



The First World War

John Keegan

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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

The First World War Details

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From Reader Review The First World War for online ebook

Jerome says

A thorough, readable and well-researched history of the First World War. Keegan fully captures the sweep of this conflict, covering all the important topics in enough detail. His coverage of the July Crisis is good, though he admits that it's basically just a summary of previous works on that particular subject. He thoroughly covers all of the theaters of the war in a smooth chronological fashion. Keegan's analysis of military strategy and tactics is great, and he tells it all in a manner that anybody can understand. He shows how the advent of new technology affected the way the war was fought, and how it transformed the conflict into a murderous stalemate. He describes how commanders were unable to adapt tactics to the new technology that existed. He does not, however, describe the development of this technology in much detail. Unlike other histories, Keegan also devotes a good amount of space to the more obscure "side-show" theaters like Africa, Asia, the Caucasus, and the 1918 North Russia intervention.

Keegan's treatment of the the various commanders, notably Douglas Haig, is mostly favorable. In their own time, all of the Allied generals were seen as great men, but following the war, which exposed the horrors of modern warfare to the world, they were widely seen as foolish, uncaring, and unfeeling to the miseries endured by the common soldier. Since enlisted men tended to dominate the new literature of war memoirs, novels, and poetry, this image has become a lasting one. The generals' upper-class background, impassive photographic expressions, and habit of living in relatively luxurious conditions as their own men lived in ones much worse make the generals unsympathetic to modern readers familiar with the horrors of modern war. But as Keegan points out, these things can be misleading, since many of the war's generals often exposed themselves to the same dangers, communications in those days were less than ideal, and the distance of headquarters was necessary due to the vast expanse of the fronts.

Keegan shows how Europe's statesmen viewed the continent as a giant chessboard, but were flummoxed when they found themselves locked in a most ungentlemanly modern war without precedent and without any rules. Keegan does cover the naval war, but not in enough detail to satisfy this particular reader. Still, he does mostly cover all the important and relevant parts of this story. Keegan reveals how Germany lost the war despite the superior quality of its commanders. One disappointment was Keegan's coverage of the end of the war, another the insufficient quantity of maps (which are next to useless anyway). The final, decisive campaigns and even the armistice and the Treaty of Versailles are given disappointingly short shrift; they come off as afterthoughts.

Still, a clear, vivid, and well-written history of the war. Keegan easily describes the experiences of the politicians, generals, and soldiers, how the war began, the war's course, and its end and legacy.

Lizzy says

John Keegan's The First World War couldn't be better as an introduction to the theme. Yes, it was my first book about World War I. I have to confess that I was practically ignorant beforehand.

Only now, two years after reading Keegan's book, I got to write its review. My interest on the theme was revived after I read the excellent The Last Lion 1: Visions of Glory 1874-1932, and since I joined the World War Two Group.

My knowledge was limited to dates and broad circumstances, not the intricacies of the alliances that helped

push for the conflict and set in a motion a destruction machine that was virtually unstoppable and lasted four years killing roughly 20 million people! Its repercussions extended to WWII and the present.

5-stars and highly recommended.

Guy says

A solid effort. Keegan does a pretty good job of covering an immense subject. He proceeds smoothly from the background to the causes to the war years themselves, structuring his narrative for the most part chronologically but diverging when it makes sense (such as in his examination of the naval dimension of the war). If you are looking for a single volume history of the First World War, this would be a good choice.

That said, the book is not perfect. Individual offensives and counter-offensives are at times described in more detail than appropriate for an overview book. The maps are inadequate -- failing to show many of the important places referred to in the text and almost completely lacking in terrain indications (it is frustrating to continually read about how an army was constrained by mountains on one side and water on the other... and not to be able to recognize either on the map). Perhaps most worrying are errors in the statistics quoted... because if you get such simple things wrong as the percentage of Germans of military age who were killed (he says 3.5% when in reality it was closer to 10%), then what else have you gotten wrong? Lastly, the analysis of the aftermath is too short, IMHO.

Nevertheless on balance the book's strengths well outweigh its weaknesses, and, given the crucial importance of the Great War for an understanding of the subsequent events of the 20th Century, I would not hesitate to recommend it.

Penny says

Great book, a wonderful one-volume account of the first world war. After reading "The Guns of August," I needed to read about the rest of the war. Keegan combines depth of knowledge with a facility in writing that keeps the story zipping along. He explains how WWI went from a war of movement to trench warfare on the Western front, and the why the trenches proved to be so very static (if one side attacks and leaves behind their supply lines, etc, they become weaker and more vulnerable, while the side attacked, falling back on prepared positions, gains in strength. You can go on like this for years -- and they did). He is also good at providing compelling anecdotes, such as one about the entry of America in 1917. At one spot on the Western front, the British troops were falling back before the Germans and advised the Americans to retreat. "Retreat?" the Marine commander said. "We just got here." The Marines stayed and won the battle.

