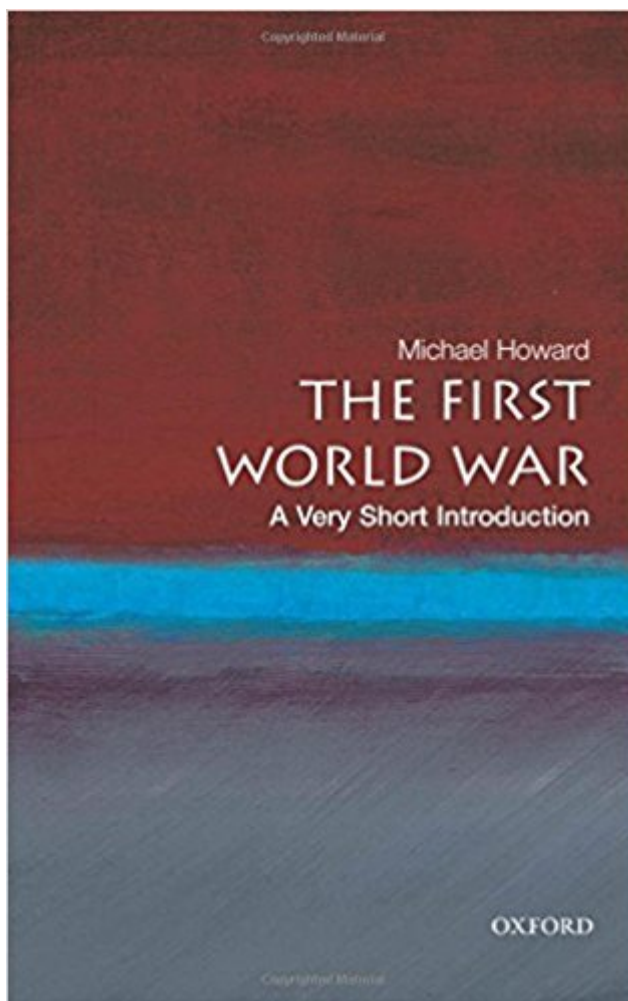


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The First World War: A Very Short Introduction



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.

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Customer Reviews

A distinguished British historian presents the central events of World War I for readers who are curious but unknowledgeable about the conflict. It is comparable in style to the author's recent *The Invention of Peace* (2001). Succinctly expressive, Howard's style concentrates narrative and interpretation within a few sentences, but a deep historical controversy often lurks behind his concision, such as who was responsible for igniting the war. For those readers who are incredulous that a global conflagration could erupt from an assassination, Howard summarizes how the alliance systems came about, the fears of the nations that contracted them, and the special resentments of a German monarch who embodied "archaic militarism, vaulting ambition, and neurotic insecurity." Just

as perplexing, perhaps, is the continuance for four years of trench warfare; once again, Howard compactly explains the slight alterations in tactics that generals believed would achieve a breakthrough, but produced instead the bloodbaths that by 1917-18 broke armies and entire regimes. Also touching on the war's course in Italy and Eastern Europe, Howard elegantly applies his erudition and judgment to this concise introduction. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Review from previous edition Review from previous edition succinct, comprehensive and beautifully written. Indeed reading it is an experience comparable to scanning the clues of a well-composed crossword puzzle. Every allusion is eventually supplied with an answer, and the finished product defies the puzzler's disbelief that the intricacies can be brought to a convincing conclusion. . . . Michael Howard is the master of the short book' TLS 'Howard expertly and succinctly summarizes the Great War for the layperson... volume is an excellent way to get a grounding in this momentous subject' Forbes Global 21/03/03 'an enlightened idea to produce a very short account of the great war - a page per month - But if, in 2014, bright schoolchildren, their brains putified by GCSE, get around to asking what the first world war was about, Howard's book will be very valuable.' The Times, Culture 'Professor Sir Michael Howard, . . . , is our best living military historian, and perhaps also strategic thinker. His new work is a masterly introduction to the Great War, designed for those with no previous knowledge of the subject. . . . Any new student who reads Michael Howard should go on to address the first volume of Hew Strachan's huge new work on the same theme. There is great wisdom in both books, and wisdom on this subject is in short supply.' Sunday Telegraph

This VSI provides a concise and insightful history of the Great War. Howard takes a chronological approach to its history -- beginning with an overview of conditions in Europe just before the outbreak of war in 1914, to the role of the U.S., to the collapse of Russia, and ending with the peace settlement in 1919 following the Central Powers' surrender. While some attention is given to how and why the war was fought, as well as the historical controversies that still surround the war (including the legacy of resentment left to Germany), Howard primarily emphasizes military operations. Consequently, this VSI reads like a military history of the Great War, and is short on human interest stories. In the end, "The First World War: A Very Short Introduction" is little more than a very thorough timeline.

