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World War I

A Short History

BY TAMMY M. PROCTOR



WILEY Blackwell

A lively, engaging history of The Great War written for a new generation of readers

In recent years, scholarship on World War I has turned from a fairly narrow focus on military tactics, weaponry, and diplomacy to incorporate considerations of empire, globalism, and social and cultural history. This concise history of the first modern, global war helps to further broaden the focus typically provided in World War I surveys by challenging popular myths and stereotypes to provide a new, engaging account of The Great War.

The conventional World War I narrative that has evolved over the past century is that of an inevitable but useless war, where men were needlessly slaughtered due to poor decisions by hidebound officers. This characterization developed out of a narrow focus on the Western Front promulgated mainly by British historians. In this book, Professor Proctor provides a broader, more multifaceted historical narrative including perspectives from other fronts and spheres of interest and a wider range of participants. She also draws on recent scholarship to consider the gendered aspect of war and the ways in which social class, religion, and cultural factors shaped experiences and memories of the war.

- Structured chronologically to help convey a sense of how the conflict evolved
- Each chapter considers a key interpretive question, encouraging readers to examine the extent to which the war was *total*, *modern*, and *global*
- Challenges outdated stereotypes created through a focus on the Western Front
- Considers the war in light of recent scholarship on empire, global history, gender, and culture
- Explores ways in which the war and the terms of peace shaped the course of the 20th century

World War I: A Short History is sure to become required reading in undergraduate survey courses on WWI, as well as courses in military history, the 20th century world, or the era of the World Wars.

Tammy M. Proctor, PhD is Department Head and Professor of History at Utah State University, Logan. She holds a doctoral degree in history from Rutgers University and has also taught at Wittenberg University. Previous books include *An English Governess in the Great War: The Secret Brussels Diary of Mary Thorp* (2017), *Civilians in a World at War, 1914–1918* (2010), and *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War* (2003).

WILEY SHORT HISTORIES

General Editor: Catherine Epstein

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World War I: A Short History

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Preface



The effects of World War I were far-reaching, from ruined landscapes to ruined lives. This photo depicts part of the battlefield at Verdun, France, nearly a century after the war.
Source: Photo by author, 2004.

One hundred years after the battles that raged in northern France, it is still possible to find copious evidence of World War I on the Western Front. Pieces of munitions, sometimes even unexploded shells, sit on the side of the road awaiting pickup by the army's disposal squad. One can glimpse the scarred shell

holes and remains of trench networks in wooded copses just off the highways and byways of the region, and small tourist signs point to memorials, cemeteries, and places of importance. While the Western Front is perhaps the best-known area of fighting between 1914 and 1918, it is not the only landscape disrupted by war. Stone trenches line the mountains between Italy and Austria, and remains from the war appear in remote areas of eastern Europe and western Asia. Monuments and markers point to places around the world where refugees fled, where enemy aliens were interned, and where wartime disasters unsettled communities. World War I had an impact—not just on physical landscapes and families—but on the social, religious, economic, political, and cultural frameworks of the twentieth-century world. This impact was uneven, and some areas experienced only a whisper of war's reshaping potential, but large numbers of people across the globe saw their worlds turned upside-down.

This short history of World War I cannot tell the whole story of this conflict, which was waged from 1914 to 1918 (officially) and which straddled more than a decade of serious global violence. Instead, my aim is to suggest for students interested in the history of the war a broad framework or way of seeing that will help them make sense of all the other materials they read and watch and hear. Each chapter answers a central question about the war and its aftermath, and at the conclusion of every section there is a timeline and select reading list for context. Ideally, when they finish the book, readers will want to go looking for more information about all the ideas that have only been suggested here.

The central aim of *World War I: A Short History* is to provide an accessible and concise overview of the first modern, global war. Many people have a cursory knowledge of the events of World War I, and most understand the stereotypical narrative that has developed, namely that of an inevitable but useless war, where men were slaughtered as a consequence of the poor decisions of out-of-touch senior officers. This trope, widely used in both scholarly and popular works, developed out of a narrow focus on the Western Front and particularly through the writing of a British version of the war. Many films and novels feature this story of the war, using the narrative of senseless war to frame the tales of individuals caught up in a futile machinery of violence. A good example is the film *Gallipoli* (released 1981), in which poor communication and a leader who is far from the front and immune from the realities of battle sends young men to their deaths. More recently, the film *Joyeux Noël [Merry Christmas]* (released 2006) humanizes the experience of fighting and loss through the stories of individual men and officers, but demonizes the military command as without pity or understanding. It is this sense of a disconnect between the bloodshed of ordinary people and what seems to be a heartless attitude on the part of the military leaders that has captured the attention of a generation.

