



14-18: Understanding the Great War

Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau , Annette Becker

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With this brilliantly innovative book, reissued for the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker have shown that the Great War was the matrix on which all subsequent disasters of the twentieth century were formed. Three elements of the conflict, all too often neglected or denied, are identified as those that must be grasped if we are to understand the war: First, what inspired its unprecedented physical brutality, and what were the effects of tolerating such violence? Second, how did citizens of the belligerent states come to be driven by vehement nationalistic and racist impulses? Third, how did the tens of millions bereaved by the war come to terms with the agonizing pain? With its strikingly original interpretative strength and its wealth of compelling documentary evidence drawn from all sides in the conflict, 14-18: Understanding the Great War has quickly established itself as a classic in the history of modern warfare.

14-18: Understanding the Great War Details

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Kylie says

I haven't read French academic work before (besides a handful of economics articles in school) and now I'm wondering why I haven't because this book was very readable. I have read a lot of German academic works and they are a bear to slog through (really long convoluted sentences = better writing in Germany) so that's what I was expecting. If you're looking for a military history or a look at the actual physical movement of the war look elsewhere. 14-18 looks at the psychological impact of the war across a variety of populations during and after the war. It's broken into 3 sections dealing with violence, the cognitive framework of the war, and mourning. Overall and readable look at the social impact of the First World War.

Jill Hutchinson says

The war to end all wars.....that was the statement made after WWI. Of course we know differently but why was this war unique from all that went before? All war is devastating but the Great War engenders particular horror to those who have studied it and the author posits, correctly I believe, that it was "the matrix on which all subsequent disasters of the 20th century were formed". This book is not about the battles and the gas and trenches but rather a sociological work which attempts to answer questions about why and how civilized people could engage in such uncivilized behavior.

The book is divided into three major sections: violence, crusade, and mourning. And it does not just touch on the feelings and actions of fighting men but also examines the civilian populations who suffered (and made others suffer) through the four years of hell. We hear their words and in some cases, their excuses for what occurred and the author's interpretation of their actions.

This is a rather disturbing book that explores some of the myths that have arisen about WWI. It is not a history of the war, but a history of the effects of the war. It is a slow read but well worth the time it takes.

Brendan Hodge says

14-18 is a social rather than a military or political history; it examines how people thought about the Great War during the war itself, how the people it touched were changed by the war, and how the view of the war changed afterward as a result of those experiences.

It is a fascinating book which relies heavily on primary sources. More importantly, it looks at what people said *during* the war as well as what they said *after* the war, and examines the changes the differences between these attitudes indicate. It takes time over the differences between the actual experiences of people affected by the war and the narrative of the war which eventually developed -- examining which experiences vanished from memory because they did not fit the narrative.

For instance, considerable time is spent on the experiences of French civilians in the occupied regions of France -- controlled by Germany for most of the war -- as they saw resources confiscated for the German war effort, and were in many cases deported or put into forced labor camps or roving labor units. These

experiences were little discussed in post-war France because they did not fit with the memory of how France had sacrificed everything in order to hold the Germans back. There was also increasing suspicion after the war of most accounts of German abuses or atrocities, as it became increasingly common to claim that these were virtually all fabricated by Allied propaganda. (Indeed, propaganda is one of the interesting issues covered, as 14-18 shows fairly successfully that the term is not well applied to what went on in much of the Great War. The modern use of the term refers to mis-information or biased information put forward by the government or a political faction in order to sway the people. What exaggeration and hysteria did occur in the popular press during the first half of the war was, on the contrary, mostly a bottom-up phenomenon. It was only near the end of the war that what might in mid-century terms be called government "propaganda" began to be produced.)