Jennifer says

If I had to rate this book on content alone I would give it 5 stars. The thorough research put into this book is impressive. Dates, locations, regiment, and battle information. . . it's all here. I appreciate the level of detail, but I found it difficult to keep engaged because at times a lot of names and dates were being rattled off in quick succession. And it's for that reason I give this book a 3 star rating.

I loved the maps, I learned a lot, and I look forward to learning more about WWI. If you enjoy reading about

military tactics, you'll enjoy this book.

Shawn says

A great, very well written and researched book that gives you a clear and concise overview of world war 1. My understanding of the war was hugely enriched by this book.

'Aussie Rick' says

Once again John Keegan has produced another well written and researched book to add to his growing number of titles. This is an excellent one volume account of the Great War which the novice or experienced reader will enjoy. I found the first few chapters a bit dry but once the author moved into the sections covering the fighting the book moved along smartly.

The author covers all theatres of the war and covered those naval and aviation aspects that had bearing on the war as a whole. There were a number of excellent general maps and numerous black & white photographs to assist the reader to follow the narrative.

Overall a great book to read and well worth the time to sit down and enjoy.

Thomas says

The book focuses on the military history of the Great War. The author only explains the political and personal environment at the beginning and end of the time period. It's a good overview for its length, but is heavily centered around tactics and strategies.

Warwick says

Keegan's history of the First World War opens, unexpectedly, by talking about Adolf Hitler, and what I liked about this book was the way it presented 1914–18 as just the opening convulsions in a longer twentieth-century cataclysm to which it remains intimately connected.

A child's shoe in the Polish dust, a scrap of rusting barbed wire, a residue of pulverized bone near the spot where the gas chambers worked, these are as much relics of the First as of the Second World War.

This is the kind of ruminative, slightly vague history writing that I really enjoy. Unfortunately there is rather little of it in the rest of the book, which too often becomes fixated on unnecessary military detail:

By 5 September the Sixth Army consisted, besides Sordet's Cavalry Corps and the 45th (Algerian) Division, of the VII Corps, brought from Alsace, and the 55th and 56th Reserve Divisions from Lorraine; the IV Corps was en route from Fourth Army. The Ninth Army, originally constituted as the Foch Detachment, comprised the IX and XI Corps transferred from Fourth Army, together with the 52nd and 60th Reserve Divisions and 9th Cavalry Division, the 42nd from Third Army and the 18th Division from Third Army.

...So?

Although Keegan does try to balance strategic explanations of the war with journals and other first-hand accounts, there is not nearly enough – for my tastes anyway – about the conditions soldiers served in, what they talked about, how they lived, what kind of social effects obtained in these countries during the war, how women and families coped while all the men in Europe were off shooting each other. It is quite a narrowly military approach.

There are also moments where you sense Keegan's own biases behind the facts; he seems a little too willing to get excited about the heroic Brits and it made me cautious of accepting some of his conclusions ('Jutland was not a German victory'). Lazy comments about the 'naturally warlike' Serbs also eroded confidence.

Still, as a one-volume summary of things it does provide a pretty useful overview and it did help me contextualise the other reading I've done this year. The way the failure of the Schlieffen Plan created the trench lines of the Western Front, which barely moved in four years, is explained well. There is a decent look at the Eastern and Italian Fronts, as well as a lightning summary of Africa, although the situation in Turkey and the Middle East still feels a little underdeveloped. I think he was quite strong on the dovetailing of the First World War into civil war in Russia as well.

Keegan tries to be fair-minded to the generals, pointing out that contemporary strategy gave them very limited options. Douglas Haig still comes across as a borderline psychopath though, devoted to fundamentalist religious belief and utterly unmoved by human suffering, who 'compensated for his aloofness with nothing whatsoever of the human touch'.

In no way – appearances, attitude, spoken pronouncement, written legacy – do [the generals] commend themselves to modern opinion or emotion. The impassive expressions that stare back at us from contemporary photographs do not speak of consciences or feelings troubled by the slaughter over which these men presided, nor do the circumstances in which they chose to live: the distant chateau, the well-polished entourage, the glittering motor cars, the cavalry escorts, the regular routine, the heavy dinners, the uninterrupted hours of sleep.

Again, when Keegan pulls back a little and reflects in this way, he is very good. He doesn't do it very often though. But despite the very military focus, most chapters here, and many single paragraphs, leave you wanting more and the bibliography has some good ideas for further exploration. For a broad account like this, that is crucial.

