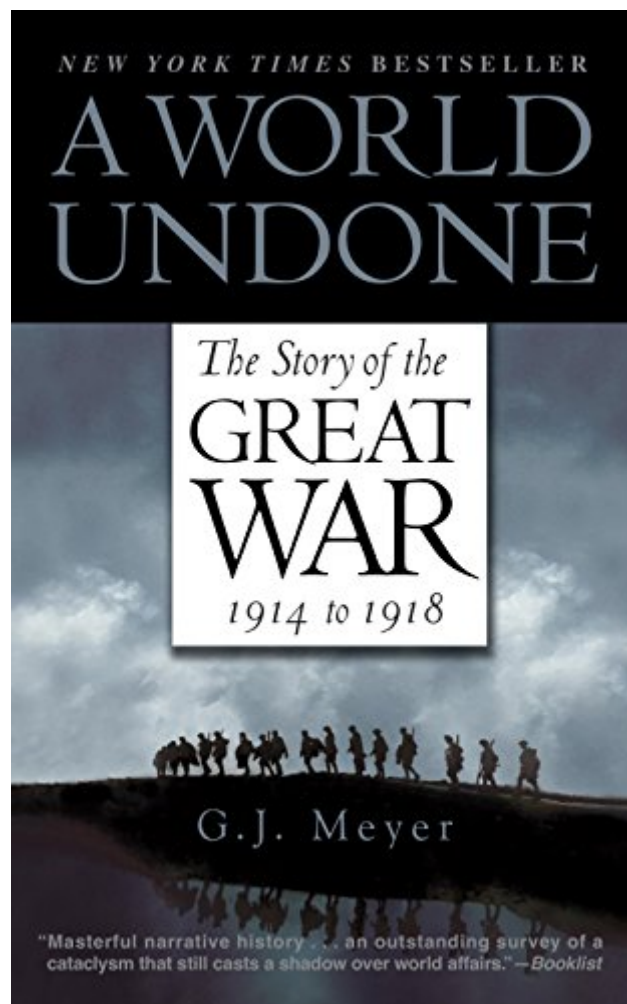


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A World Undone



Synopsis

The First World War is one of history's greatest tragedies. In this remarkable and intimate account, author G. J. Meyer draws on exhaustive research to bring to life the story of how the Great War reduced Europe's mightiest empires to rubble, killed twenty million people, and cracked the foundations of the world we live in today. The First World War is one of history's greatest tragedies. In this remarkable and intimate account, author G. J. Meyer draws on exhaustive research to bring to life the story of how the Great War reduced Europe's mightiest empires to rubble, killed twenty million people, and cracked the foundations of the world we live in today. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

The first chapter of the book "A World Undone: The Story of the Great War, 1914 to 1918" by G.J. Meyer begins with a detailed narrative of that fateful date in Sarejevo when an Austrian archduke and his wife are gunned down by a nineteen year-old Serbian nationalist. I was alarmed when I realized that this entire chapter was strikingly identical to the first chapter of Edmond Taylor's "The Fall of the Dynasties, 1905-1922", which is one of my favorite but an oft-overlooked work of the time

period. Thus, I was not surprised when I turned to Meyer's bibliography and found Taylor's work cited as a source for this chapter. At that point, I was fearful that "A World Undone" was going to be nothing more than a pitiful mashing of previous historical works relating to the time period (similar to Joseph Persico's "Eleventh Hour, Eleventh Day, Eleventh Month.") Despite the frequency of texts throughout Meyer's book with stark similarity to existing literature, "A World Undone" does have several redeeming qualities. The author does provide some analyses that deviate from the status quo, such as depicting Moltke the younger as the executor of an impossibly doomed Schlieffen Plan rather than the meddler who transformed an intrinsic path towards victory into defeat. Meyer also balances the traditional views of the Great War with contemporary accounts that have emerged in the last decade, such as his acknowledgement of the Entente's self-delusion that Germany's casualties were substantially greater than their own, when in fact the opposite was true (as cited by John Mosier's "The Myth of the Great War").

G. W. Meyer takes on an enormous task in this book. He tries to tell not just what happened leading up to and through WWI, but the important historical background to give the events context. He pairs a Background chapter with what we can call each 'Events' chapter. This is an extremely creative way to write about what is already a huge tableau. It provides the unfamiliar reader some context, but is inevitably frustrating to those who have gone deeper. By the structure of the work, Meyer has taken on the task, for example, of summarizing the over 1000 year history of the Hapsburg Empire in ten or fifteen pages. So, over-generalizations and the occasional plain error creep in. For an example, at one point Meyer states that Russia had never been made to compromise with other European states--apparently glossing over their defeats by Napoleon and the entire Crimean War. These grate on the reader who has read more on each of these Background chapters. That being said, in a book for a general audience for whom this is perhaps their first introduction to European history of the period, this is an enormous achievement. Meyer takes a lens from far above what is happening, attempting to show the over-arching reasons why certain things happened. He is more likely to discuss the idea of Ludendorff creating a flexible defense, rather than having troops in a rigid and fixed front line, than he is to talk about what happened at a certain hill or dale. You get the overview--why were the Germans almost successful in 1918 after years of stalemate--rather than they took this town or this fort. When a city is mentioned, he tells you why this place was important.

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