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The ubiquity of this image of World War I makes it a fascinating topic. However, it also demands the production of a new volume for classrooms that challenges this narrative. What is needed is a corrective to this vision of the war, one that digs deeper into the mechanisms by which battle was waged for more than four years. Here, each chapter re-establishes the broader context of the war by including the rest of the fronts: Italy, Russia, East Africa, and Mesopotamia, to name some of the more important war zones. The war encompassed and affected a broad swath of humanity, and this book brings some of those voices back into the story of the conflict. By doing so, the Western Front story gains a back-story and a necessary complexity. Many leaders acted in concert with their allies, and often an offensive in one sector was coordinated to help another sector advance. With poor communication and uncertain transport/supply trains, officers and civilian officials struggled to understand the many moving parts that made up the war effort around the globe. Here, students will get a sense of some of those challenges.

Each chapter of this book is arranged in a loose chronological fashion with a featured year of the war framing the discussion. In addition, each chapter contains a wide-ranging geographical coverage of the topic with short, specific examples to help support this view of war. Because the common narrative is so strong, the book provides an equally strong counter-narrative to help displace current myths about the war. The story of this book is focused around the linked questions—to what extent was this war *total*, *modern*, and *global*? Readers are encouraged to answer these questions for themselves as they progress, using the tools in each chapter. Perhaps at this point, readers might be thinking—who really cares? Is World War I all that significant anyway in the scheme of things? This book argues that the war was a pivotal point in world history in the twentieth century for three main reasons.

First, it gave concrete reality to the possible. By this, I mean that ideas that had emerged in laboratories and factories, in diplomatic offices and imperial outposts, now could be tested in the social experiment that was war. World War I featured the development of new weapons, which were tested and perfected in the field, with deadly results. Well-known examples include tanks, aerial bombs, and poison gas delivered in shells. The war also witnessed the birth of a broad coalition of charitable and humanitarian organizations with the express aim of alleviating the suffering of victims of war. Some of these organizations survived the war as international and permanent agencies devoted to the lives of war victims or children displaced by violence. Certainly, ideas about what could or should be done for the victims of war were transformed by this conflict. Governments also expanded to meet the needs of a modern wartime economy and society; many nations created whole sections to handle pension claims from widows and veterans, for instance. States also codified international agreements and rules for passports. Tax structures that had been reformed during the war

became permanent fixtures of life. In short, World War I wrote the rules for what war meant in the modern world, while simultaneously reforming governments, societies, and economies.

Second, the experience of World War I fundamentally reshaped geopolitical lines, not only reframing power blocs but also redrawing political boundaries. Four well-established empires in Eurasia disappeared as a result of the war (German Empire, Austro-Hungarian or Habsburg Empire, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire), and many other states emerged as new entities. Examples include Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, to name only a few. Imperial lines outside of Europe also changed, with the creation of a category of states known as mandates. Many of these mandate states, such as Syria and Iraq, faced tutelage from European nations (France and Britain, respectively), and while they looked forward to eventual independence, this timeline was uncertain and highly managed by their imperial masters. It is also important to remember that the war displaced vast numbers of people, many of whom lost their citizenship along with their homes. The population exchanges between Turkey and Greece fundamentally restructured religious, political, and cultural life in those two nations and upended the lives of nearly two million people. Russian refugees from a variety of regions including modern Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Belarus streamed into cities seeking work, many of them classified as “stateless.” To summarize this point, the modern political landscape was born out of World War I.

Finally, World War I set the stage for the extremist politics of the interwar period and ultimately served as a major factor in the outbreak of World War II. It was a precursor. The unprecedented numbers of people involved in the war meant upheaval in the postwar period as soldiers sought to reintegrate into society. Families faced personal challenges with the return of their loved ones, but at every level—household, neighborhood, town, nation—people sought to make sense of the war and return to something that could be perceived as “normal” life. For many, this proved impossible, and the growth of paramilitary units, many of which contained disaffected ex-soldiers, threatened social harmony. Revolutions, civil disorder, and economic instability also plagued postwar nations. Framed by the perceived problems of the peace treaties in many parts of the world, grievances and disorder gave way to extremist political solutions. Fascism, along with Stalin’s version of communism, gained traction by the late 1920s. In this climate of political experimentation, military *coups d’état* and authoritarian regimes marked interwar politics around the world. Even nations with democratic traditions experienced unprecedented concentration of power. For instance, the only US president to win an election four times was an interwar leader, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

These three themes are important reasons for studying World War I, but they are not the only reasons that the war’s legacy is still important more than

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100 years later. Unlike World War II, the 1914–1918 war remains a contentious event. The British Parliament squabbled in 2014 about how to commemorate the war in their nation, and journalists often raise the specter of the war in explaining political divisions in the Middle East or the rise of nationalism in the last 100 years. *World War I: A Short History* details the multitude of ways that the war functioned as a rupture between the wars of the past and the wars still to come. As British poet and novelist Thomas Hardy wrote in his 1918 poem, “And There Was a Great Calm”: “There was peace on earth, and silence in the sky;/ Some could and some could not, shake off misery:/ The Sinister Spirit sneered ‘It had to be!’/ And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, ‘Why?’” Hardy posed the ultimate question asked by the survivors as they contemplated the armistice: Why? This book will explore that question.