Kurt Reichenbaugh says

It's taken me a couple of months to read this book. I've had it for several years now, and it has been challenging me to read it. My first attempt failed when I became confused as to which line was where, which front was retreating, which advancing, and I was just plain lost without a map. My second attempt, just a few months ago, was much more successful as I allowed myself to take it slowly, and absorb the detail that Keegan provided. I'm pretty much a typical American in that my sense of geography is pretty bad, but Keegan did a thorough job of taking the reader through the war plans, successes and failures and the horrible losses suffered by so many. Recommended.

Mark Mortensen says

The book offers a good general overview of the Great War with much detail of the buildups and numerous engagements on the opposing sides. However, discussion of events in 1918, the final year of the war, was presented with much less depth than prior years. There was really no mention of accounts on the final day of the war, November 11, 1918 Armistice Day, a day so historical that author Joseph Persico wrote an entire book about it.

Keegan does tend to concentrate a bit more on the British Expeditionary Forces, but they were certainly in the thick of much of the fighting. I do take exception to his comment regarding the American Expeditionary Forces "*It is immaterial whether the doughboys fought well or not. Though the professional opinion of the French and British officers that they were enthusiastic rather than efficient was correct...*" is well off the mark. The German opposition opinion of the AEF ought to carry the most weight. The German's were within a three day march of taking Paris and in no mood for retreat until they came in contact with Pershing's AEF. It did not take long for the German Forces to fear the well trained AEF divisions including the 1st Division known as the "Big Red One" and particularly the elite 2nd Division led by General John A. Lejeune USMC towards the end of the war that was comprised of a brigade of Marines. The Marines were so tenacious moving forward that the German's called them "Devil Dogs". Not only were they fearless, but classified as Marksman, Sharpshooter and Expert, they were the most proficient individuals at firing a rifle killing German's at up to 800 yards away. These talents and skills of the AEF members were further recorded during the Occupation of Germany events with the Pershing Games.

It is not an easy task to compile the First World War into one binding and this book chronicles an important piece of history.

Jonny Ruddock says

An engagingly written top-down history of the First World War, crammed (somewhat incredibly) into slightly less than 460 pages of text. Very definitely of the grand strategy position, but it does give a good sense of the movement of the armies and their activities, providing scope for further reading and shining a light into some of the less well known aspects of the war, such as the Serbian front, the African campaigns

and the German "activities" in Belgium (not quite the propaganda excuse for British intervention I'd been led to believe in my youth). It's a nice overview of the war, leaving out little and providing enough food for thought for a lot of further reading.

Stephen Case says

There are not many books out there about the First World War, and there are even fewer good one-volume popularizations. This might be because the Great War lacks the pathos and the apparent aspects of heroism of its sequel European tragedy. There are no big names that stand out, neither are there many spectacular and critical battles. Nor are there retrospectively clear "good guys" and "bad guys". The whole thing has the feeling of a mistake, a muddy, avoidable, immense waste of life in which millions of men were sacrificed along fronts that hardly budged, a pointless conflict which saw the dismemberment of three empires: the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian.

I've mentioned before that the Great War seemed to be prowling in the background of several books I had read recently: *The Remains of the Day*, Wittgenstein's biography, and *Logicomix*. The truth was that I had plenty of general knowledge about the War but very little specific information. It knew it as an event that set the groundwork for the Second World War, but the actual waging of the war, its antecedents and its outcomes, were pretty vague in my mind. If that's the case for you as well, Keegan's book is the antidote.

Keegan's *The Great War* is a straightforward narrative of the conflict, beginning with a brief cultural and political survey of Europe at the outbreak of war and ending with an explanation of how the outcome and terms imposed on Germany as well as the way national boundaries were re-drawn in its wake from the ruins of empires set the stage for the Second World War, which Keegan understands as a natural progression of the First. Both these topics-- the causes and the results of the war-- merit books of their own (which have likely been written), but they show the comprehensive ease that Keegan brings to his topic: treating cultural, political, economic, and technological aspects with enough depth as to be meaningful but never moving beyond the scope of a single-volume treatment.

Between these two chronological bookends, the narrative is that of the progress of the Great War itself, as divided and shifting as the scope of the conflict itself. Most chapters deal with progress (or lack thereof) on the Western Front and the details of the trench warfare involved. Keegan puts in a bit of biography, so that the many commanders involved become at least a bit multidimensional, as well as frequent quotes from letters and accounts of troops on the front. This is one of his great accomplishments of the work: humanizing those who fought, on both sides.

