). While the war was touted as "the war to end all wars", that judgement was subsequently shown to be ludicrous. It wasn't the beginning of the end' rather, it was the end of the beginning, as Hastings shows here.

Is there anything really new under the sun to say about the outbreak of the First World War and the campaigns of its first 5 months? Well, no, not really, but that doesn't stop one of my favorite military historians from giving it a good go, and your reading this book will not go unrewarded. Taking into account the best of the last 20 years or so's historical research, Hastings has concluded that Germany and Austria bear the primary responsibility for the disaster that was WWI, and that preventing a German-dominated Europe was a worthwhile war aim, in spite of the heavy sacrifices.

As he always does, Hastings peppers his narrative with peppery verdicts and conclusions on the decision-taking and war-making abilities of the various politicians and military leaders but, hey, what would a Max Hastings history book be without those judgements? It's part of the fun! Best of all, of course, is Hastings' mastery of the sources combined with his rich and creamy prose that makes reading his work so pleasurable. If you haven't read a good book about the causes of the war and how it played out in its first year since "The Guns Of August" then curl up with this one. You won't regret it.

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