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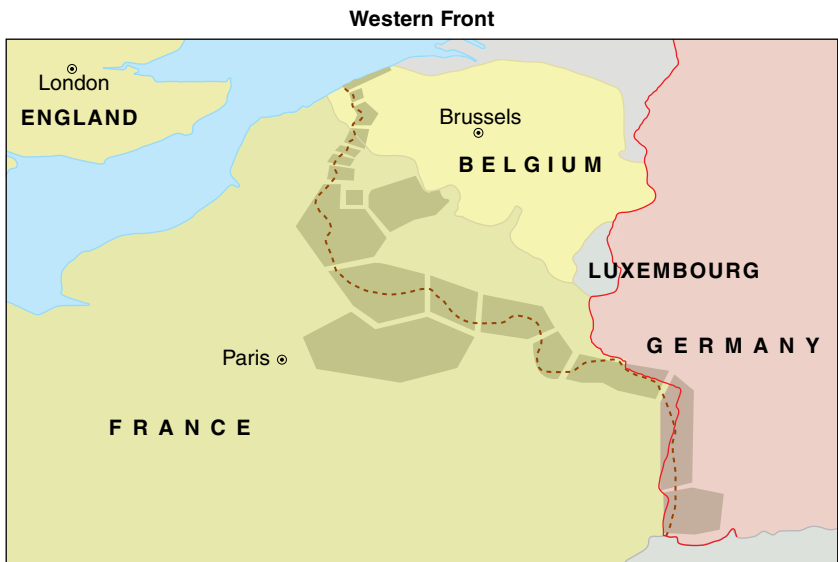
- x *Gallipoli*. 1999. DVD. Directed by Peter Weir. Paramount Pictures.
- x *Joyeux Noël [Merry Christmas]*. 2006. DVD. Directed by Christian Carion. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.
- xiii Hardy, Thomas. “And There was a Great Calm.” 1918. Accessed December 18, 2015. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/248470>



Map 1 The world in 1914.



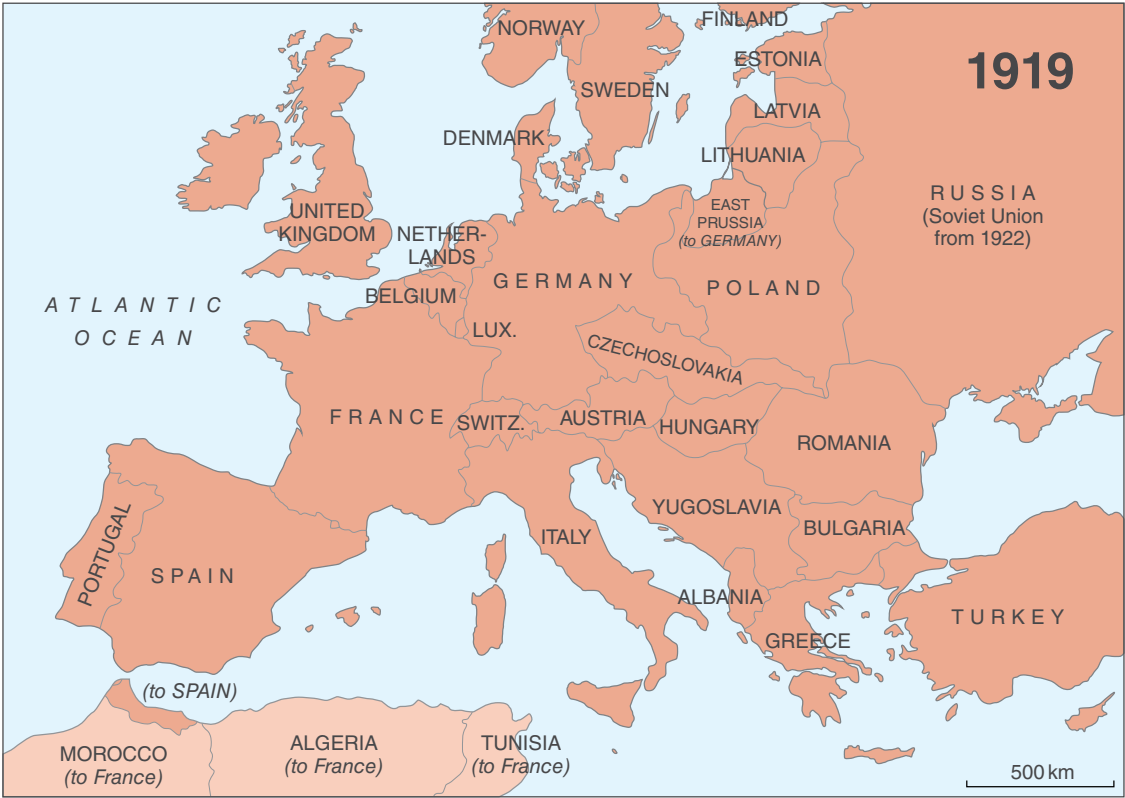
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Map 2b The Western Front in 1915.



Map 2c Important sites on the Eastern Front.



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