The work is slightly Eurocentric because those are the conflicts for which we have the most detailed sources and accounts, and Keegan draws on them to paint each pointless back and forth with specific details. He is careful to show, however, that the conflict was indeed worldwide. There is plenty of discussion of what was happening on the Eastern front as well, including the ultimate collapse of the Russian armies, and around the world. For example, the conflict in the Middle East, the assault on Germany's African colonial holdings, and the naval battles of the North Sea are all chronicled. One of the interesting points that Keegan makes and that shapes subsequent narratives of the war is the contrast between the education and background of soldiers on the Eastern versus the Western front: the Eastern front soldiers were often illiterate peasants, so besides a very few surviving accounts such as those by Wittgenstein, our knowledge of the conflicts in the East is much more tenuous, exacerbated by the fact that the antagonists in those regions-- Russia and the Hapsburg Empire-- disintegrated by the war's end. The conflict there did not "set" in the cultural and literary imagination like the war in the West.

There is history of technology in this treatment as well, though not in detail and not in abundance (which is just about right for a general treatment). Specifically, Keegan discusses the construction of the dreadnought class of warship and their role in the conflict, as well as the coming of tanks used alongside infantry. In his discussion of tactics on the battlefield, he highlights the dawning strategy of armies being considered moveable fortresses and the difficulty in the essential coordination of artillery assault with ground attack. Artillery and massed armies-- these were the primary format of the conflict.

The entire treatment is accessible, and the narrative momentum does not bog even when the conflict itself does. Keegan captures both the drama and tragedy of the entire war without simplifying or villainizing either side. Indeed, it is the courtesy and camaraderie often showed across lines even in the face of unmitigated slaughter that seems to strike Keegan most about life in the trenches. Empires died in the Great War, and millions of soldiers, for no clear reason. Yet to treat the whole thing as senseless mistake and therefore ignore it would also be a tragedy. Keegan accomplishes the very difficult by telling the story of the Great War without glorifying or dismissing it.

Mary says

A friend reminded me that this year was the 100th Anniversary of the beginning of WWI and suggested I do some reading about The Great War.

So I started with this overview. For those of you who did as well as I did in Geography, I would suggest that you print out a map of Europe. It really helped in understand what Keegan was describing in terms of troop movements, battles, and war plans.

I was staggered by numbers. Large numbers like 300,000 and 700,000 dead, wounded, prisoners, needed to replace the dead, wounded, and prisoners. I knew that WWI involved trench warfare with both sides fighting to control 5 football fields of land. I remembered reading before about the gas used (tear gas, chlorine, mustard).

What came as a shock was the attitude that life was cheap. A commitment to offensives where the commander knew there would be a substantial loss of his men. At the end of the book, I had the sense that WWI would never have ended if Germany could have conscripted the Chinese to fill their withered ranks. If Americans had not joined the Allies, the result could have been much different.

I learned how important tanks were. The Germans did not invest much time, ingenuity, or resources to develop tanks. But the British and French did. The better built British Mark IV and Mark V really helped the Allies in some of the battles.

Communication. At the beginning of the book, I got a sense that perhaps this war could have been prevented if the major players (Germans, Austrians, Serbs, French, British, and Russian) could have just gotten on a conference call and worked something out. But communications in 1914 were not at all what we have today. When the Tsar is on his yacht in the Black Sea, it is very difficult to converse with him. Also Battlefield communications were mostly nil. Radio batteries were so big it took several men to carry a radio. Telephone lines cut, blown, up or broken. Hours to get orders from commanders to troops. The artillery firing by guesswork.

At the end of the book, Keegan discusses the large numbers of soldiers who were killed but whose bodies were never found. He describes the burial grounds built in the style of the Allies to remember their dead. He uses two moving quotes from Kipling. He describes the contrast on the German side. He describes their

anger at the sanctions imposed upon Germany by the Treaty of Versailles.

Finally, having seen Lawrence of Arabia, I thought there would be a large section in the book on his work with the Arab tribes. He gets a one page mention near the end. The book does spend quite a few pages on the disaster of Gallipoli. It made me glad I had never seen the film.

I am not sure where my WWI reading will take me next. Probably, I will read more about the beginning of the war.

Jill Hutchinson says

Only a historian as talented as Keegan could tell the whole story of WWI in 400+ pages....an amazing feat. But he does it with style and readability, even though the first several chapters are dry as dust! He hits his stride with the latter part of 1915 and holds the reader's interest from that point forward. Anyone who reads the history of the Great War is horrified by the unbelievable and unnecessary slaughter of a generation of British, French, and German young men who marched upright into a barrage of machine gun fire time and time again.....and all for a few yards of ground that would be lost the next day. For what?.....that is the question that haunts the reader throughout the book and has puzzled historians for decades. The author attempts to solve that puzzle but even he admits that there is no "correct" answer. He agrees that WWII was just an extension of the Great War due to the fact that Germany felt that their military was never beaten and that they were sold out by the politicians. This is a must read for the WWI buff and highly recommended.

