

The Best Books on the Impact of World War I

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Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*. New York: Random House, 2002.

In January 1919, the leaders of the First World War's victorious powers gathered in Paris. The original purpose of this meeting was to decide on the final terms of the peace treaties to be signed with the vanquished. However, as Margaret MacMillan brilliantly illustrates in this book, the conference was soon became an enormous repository for the hopes, shared all over the globe, that the awful slaughter would be followed by the creation of an entirely new world, organized and run on principles more humane and just than the one that had produced the war. "Votes for women," MacMillan notes, "rights for blacks, a charter for labour, freedom for Ireland,

[and] disarmament" were just a few of the radical results that the "petitioners" who arrived in Paris "from all corners of the world" asked the assembled powers to bring into being. MacMillan is a sure guide through the maze of conflicting pressures and often obscure interests that competed for the attention and sympathy of the assembled dignitaries, and her narrative is enlivened by well-chosen quotes, vivid character sketches, and telling details (such as her wry observation that the Greek delegation—which was soon to press for a vast expansion of Greek territory— reserved a suite of rooms suitable for a delegation several times its actual size). In addition, MacMillan accomplishes the difficult feat of writing about her subjects critically but sympathetically. She observes, for example, that most of the key players at the conference shared in the generally racist world view of the era, and were condescending towards, and dismissive of, the claims and aspirations of non-European peoples. At the same time, she persuasively argues that the conference has unfairly been blamed for all the horrors that followed some twenty years later with the outbreak of the Second World War. MacMillan notes—correctly—that Adolf Hitler initiated that war to create a racial empire based on genocide, not to undo the terms of the peace treaty signed by the Germans in June 1919, which has entered history as the Treaty of Versailles and has become its most enduringly famous result. MacMillan ultimately shows that the statesmen of Paris were faced with the impossible task of sorting through the unprecedented political wreckage of the war and fashioning something new from it. Far from being resolved in 1919, it is a process that continues to this day, not least in the Middle East, with profound consequences for the entire world. Those who wish to understand how and why this came to be should start by reading this book.

James J. Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

While this book is not exclusively about the Great War or its impact, it is still indispensable for an understanding of the broader significance of both. *Where Have all the Soldiers Gone* is a brilliant illumination of the role that war and military institutions have played in the broader sweep of European history. In just over 200 beautifully written pages, Sheehan—Dickason Professor Emeritus in the Humanities, Emeritus, at Stanford University and a past president of the American Historical Association—shows how the rise of powerful militaries in nineteenth century Europe fundamentally altered the nature of states as well as their citizens' relationship with them. He then illustrates how these military institutions wreaked unprecedented destruction on Europe between 1914 and 1945, before arguing that the trauma of these years continues to exercise a profound influence on European politics, culture, and society to the present day. With regard to the First World War, Sheehan first surveys the mood of naive innocence that greeted its outbreak before portraying the shattering effect that resulted from the collision of this innocence with the horrors of mass industrialized killing. He then shows the complicated and varying impact the war had, ranging from new modes of mass commemoration of the dead, to the surge in pacifist movements, to the creation of political movements—such as Russian Bolshevism and German and Italian Fascism—that were products of the war. Both Fascism and Bolshevism, Sheehan shows, not only thrived in within the broader context of collapse, crisis, and instability the war ushered in, but sought to bring the war home by militarizing domestic politics. Sheehan has an unusual knack for making complicated ideas accessible, and his clear, jargon-free writing is enlivened by

well-chosen quotes and devastating details, as when he notes, for example, that a staggering 27,000 French soldiers were killed on August 22, 1914, or that “around 300,000 of France’s 1.3 million war dead [of 1914-1918] could not be identified,” a result of the devastating impact of modern military technology upon the human body. Ultimately, Sheehan’s book is a piercing explanation of why Americans and Europeans today have such different views about the nature and purpose of war, with important effects for European-American relations. If someone were to read just one book on twentieth century European history, I would recommend that this be it.

David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Henry Holt, 1989.

