

Synopsis

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. With *The First World War*, John Keegan, one of our most eminent military historians, fulfills a lifelong ambition to write the definitive account of the Great War for our generation. Probing the mystery of how a civilization at the height of its achievement could have propelled itself into such a ruinous conflict, Keegan 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. He 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. With 24 pages of photographs, 2 endpaper maps, and 15 maps in text

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

John Keegan' "The First World War" is one of those rare books which combine the thoroughly researched descriptions of history, technology and means of warfare with nuances of psychology and mystery of the Great War. Keegan starts with the overview of diplomatic positions of the Great powers involved in the war (although his analysis of origins is on his own admission is just a summary of prior work), then proceeds to the breakout of the conflict. In subsequent chapters Keegan covers every year of the Great War on the Western, Eastern, Middle Eastern, Italian and Mediterranean theatres of war in a thorough and scholarly fashion. Very soon a pattern emerges - a static trench warfare on the Western front, in-conclusive war of movement on the Eastern front with untold unaccounted casualties, diversionary operations on the secondary theatres costing significant resource drain, and pointless war of heroics, despotism and bravery on the Italian front. What I like particularly about the book is the analysis of military strategy and tactics of the main participant in the manner which somebody without training in military science can easily comprehend. Keegan points out how lack of communication, rigid bureaucratic organization and the lack of appreciation of the tactical variability of the war caused British failures to command a decision at Somme in 1916 and Ypres and Flanders in 1917; how ill-prepared was French army for defensive operations due to its romantic "esprit de corps"; how Russian lack of coordination, material supply and organization lead to horrendous losses on the Western front. Germans came out as good fighters, allowing their field commanders high degree of freedom, yet weak strategically, unable to concentrate the efforts on a single point of the decisive breakthrough.

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