



Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War

By Max Hastings

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From the acclaimed military historian, a new history of the outbreak of World War I: the dramatic stretch from the breakdown of diplomacy to the battles—the Marne, Ypres, Tannenberg—that marked the frenzied first year before the war bogged down in the trenches.

In *Catastrophe 1914*, Max Hastings gives us a conflict different from the familiar one of barbed wire, mud and futility. He traces the path to war, making clear why Germany and Austria-Hungary were primarily to blame, and describes the gripping first clashes in the West, where the French army marched into action in uniforms of red and blue with flags flying and bands playing. In August, four days after the French suffered 27,000 men dead in a single day, the British fought an extraordinary holding action against oncoming Germans, one of the last of its kind in history. In October, at terrible cost the British held the allied line against massive German assaults in the first battle of Ypres. Hastings also re-creates the lesser-known battles on the Eastern Front, brutal struggles in Serbia, East Prussia and Galicia, where the Germans, Austrians, Russians and Serbs inflicted three million casualties upon one another by Christmas.

As he has done in his celebrated, award-winning works on World War II, Hastings gives us frank assessments of generals and political leaders and masterly analyses of the political currents that led the continent to war. He argues passionately against the contention that the war was not worth the cost, maintaining that Germany's defeat was vital to the freedom of Europe. Throughout we encounter statesmen, generals, peasants, housewives and private soldiers of seven nations in Hastings's accustomed blend of top-down and bottom-up accounts: generals dismounting to lead troops in bayonet charges over 1,500 feet of open ground; farmers who at first decried the requisition of their horses; infantry men engaged in a haggard retreat, sleeping four hours a night in their haste. This is a vivid new portrait of how a continent became embroiled in war and what befell millions of men and women in a conflict that would change everything.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Guest Review of “Catastrophe 1914” by Max Hastings

By Scott Anderson



Author of *Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Scott Anderson is a veteran war correspondent who has reported from Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Northern Ireland, Chechnya, Sudan, Bosnia, El Salvador and many other strife-torn countries. A contributing writer to the *New York Times Magazine*, his work has also appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, *Harper's* and *Outside*. He is also the author of novels *Moonlight Hotel* and *Triage* and of non-fiction books *The Man Who Tried to Save the World* and *The 4 O'Clock Murders*, and co-author of *War Zones* and *Inside The League* with his brother Jon Lee Anderson.

To truly understand the grim march of twentieth century history, one must start with World War I – and to truly understand that horror show, one must look at its cataclysmic first few months. It was during this time that Europe saw sweeping military offensives, great pitched battles, and such staggering body-counts that the powers turned to the stagnation of trench warfare almost as a matter of national survival. This is the period British historian Max Hastings sets out to examine in *Catastrophe*, and the result is nothing short of a masterpiece.

The power of this book operates on several levels. Due to the political and military complexity of World War I – as well as, perhaps, a certain nationalistic chauvinism – most histories of it tend to be decidedly local; a reader might learn a great deal about the battle of the Somme, for instance, but virtually nothing about what was occurring at the same time elsewhere. By deftly moving from one battlefield to the other, Hastings is able to create a mosaic of the carnage visited upon Europe in the opening days of the war, and to show how those fronts were interconnected. Certainly no other general World War I history that I've read gives the

commensurate attention to the slaughters that occurred on the Serbian and Galician battlefronts in 1914 that Hastings provides here.

To accomplish this, he has wisely avoided that tendency so common among military historians - barraging the reader with a blizzard of commanders' names and regimental designations - that can make reading about combat such an ironically-dull task. Instead, by bringing us the voices of the young men from all sides caught in the maws of these battles, we not only get a visceral sense of what it looked and sounded and smelled like, but an appreciation for the commonality of the horror befalling them. Those wanting a tactical, blow-by-blow account of the Russian disasters at Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes, for example, will have to look elsewhere - Hastings dispenses with these twinned battles in a mere dozen pages - but for everyone else, the description of ordinary Russians slowly dawning to the realization that they are doomed is both wrenching and unforgettable.

Perhaps most remarkable, given his focus on the personal and the small, telling detail, Hastings' voice also carries the mantle of authority; very early on, the reader realizes the author has done the heavy spadework of examining the myriad political and military controversies of the period, and come to a studied conclusion. Chief among these is the enduring debate over who was most responsible for starting the war, and in recent years a whole spate of revisionist histories have sought to redirect blame toward Britain or France or - most improbably - Russia. While Hastings is ultimately dismissive of these alternate theories (it really was the Germans' and Austro-Hungarians' fault), he does so decorously and only after entertaining the revisionisms long enough to show their contradictions. Similarly, the battlefield decisions of Sir John French, the first British field marshal of the war, have been argued over for nearly a century now, but it's very hard to see what needs to be added to Hastings' elegant comment that French's conduct, "in the field was little more egregious than that of his counterparts of the other European armies."

In contemplating this project, it surely crossed Hastings' mind that his book would inevitably be judged against another work that covers almost precisely the same time period, Barbara Tuchman's 1962 classic, *The Guns of August*. With *Catastrophe*, that period now has two classics.

