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John Keegan, *The First World War*

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In August 2014, it will be exactly one century since the beginning of a small war that became a global conflict. Many historians are revisiting this war, but two earlier works stand out as classics of the genre: *The Guns of August* by Barbara Tuchman (1962) and *The First World War* by John Keegan.

Tuchman’s work focused on the first month of a war that could have been avoided had the major European powers used judgment. However, a combination of foolish (and stupid) misreading of the intentions of others spiraled into a war that killed off nearly a whole generation of young men across Europe and destroyed the entire historic culture of Russia. Three empires collapsed and a number of new nations were born, few of them to survive the second stage of World War I, World War II.

Keegan is an excellent military historian, whose book, *A History of Warfare* (1994), has become a classic and is much admired in military institutions.

*The First World War* is comprehensive, full of maps, photos, and detailed accounts of every battle fought in that war, but what makes it most valuable to me are the author’s insights about the consequences of that war. It produced its second phase, the very different World War II. All of us getting immersed in the centennial of World War I should read this work. If you read nothing more than Chapter 1, “A European Tragedy,” you will see what a horror was created by a handful of national leaders who were rash and foolish, and upon whose heads should fall the blame for the turmoil that characterized the rest of the century.

Keegan notes: “The First World War was a tragic and unnecessary conflict. Unnecessary because the train of events that led to its outbreak might have been broken at any point during the five weeks of crisis that preceded the first clash of arms, had prudence or common goodwill found a voice; tragic because the consequences of the first clash ended the lives of ten million human beings, tortured the emotional lives of millions more, destroyed the benevolent and optimistic culture of the European continent and left, when the guns at last fell silent four years later, a legacy of political rancor and racial hatred so intense that no explanation of the causes of the Second World War can stand without reference to those roots. The Second World War, five times more destructive of human life and incalculably more costly in material terms, was the direct outcome of the First. On 18 September 1922, Adolf Hitler, the demobilized front fighter, threw down a challenge to defeated Germany that he would realize seventeen years later: ‘It cannot be that two million Germans should have fallen in vain…No, we do not pardon, we demand---vengeance!’”
Keegan describes the deaths of so many in the First World War, but notes that by comparison with the war of 1939-45, it did little material damage. For all the carnage on Europe’s young men, the First war was rural and the carnage took place on fields and in some villages, all of which were restored by a few years later. “The war inflicted no harm to Europe’s cultural heritage that was not easily repaired,” he writes. The civilian populations involved suffered almost none of the deliberate disruption and atrocities that were to be a feature of the Second World War. Except in Turkish Armenia, no population was subjected to genocide. “The First, unlike the Second World War, saw no systematic displacement of populations, no deliberate starvation, no expropriation, little massacre or atrocity. It was, despite the efforts by state propaganda machines to prove otherwise, and the cruelties of the battlefield apart, a curiously civilized war,” he concludes.

Even so, that war set the tone for what was to almost destroy European civilization, its values, its Enlightenment, forever, had the Nazis won. It set the tone for the demise of democracy (or the promise of it) in Germany, Italy, Russia (and Greece, Spain, and Portugal). We are all paying for these horrors today, as a new cadre of religious fascists attempt to derail liberal modernity throughout the world.

I would recommend a new movie, The Monument Men, as a companion piece to this book. Not only had the Second World War’s horrific destruction devastated the architectural treasures of Europe’s 2,000-year history, but a new group of Vandals, the Nazis, undertook the looting of all the paintings, sculptures and altarpieces that they confiscated from museums and private collections to display in private Nazi homes and in a proposed enormous museum to be built in Hitler’s home town in Austria. Hitler had even given orders that if he were to die during the war, these treasures were to be destroyed.

The ‘Monument Men’ were mostly American art experts, well beyond the age of soldiers, who volunteered to find and save Europe’s art treasures, not for our own use, but to be returned to the owners. Unfortunately, many of the private art collectors were European Jews, most of whom had been murdered by the Nazis. These brave men risked their lives in the last days of the war to find these treasures before either the Nazis destroyed them or the Soviets looted them for their own collections.

It is amazing that in the midst of a brutalizing war, some values of the humanity and decency of Western Civilization could still exist and accomplish such good.