4triplezed says

Author John Keegan gives the impression late in this very good book that he held the Kaiser partially responsible for the Great War as he embarked on a pointless attempt to match Britain's maritime strength that "...in all possibility, might have been the (cause of the) neurotic climate of suspicion and insecurity from which the First World War was born." Based on this book being very much written from a British point of view it is easy to understand why Keegan is of this opinion. In the end though I have still no idea and will read further into this subject in the coming years.

As to the book it strangely gave depictions of battles in that the author's coverage was written with a sense of tedium. Thousands died in pointless campaigns that all seemed the same from east to west to north to south. Events such as the African theatre and Gallipoli were so rare as to be almost startlingly different. Keegan says as much, one point calling "The chronicles of its battles.." the "... dreariest literature in military history"

If I can think of one thing that this book lacked was coverage of US involvement. Late as it was the fresh troops made a considerable difference to the final outcome I would suggest. But with that there is not much new I can add to an already saturated subject other than say that this is a very good one volume history and is to be recommended to anyone looking for an Anglocentric point of view.

Matt says

As I've often proclaimed my deep and abiding love of history, it is somewhat difficult for me to admit that my knowledge of the great upheaval of World War I is about the size of a teacup pig. Now, before I get any further into the terrors of trench warfare, machine guns, and unrestricted submarine warfare, let's take a moment to reflect on teacup pigs: (soundtrack provided by the Beach Boys)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2FUsP...>

Back to the horrors of the Great War.

Any student of anything knows that you have to start with the basics. When learning about historical events, the fundamental building block is a "one volume history" by a "popular historian." In other words, it's a book that's not too long, written by someone for whom language itself is not a second language.

For the purposes of World War I, my choice of John Keegan's *The First World War* was a no-brainer. Keegan is a prolific and well respected author, highly-educated and learned yet fairly accessible. His take on World War I is moderately recent (published in 1998) and, at just over 400 pages, is relatively short, especially for such an expansive subject.

As might well be expected for a book titled *The First World War*, Keegan's history spans from the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (the heir to the Hapsburg dynasty, not the Scottish post-punk revival band) to the Armistice of 1918.

Of course, with any one-volume history of a titanic event, there are bound to be tradeoffs. What to leave in, what to leave out. Where to go into detail, and where to skim. Because of the shortness of Keegan's work, there are more tradeoffs here than most. Many aspects of the Great War are dealt with at the epidermal layer.

The most depth and insight comes right at the beginning, in Keegan's retelling of how the war began. This also happens to be the best part of the book. Anyone with even a passing familiarity with World War I knows that its origins are as complicated as *Inception* and as mysterious as Justin Bieber's fame.

In school, you probably learned – as I did – about the infamous "entangling alliances," which constituted a half dozen or more treaties, each with a dead man's switch that tripped. Following the Archduke's assassination in Sarajevo, Bosnia, then an outpost of the Austria-Hungarian Empire. The A-H's blamed Serbia, and threatened to attack; Russia threatened to join the war to help Serbia; Germany threatened to join the war to support A-H; France then threatened to join the war in support of Russia; and Germany decided to attack France, through Belgium, which brought Great Britain in on the fun.

If this all sounds desperately suicidal, well, it was (with good reason did JFK turn to Tuchman's *The Guns of August* during the Cuban Missile Crisis). However, Keegan does a good explaining the logic – if that's the right word – behind Europe's decision to hand the 20th century to the United States (thanks, by the way, we sure enjoyed a good run; and best of luck to China).

In Keegan's telling, the magic word is "mobilization." Back in the good old days (of monarchies and mustard gas), it took armies a great deal of time to gather, equip, and set out for war. The speed of this mobilization was determined, mainly, by railroad timetables: how many carloads of men, equipment, and so forth, could be moved in an hour, a day, a week. The French even had an algorithm for how much territory they'd lose during each day of delay in mobilization. (And this is why we should not trust math).

The net of interlocking and opposed understandings and mutual assistance treaties...is

commonly held to have been the mechanism which brought the “Allies”...into conflict in 1914 with the “Central Powers”...Legalistically that cannot be denied. It was no treaty, however, that caused Austria to go running to Berlin for guidance and support in the aftermath of the Sarajevo assassination – no treaty in any case applied – but anticipation of the military consequences that might ensue should she act alone...[I]t was the calculation of a presumed military response, of how it was guessed one military precaution would follow from another, that drove Austria to seek comfort in the Triple Alliance from the outset, not the triple Alliance that set military events in train.