In a 2016 article for *The New Yorker*, journalist Robin Wright noted that the extremist movement known here in the United States as ISIS, glorying in its conquests in Syria and Iraq, announced that its ambition was to “hit the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy.” The movement’s leadership was referring to the agreement made by France and Britain during the First World War to carve up the Ottoman Empire’s Arab territories into spheres of colonial influence. The appearance of Sykes-Picot in the propaganda statements of a modern-day political movement is a powerful reminder of the role that the First World War played in the shaping of the modern Middle East, and consequently, of the bitter reactions against that order. David Fromkin’s *A Peace to End All Peace* is the indispensable guide to how and why this came to pass. Centering his analysis on Great Britain, Fromkin illustrates how European diplomatic and political wrangling during and after the war for influence in the Middle East was largely

responsible for creating the state system which, precariously, exists to this day; the origins of modern-day Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq can all be traced back to the Great War and its political fallout, fallout that the Europeans tried mightily to guide to their advantage. This book is high political history of the sort that has largely fallen out of favor in academic circles, focusing on powerful men, backroom deals and diplomatic sparring at international conferences. It is also exceptionally well done and a reminder of why such history matters, since the decisions made by these men profoundly affected both their world and ours. Those looking to supplement it with a book on how ordinary people in the Middle East experienced the war may want to pair Fromkin with Leila Fawaz' *A Land of Aching Hearts* (Harvard, 2014).

Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

Perhaps one of the greatest popular misconceptions about the First World War is that it ended neatly on November 11, 1918. It's true that the fighting on the western front stopped that day, but as Robert Gerwarth shows in this powerful book, the violence elsewhere not only continued past that date, but in many places actually escalated. The collapse in 1918 of the Russian, Austrian, and Ottoman empires plunged central and southern Europe into a series of wars fought to determine what would replace the collapsed imperial order. The result was an overlapping and often baffling mix of foreign and civil wars in which national hatreds, social resentments, and revolutionary fervor combined in various ways, with devastating results for the millions caught up in it. Gerwarth is a sure and steady guide to this brutal mayhem, disentangling the various interlocking pressures and forces at work without,

however, ever losing sight of the human face of the conflicts. Among the important points Gerwarth makes is that, as the violence of the so-called postwar era spread, killing civilians became a widely accepted practice; and, while no one was safe, the Jews were most vulnerable of all, as they seem to have been suspected and hated by virtually every warring party. In addition, once the post-World War I volatility and instability of the region is understood, it becomes easier to see why contemporaries failed to grasp the significance of what the Nazis embarked on in September 1939, when they attacked Poland and began the Second World War. What we now know to be the first shots in a war of racial annihilation would have appeared as merely the latest eruption of a series of post-1918 border wars that had never really ended. In addition, present-day tensions along Russia's western border, particularly with Ukraine and the Baltic states, cannot be understood outside of the context of the story that Gerwarth tells so well.

Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*. New York: Penguin, 2005.

No list of books on the impact of the First World War would be complete without at least one memoir to humanize and personalize the vast historical forces at work. Several excellent candidates suggest themselves (Robert Graves' *Good-bye to All That* is justly regarded as a classic), but Vera Brittain's is one of the best-known for a reason. Brittain was the daughter of a prosperous, provincial English industrialist who grew up on comfortable surroundings and enrolled at Oxford in 1914. Once war broke out and her male family and friends signed up to fight, Brittain felt that she too should do her part, and so left university to sign up as a military nurse. Her training and service took her to London, Malta, and

France, where she saw firsthand the murderous horror of the war. This alone is suggestive of the profoundly disruptive forces unleashed by the conflict, as a greater distance from her comfortable and sheltered prewar life is hard to imagine. But the war made itself felt in Brittain's life in another, more terrible way: her beloved brother, Edward; her fiancé, Roland Leighton; and her two best friends, Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow, were all killed in the fighting, a horrific reminder of the devastation inflicted on a generation of young men as well as of what all of those deaths meant for loved ones back home. Brittain never really recovered from her

grief, and her book also details her postwar life, when she became a well-known political activist. Brittain campaigned tirelessly for causes that included women's rights and—above all—pacifism. In this, she is emblematic of all those who felt that the appalling sacrifices of the war had to be followed by the creation of a better, more just and peaceful world. Her deeply held pacifism, rooted in intense personal grief and sorrow, is also important for those seeking an answer to why, as storm clouds gathered again in Europe in the 1930s, so many tried desperately to convince themselves that nearly any solution to the continent's ills was preferable to war. A