All of this makes 14-18 a fascinating and important read. The reason I give it four rather than five stars relates mainly to scope and organization. The book is organized thematically, which is, I think, a good way to approach its subject. However, within each thematic section there is little effort to separate out the experiences of different countries and different theaters of war, though there is a good discussion of how trends changed during the course of the war. I would have appreciated more discussion of the specific ways in which these experiences and trends varied by nation. What we get instead is mostly an account of France's experience, with a much more passing discussion of the British Empire and Germany (mostly where their experiences were especially similar or in direct contrast.) Discussion of Austria-Hungary and Italy are even more sketchy, and The US, Russia and Turkey almost absent. I could wish that the book either explicitly restricted itself to France and dug even deeper into that topic, or spent more time discussing each nation involved in the conflict separately within the themed chapters.

Marks54 says

This is a good book on the general meaning of WW1 and on the historiography of the war -- how the story told by historians has changed over the years. The broad question is really about how to understand why WW1 was such a watershed and how it changed most everything that came after it. This is not a book about battles, campaigns, and peoples. Readers who want such historical detail should read some of the many fine one volume histories that have come out prior to the centennial. This book is more about broader questions like why the war was so violent and what that violence did to survivors. The book is actually composed of a number of shorter interrelated essays on such topics as violence, compulsion and volunteerism, the nature of barbarity and propaganda, and the nature of the suffering that came with the war and has in many ways afflicted Europe ever since. In its later chapters, the book reminds me of Drew Gilpin Faust's book about the US Civil War entitled "Republic of Suffering".

This is a shorter book but a thoughtful one. The authors have spent some time on these essays and the reader will need to do so as well to appreciate them. It is a reissue of a book published just after the Millennium, but it reads very well and will reward patient readers. The great battles of WW1 can be read about elsewhere. It is also interesting to read a strong French perspective on the war and how it is currently understood in France.

Amelia says

More about World War I scholarship than about WWI. Not what I'm looking for right now. Maybe one day I'll return to it, but I doubt I'll ever be so interested in scholarship, history, and WWI as to do so.

David C Ward says

Quite good not least for laying out the questions that still need to be asked (let alone answered) about WWI. Not a history but a linked series of three essays - engagements, to use a term French scholars like - on Violence, Crusade (Why People/Nations Fought) and Mourning. Especially sharp on the need for historians to act like historians and reclaim the war from veterans and politicians. It moves adroitly between the individual and the mass: the societal experience of mass death and the individual experience of death. Implicit is that WWI laid the basis for what followed in the 20th century even in small details: the graves/tombs of the parents who had lost so many sons were smaller and less ornate than those of before the war-elaborate tombs would have been unseemly.

This book really needed to have illustrations though.

Tiffany says

This book challenges and explains what the Great War was like culturally for those fighting and those not fighting. Moving. This book really explains the formation of the Red Cross, religion/spirituality and its development, as well as what the war was like for women and children. It also poses the question why is WWI often overlooked in favor of WWII, when it was equally ugly.

Michael Duane Robbins says

The world suffers from a collective amnesia, in which our vision is limited to trenches and flying aces. This book opens a dialogue on the atrocities committed by both sides, and the occupation that brutalized Belgium and France, which was as bad or worse than what they suffered in WWII. No one considers the effect of the blockade on Germany, how their people too were starving. Propaganda paints it as a glorious, which this book puts the lie to.

Teddee says

Somehow felt unsatisfying after reading it, perhaps because I was never really convinced it was saying something that wasn't already intuitive or that we weren't already taught about WWI. Apparently it is a significant academic writing about WWI history but, coming from a layman's point of view, the nuances are too subtle for us to care about. This is a very broad book that covers a lot of aspects of the war and is less interesting for those interested in more focused books. The book also seems like an preliminary study at a summary level, so one leaves it not feeling overwhelmingly convinced.

Jim Gallen says

“14-18: Understanding The Great War” helps the reader understand the War through the understandings of

those who fought it, lived through it and commemorated it. Chapter by chapter the authors examine how civilized societies turned into brutal warriors, collectively and individually, and how they dealt with this transformation.