The most important “military precaution” was the German’s so-called Schlieffen Plan. It was predicated on the German belief that they could not hope to fight and win a war against both France and Russia at the same time. Thus, at the outset of any war, the Germans planned a lightning strike into France, hoping to topple her within 40 days or so, and then turn their attention to the East. In order for this plan to work, and to avoid France’s string of frontier forts, the German Army would have to cross through neutral Belgium.

The Schlieffen Plan very nearly worked; however, it was stopped short of its goal following the horrendously complicated (and violent) battle of the Marne. By the time Keegan gets finished telling the woeful story of the Marne, and the battles of the Frontier that preceded it, he is tapped out on battlefield detail. From this point on, his telling becomes more cursory, and *The First World War* begins to feel like more of a survey. As Keegan starts to skip from event to event, the acute judgments and thought-out analyses of the first few chapters lessen.

World War I is as complex on its battlefields as it is in its politics. The masses of men and horses involved really boggle the mind. It’s like the Pelennor Fields in *Return of the Kings*, except the scale is even bigger and Legolas is covered in lice and choking on chlorine gas. The movement of troops on this scale are exceedingly difficult to follow. When Keegan starts to name the army groups – Army X, Corps IXV, etc. – the page starts to look like the copyright to a movie. And when he starts to explain where those various armies are going, it turns out they’re going to places you haven’t heard of, and which might not exist anymore.

The problem, I think, is that at certain parts of his book (the Marne especially), Keegan couldn’t decide whether to go all-in on his descriptions, or whether to keep it simple. The result is a cursory description of the order of battle, without any context whatsoever. Too often, the words on the page had no real meaning. For instance, at one point, Keegan writes:

Army IX, consisting of Corps VI and Corps III, made up of Divisions XI, XV, and XXV, marched twenty kilometers toward the village of Ferret Tongue, crossed the Smelly Frenchman Creek, and launched an attack *en echelon* against the IVth Corps of the German Army, located in the province of Waffle (somewhere in present-day Belgium).

Okay, I made that all up. The point remains, however.

And there needs to be maps! Many maps. There should be a law about this. In books about World War I, there should almost be maps everywhere. Here, there are 17 maps, ranging from relatively helpful (a conceptualization of the Schlieffen Plan) to absolutely needless (a map of the battle of Jutland, which shows the North Sea and has an X where the battle of Jutland took place). This isn’t nearly enough to help me figure anything out. Besides, the maps were apparently made in color, and then put into black & white. Have

fun figuring out which shade of black represents the British Expeditionary Force!

Throughout the book, I felt like Keegan was losing steam, or maybe I was losing interest. Certain theaters of the war, especially the battles in Africa, are relayed so half-heartedly, that I wondered why they were included at all. The great climax of the war – the last German offensive and the entry of America – becomes an anticlimax in Keegan’s hands. Despite offhandedly mentioning the tipping power of America’s entry onto the Allies’ side, the contribution of the Yanks is given extremely short shrift.

My main problem with *The First World War* is in its textual presentation. Despite being a short book, it felt like a long read. This is due to Keegan’s style, which can best be described as dense (also, thorny, or tangled). His sentences are often long, studded with commas, set off with dashes, and packed with so much information that the sentence’s point is lost. To wit:

The French could not delay German reinforcements more than four weeks – the Schlieffen Plan, to the details of which Austria was not privy, reckoned six weeks – so that it was perfectly safe, as well as essential, for Austria to attack Russia in Poland; and, even if Austria found itself committed to a Serbian war, it would not be let down by Germany; as to Serbia, the problem “will solve itself for Austria as a matter of course.”

Diagram that!

Too often, a Keegan sentence would fail the Twice-Over Rule. This rule, which I just made up, states that if I have to read a sentence twice-over too often, I will soon start skimming the pages. If, after skimming for some time, I realize I can’t recall anything that happened in the last twenty pages, I will throw the book out the window and play video games. Keegan also has the annoying habit of proving how smart he is. We get it, John! You know about every battle that was ever fought. You don’t need to compare everything in World War I to Agincourt, Waterloo, or Antietam.

Another thing I disliked about *The First World War* was its lack of intimacy. World War I gave us some of the most beautiful and personal accounts of any war in history, yet Keegan is apparently unmoved. There is a disheartening paucity of grunt-level recollections, which might have added some life to the narrative. Instead, for the most part, we are left with Keegan’s dry, stuffy, Oxbridge-ian sentences.

This remove, I posit, is intentional on Keegan’s part. I don’t know anything about the guy, aside from his Wikipedia page, but his writing reeks of the aristocracy. Throughout these pages, he takes little to no time to develop any characters or to connect various names to anything resembling a human person. What little time he does spend, though, is in the company of the generals, the “great men,” such as French, and Joffre, and Haig.