From [Booklist](#)

After writing almost exclusively about WWII, eminent historian Hastings (*Inferno*) turns his attention to the outbreak of WWI. Chronicling both the prelude to the war and its initial battles, he concentrates on events occurring between June 28, 1914, when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, and December 31, 1914, when soldiers on both sides of the conflict languished in trenches. Drawing on accounts generated from rarified diplomatic circles, seasoned military leaders, and ordinary citizens helplessly caught up in the international catastrophe, he examines the origins and the onset of the Great War in minute and vivid detail. Hastings, unlike many contemporary historians, refuses to indulge in any retrospective hand-wringing, concluding rather firmly that Germany and Austria must accept principal blame for the war and that it is an analytical and an ethical mistake to believe that it did not matter which side won. This compelling reexamination of the commencement of the conflict represents an important contribution to the scholarship of the "war to end all wars." --Margaret Flanagan

Review

"The political and chattering classes are right to be worried: if any region today could cause a crisis comparable to that of 1914, it is the Middle East. They need a new book on the outbreak of World War I, and now they have it in *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*. [Hastings is] an outstanding historian . . . a victorious foray . . . Tuchman has been supplanted."

—Hew Strachan, *The New York Times*

“[World War I’s] centennial is almost upon us. Among the resulting flood of books, it’ll be hard to find one better than this early entry . . . absorbing and compulsively readable . . . Like an eagle soaring over this vast terrain, Hastings swoops in and out, spying broad features and telling details alike . . . superb.”

—Alan Cate, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Hastings over the past two decades has become the contemporary premier historian of 20th-century war . . . The real strength of this story is how Mr. Hastings portrays the principal characters, not as stereotyped tyrants, greedy empire builders or mindless militarists, but rather as very real human beings with as many flaws as virtues . . . Will the past be prologue? Get this book.”

—James Srodes, *Washington Times*

“Hastings is in top form . . . a lively and opinionated account . . . one that lacks the romanticism that can bedevil military history. There’s nothing sentimental about his version of events. His vivid rendering of the first months of a cataclysm that grows more distant with each passing year makes the book a worthy addition to the canon.”

—Meredith Hindley, *The Christian Science Monitor*

“What makes this book really stand out is Mr. Hastings’ deliberate efforts to puncture what he labels the many myths and legends of the events of 1914 . . . excellent . . . His deep research, insightful analysis, and wonderful prose make this an excellent addition to his long library of titles. This volume is a highly readable account of a war Europe completely misjudged in terms of bloodshed and cost—a war that destroyed three dynasties, remade the map of Europe and set the state for mankind’s bloodiest century.”

—Jerry Lenaburg, *New York Journal of Books*

“Like one of Field Marshal Haig’s family whiskies, Max Hastings is a dram that steadily improves with age . . . his position as Britain’s leading military historian is now unassailable . . . enormously impressive . . . Hastings effortlessly masters the complex lead-up to and opening weeks of the First World War . . . magisterial . . . Hastings soars across frontiers to take in every theatre, describing half-forgotten campaigns on the Drina and Danube rivers with the same verve and élan that he brings to the more familiar clashes at Mons, Le Cateau, the Marne and Ypres . . . But it is the voices of ordinary folk that resonate loudest and longest . . . This is a magnificent and deeply moving book, and with Max Hastings as our guide we are in the hands of a master.”

—Nigel Jones, *The Telegraph* (UK)

“Hastings argues persuasively that the war’s opening phase had a unique character that merits closer study . . . Hastings ends his deft narrative and analysis by observing that the price of German victory would have been European democracy itself. Those who died to prevent that victory—despite the catastrophic decisions of 1914—did not die in vain.”

—William Anthony Hay, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Does the world need another book on that dismal year? Absolutely, if it’s by Hastings . . . splendid . . . Readers accustomed to Hastings’ vivid battle descriptions, incisive anecdotes from all participants, and shrewd, often unsettling opinions will not be disappointed. Among the plethora of brilliant accounts of this period, this is one of the best.”

—*Kirkus*, starred review

“Hastings makes a very complicated story understandable in a way that few serious history books manage. An ideal entry into World War I history.”

—Michael Farrell, *Library Journal*

“[I]nvites consideration as the best in his distinguished career, combining a perceptive analysis of the Great War's beginnings with a vivid account of the period from August to September of the titular year.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A year ahead of the centenary of the Great War comes this howitzer of an offering from Max Hastings, who has skilfully blended new first-hand material from peasants and housewives to generals and emperors into a seamless, vivid and compelling narrative . . . [Hastings's] quest, he tells us, is to answer the question: ‘What happened to Europe in 1914?’ He achieves this with aplomb . . . a seamless, vivid and compelling pan-European narrative . . . Hastings is a master of the pen portrait and the quirky fact . . . [H]is greatness as a historian — never shown to better effect than in this excellent book — lies in his willingness to challenge entrenched opinion and say what needs to be said.”

—Saul David, *London Evening Standard* (UK)

“[C]ompelling . . . Hastings will have no truck with the idea that a chapter of accidents brought about the war, or with any liberal, guilt-ridden guff about equal moral and political responsibility of the warring belligerents . . . [T]old with an equal richness of detail and sure narrative sweep . . . [A] formidably impressive book.”

—David Crane, *The Spectator* (UK)

“Forcefully reasserts the thesis of German guilt in *Catastrophe* . . . magnificent . . . a splendid read.”

—Ben Shephard, *The Guardian* (UK)

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