Michael Howard does an excellent job of summarizing World War I in slightly more than 100 pages.

Clearly it's possible to quibble with some of what he included and some of what he omitted and with some of his judgements -- which he lacks the space to adequately defend. My only serious objection is that he doesn't include maps illustrating the campaigns he describes. There are a series of maps at the front of the books, but they only show the areas of Europe involved, with key cities indicated, without illustrating the actual campaigns. The companion volume by Gerhard Weinberg on World War II does include such maps.

The First World War: A Very Short Introduction by Michael Howard is just that -- a short introduction to WWI that seeks primarily to inform readers of the economic, societal, political and militant activities during the turbulent four-year span of 1914-1918. Within this shortened text, Howard has compiled and morphed the timelines of these varying events according to country, and by doing so, has attempted to recreate the simultaneous unfolding of warfare. This book includes battle descriptions and locations as well as briefly references military tactics, political agendas, governmental decisions, civilian life, propaganda techniques, financial struggles, resource depletion and offers a variety of speculations regarding each. In addition, Howard, although not entirely objective in his portrayal, makes an apparent, yet subtle effort to identify reoccurring themes such as hope, discouragement, fear, and motivation. As a result, Howard often poses as a Daniel Boone figure that readers can use as a guide for understanding both the concrete and more abstract components of WWI. With an instructor-to-student type of writing persona, Howard manages to pack large amounts of content into relatively few pages. Since his intended readership is most likely high school and undergraduate level researchers, his historical overview is quite concise, which is typically a coveted strength in introductory books. However, he does deviate occasionally with a few wordy, reoccurring sayings and unnecessary descriptive phrases, which has a tendency to slog down certain passages. Additionally, just as all writing styles have their limitations, the bare-bones quality of this book sometimes appears as a "data dump" of information (which can also add to this text's "data-swamp" quality). As a result, examples are stacked on top of examples, furthermore giving Howard's history a sometimes-stilted presentation. This book is formatted in a timeline fashion; however, in order to supply his readers with additional context, Howard often inserts a "sub-timeline" so to speak, within his already chronological organization. These expanded contexts help readers understand the war both in its militant setting, but also within its civilian one. However, all context and information must be taken with a grain of salt. Howard's portrayal of the war comes from a British historian

perspective, and his book reflects this in both word choice and content. When all is taken to account, however, this book does a decent job of fulfilling its purpose. It focuses on both the events and the contexts surrounding them as well as keeps in mind the swirling dichotomies of other warfare factors. It's concise. It's informative, and although sometimes it does an odd teeter-totter dance between being formal and dense or being informal and speculative, it's a readable book that a student would find helpful if they just want to know the crunch time basics of WWI.

I did not know a great deal about WWI going into this book. My early education had taught me that everyone made alliances, Archduke Franz Ferdinand got shot, all the countries began to fight each other, stalemated and killed millions. Even in such a short read, it is clear that there is a far more intriguing explanation of what I would claim as the most wasteful war in history. Howard is a phenomenal story teller which means that once you pick this up, you won't be able to put it down, other than the moments when you feel the impact of decisions where hundreds of thousands are slaughtered.

Used for a history class. It does a good job of getting right to the point and letting a newbie to World War 1 know the ins and outs. Even if you're not a novice to WWI, it's a good refresher. Well worth the read.

Howard is an accomplished historian and this book shows it. He explains truths that are often hidden by the details of longer books. One thing did leave me wondering. He writes about how France had fallen behind in the great power competition of population, wealth and power. A few more sentences about this would have been helpful. But all in all I found this a fine description of how Europe managed to get involved in such a cataclysmic struggle and how it played out. It is certainly worth the time it takes to read. I've read a number of other, more detailed books about this war. Howard's book still yielded fresh insight.

This book tells the causes and the course of the First World War without polemical emphasis. What mainly comes through is how the Great War was a series of unintended consequences based on miscalculations of national alliances, technical capabilities, and popular enthusiasm. It also shows how political idealism (the Fourteen Points), nationalism, and the victors' attempts to neutralize Germany and disassemble Austria-Hungary combined to create an unstable settlement, the

consequences of which are still with us.

This is an excellent book for those, like myself, who wanted a better understanding of the circumstances that led to WWI, some sense of the battles, and the aftermath. While the "Very Short Introductions" series is not meant to be a comprehensive source on any of the subjects offered, I felt I came away with a greater understanding of the subject matter and with enough knowledge to know where to continue on for more in-depth study of any one aspect. I have since purchased two more of the VSI series.

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