There is even a section – proportionately long, too – in which Keegan vigorously defends these men. He takes umbrage at the brilliant German tactician Max Hoffman’s conception of the British army as “lions led by donkeys.” Not true, Keegan insists. And in support of this argument, he lists the difficulties inherent in command, and makes increasingly facile and strident comparisons to the Napoleonic Wars and the American Civil War.

Not only does Keegan’s argument miss the point – of human suffering beyond imagination – but it’s wrong. His own book proves this point. Time and again, generals on all sides – but especially Haig at the Somme – failed to achieve breakthroughs because of a lack of preparation, foresight, and nimbleness. Moreover, Keegan’s heroes – Haig and Joffre – are pretty awful men, or at least unfeeling. Joffre never let the war

disturb his sleep or cause him to miss a meal. And Haig made petulant diary entries in which he blamed his men for not trying hard enough. This doesn't exactly make them the second comings of the Duke of Wellington. Certainly, all these generals did the best they could; just as certain, they aren't worth Keegan tearing the elbow patches off his tweed jacket in a full-throated defense.

Now, I'm just grumbling. I'm apt to do that, sometimes, when a book annoys me. And truly, this book annoyed me; however, it also proved to be an astute primer on one of history's bloodiest fulcrums. Whatever else you can say about him, John Keegan is a brand you can (mostly) trust. If you've got to start somewhere, it might as well be here.

Ed says

I am not a big fan of military histories. They tend to be much too detailed for my taste. They require a familiarity with the geography they cover and often do not provide good maps of the area being written about. They often do not provide the author's opinion of the events being covered.

This book meets none of the above criteria. While it is detailed, nevertheless the details are usually necessary to understand the nature of the battle being described. The details also help the reader understand, fully, the horrors this conflict visited upon the average soldier.

The geography covered in this account is immense. It was after all a World War. However, the maps provided managed to keep me connected to the events I was reading about.

Keegan interjects his opinion whenever he thinks it's called for. Usually at an appropriate point in the narrative. He also ends the book with a well stated soliloquy that does a good job of summarizing why this war was unnecessary, why WW II was just an extension of WW I and shares his perplexity with why these nations went war in the first place while also questioning the concept of "National Pride" by equating it with "National Arrogance".

I think for the first time in my life, I have a picture of the entire War as well as its major battles and its geopolitical underpinnings.

Keegan is a renowned Author and after reading this book, I understand why.

Riku Sayuj says

An agricultural labourer, who has

A wife and four children, receives 20s a week.

3/4 buys food, and the members of the family

Have three meals a day.

How much is that per person per meal?

. . . The table printed below gives the number

Of paupers in the United Kingdom, and

The total cost of poor relief.

Find the average number

Of paupers per ten thousand people.

...Out of an army of 28,000 men,

15% were

Killed, 25% were

Wounded. Calculate

How many men were there left to fight?

~ From Pitman's Common Sense Arithmetic, 1917

THE TEMPTATIONS OF HISTORY

What are some of the toughest temptations for the historian to resist?

1. Looking for Concrete Causes
2. Looking for Dramatic Turning-points
3. Looking for Direct Consequences

Keegan's history is dry and that is precisely why it is so good.

Keegan tries hard to fall into these traps. He knows that he cannot afford to keep his history dry. He knows that these traps are exactly the ones which can juice it up. But luckily, he does not (or could not) juice it up.

Keegan's strength is his military analysis and command of the tactical decisions that punctuated the war the war. He tries to dress up the book beyond this by talking about *'the mystery of why a continent at the high of its powers went to war'* & *'the Second world war was a continuation of the First'* & *'the race for naval*

supremacy perhaps started the process' occasionally, but except for lip service at the beginning and the end of the book, these are left as mysteries.

Looking for Concrete Causes

Keegan does not easily take sides. He does not show one side as good and one side as bad. There is No Demonizing involved. He does not blame any one country for precipitating the war (well, at least not in his actual account - as you will see, I discount certain parts of the book). He does not even condemn specific war practices or instances (except book burning — he does hate the Germans in those few pages. Well who wouldn't? Book burning is just BAD), instead he shows us how desperate all sides were and how willing to push any sort of limits to escape from this war that had become a hell beyond what they could have imagined.

Keegan's war is not a grand *Good vs Evil*, or a *Defense of Democracy/Civilization*, or whatever else.

It is a bunch of misguided leaders bringing destruction upon millions. At the same time, the leaders are not crucified either.

In the end, Keegan maintains a very balanced approach that never tries to apportion blame for causing the war.

Instead he leaves it as a Mystery #1. Good.

Looking for Dramatic Turning-points

A good story teller cannot lack for 'turning points' in war, as evidenced by many titles that talks of the battle that changed the war (insert Somme, Marne, etc. here).