The magnitude of the struggle was unprecedented. The neat wars of the past between professional armies were replaced by total war as masses were inducted into the military and entire nations were channeled into support of the war effort. Civilians who had never fought before found themselves hating enemies they did not know, picking off perfect strangers and cleaning trenches of the frightened and wounded. What would they report about their service? Although uniformed personnel suffered most of the casualties, civilians found themselves bombarded, expelled from their homes and forced to work for their country's invaders. How do they reconcile their loyalty to homeland with their acts of self-preservation? How did the war affect the people's faith and how did men of the cloth and their flocks pray to the same God for help in killing their fellow men? How did individuals and nations assuage their grief and with what rituals did they conduct their mourning?

Authors Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker raise and try to answer these questions and more. Originally written in French by French scholars it focuses on the French experience, but not the exclusion of other belligerents. The writing flows so well that I would not have known that it was a translation had I not been told. I did pick up a few facts of interest. Australia was the only significant belligerent not to adopt conscription, most armies were dominated by peasants and War Memorials listing the dead and tombs of the unknown arose in the wake of the Great War. At times I concluded that the American Civil War anticipated the course of the World War I and its aftermath. A fairly balanced study of the Armenian Massacre is presented as the Turks sought to remove civilians potentially sympathetic to the Ottoman Empire's Russian enemies. At the end of this work I felt that I was aware of some currents flowing below the surface of battle and politics that so often dominate other tomes. Understanding will take more reflection and more reading. It is a good read early in the Centennial as it will help readers appreciate some of the thoughts they will encounter in future histories. For that it is worth picking up.

I did receive a free copy of this book with the hope, but not the requirement, of a review.

Nicole says

"14-18" is complicated, anthropological, and wholly interesting in its examinations of the societal impact of the Great War. They answer questions of greatness, of intimacy, of mourning, of religion, and of the body. Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker make their presentations seem simple and logical, but they have flawlessly consolidated volumes and decades of research and insight into something fresh and unique. This book is sure to completely change one's perspective on the war that really threw the world we know today into motion.

Todd says

This was more of a case study on WWI than a true history. However, still definitely worth the read as it was clearly influential; most books on the Great War that came before (written 2000) as these authors were willing to record the tales of atrocities and what the war actually meant to the belligerents. We now see it as a horrific bloodshed, pointless in the fact that it was about nationalistic patriotic and religious fervor, but on all sides, in most cases even the same faith. Assuming this was the War to End All Wars, there were seemingly infinite state sponsored memorials once the ordeal was over, but no real answers for why the slaughter needed to happen; only a single nation, Germany, was declared responsible in any way for anyone's

hardships. This is a true eye opener as the authors make the argument: why didn't journalists and citizens get to ask the right questions in so-called free societies, such as what is this whole conflict even about? Why can't we negotiate a peace sooner? Why aren't we honest about this war and expected to be zealots when it comes to our own nation? Nationalism is in itself a tragedy as we would find out a mere 20 years after the battles that were supposed to be the last war in history. A dark tale, but it needed to be said.

BurntOrangeOwl says

I'm enjoying this brief book immensely. It doesn't attempt to summarize the events of the war, but to examine how we might think anew -- or teach anew -- about this event, now a century past. It's really a series of essays or lectures by two very smart and sensitive people who know the facts, but believe more is necessary for a better understanding. How, for example, are we to think about the extraordinary violence of the war? A product of technology? propaganda? "race" hatred? barbarism? They argue that it's necessary to confront the morbid, ghoulish facts and material evidence in order to really understand the horror, and discuss how and why different nations and generations have given the violence a different spin over the years. All very fascinating. There are more ideas per page here than in most WWI books you'll find.(less)

Frédéric says

A must read for the Great War historian!
I've read this book, and quote it many times while I was in the university.
It gives such an approach!

Nicholas says

Goodreads win. Will read and review once received.

THis was an okay read. It was a little hard to get through because of the writing style. Not something I am really into and the book didn't help out any. I will admit at times the book got my attention. One thing I did enjoy about the book is how well the author knew the facts.