But the most common temptation is to cite the **American entry as turning point**. And conversely to show the U-boat mishap as the big-stupid-decision. But was it really?

Without Germany's precipitous surrender and without Austria and Ottoman's ethnic dissolution that followed this, it might not have mattered as much. I am not denying that it did not affect the mood of the army, but Keegan's account shows clearly that it is not just the Army's mood that matters. The atmosphere back home matters as much.

The long British blockade of trade into Germany, which forced them to resort to U-Boats again which in turn brought Americans to turn the screw even more... You see where we are going? The 'turning point' was a screw that was truing and tightening all along.

Technology: Keegan does slip a bit at times and tries to show the influence of communication technology (esp radio) and military technology (esp tanks) but again, hedges it by showing us how contingent that too is. The British were ahead of the Germans in tank-tech, but it was purely fortuitous. Neither were using radio tech on the ground. Again, this was not rally a technological limitation. Consider how within two years radio was everywhere, so were tanks.

This teaches us an important lesson: Modern wars are not about strategy, technology or leadership anymore.

It is about how long a country manages to keep its people in illusion. The longer they can, the better their shot at winning.

This leads us to another trope to push: to say that ‘**Democracy was the secret weapon.**’

After all, if popular sentiment was so crucial and if the non-democracies were the ones who couldn’t handle a long war, that is the logical conclusion? We can take for example the Russian revolution, the German civil unrest and the Austrian ethnic strife - samples from both Allied and Central forces - what unites them? Lack of Democracy! Bingo.

But we do this only by conveniently ignoring that it could easily have been France that fell prey to civil unrest, or Italy. Or even Britain for that matter. They did all revolt at some point after all — both their armies and their peoples. So it couldn’t have been democracy alone then?

The overall sense Keegan’s narrative conveys is one of a **Precarious Balance of Power** discovered by powers who thought war all too easy, perhaps deluded by the easy victories they were accustomed to in their colonial possessions.

None of the countries involved were prepared for a long war (or even for a short one). And accordingly, hardly any army had made real progress in 4 years. The war was conducted mostly in stalemate. Where progress was made it (what little of it) was more due to one army folding up from exhaustion, moral or material.

These tended to be reversed almost immediately. Any ‘turning points’ were just the winds of war, of morale - just as in The Iliad when war seems to turn at the urging of the gods giving morale to the men. What seemed decisive at the moment soon turned out to be just another exercise in stalemate. Nothing on the field seemed to decide how this stalemate could be broken. The really major shifts in fortune were usually due to events far from the battle-field.

The lack of clear turning points in the narrative means that until the last few pages, the reader can hardly believe that the war was headed towards any specific conclusion. And when it is over, there is a sense of disbelief. After *all that*, it was just over? Just like that?

We can well believe what the world too must have felt... it must have felt *incomplete*.

We can well understand why Hitler found it so hard to believe that it was conclusive and resorted to conspiracy theories soon.

Mystery #2. Good.

Looking for Direct Consequences

That thought, along with the details of the harsh treaty forced on the vanquished, leads us to the final thread Keegan tries to explore in his unfulfilled quest to spring one of the historiographic traps — **The unity of the two wars** & thus the origins of World War II.

Luckily, he does it in what must now be recognized as his standard *modus operandi* — by setting it out in the

introduction, leaving off during the actual narrative and picking it up again in the conclusion. Deft move, eh? After all, if this is his thesis, this too is not supported by the actual account of the war.

Mystery #3. Great!

So why did I feel the book was so great?

In fact, the five stars you see above are a direct consequence of the *modus operandi* I described above. The five stars are for the entire book minus the introduction and the conclusion, which are the only places where Keegan tries to alleviate the dryness of his narrative with juicy historiography. Yes, the dryness gets him full marks.

Jonfaith says

1) One shouldn't read compact one volume surveys of epic events. It is safe to assume that The First World War meets the criteria of epic event. Any single volume will only distort and compact events. This was no exception

2) John Keegan is vastly overrated as a writer and scholar. I think the latter was accidental. People projected authority, with his sober demeanor, who can blame them? Keegan routinely employs clumsy metaphors and speaks of terrifying events in terms of inefficiency. He also resorts to unflattering stereotypes which detract. Keegan uses little primary sources, instead he mines Alistair Horne's book on Verdun and similar secondary texts.

3) Daniel Haig is lambasted as the autistic author of the slaughter at the Somme. Keegan may be guilty of similar callousness though he is constantly reminding the reader of late 20th Century outcomes of nations and regions.

3.1) This is an interesting adaptation of the former. Keegan does point out the Great War activities of WWII leaders and innovators.

This is not a terrible book, nor one of questionable erudition. It is a survey and if one wants the barest of narratives arcs, one could possibly do far worse.
