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Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*. New York: Knopf, 2013. Pp. xxxvii, 628. ISBN 978-0-307-59705-2.

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Recent years have seen a wave of new scholarship on World War I as historians mark the centenary of a conflict whose consequences we still experience today. Max Hastings's thorough *Catastrophe 1914* is an important contribution to this growing body of literature. Hastings, who has served as both a foreign correspondent for BBC TV and an editor of Britain's *Evening Standard* and *Daily Telegraph*, has published extensively on World War II. His latest book is an extraordinarily detailed chronicle of the outbreak of World War I in summer 1914 and the first five months of fighting. He draws on an impressive variety of sources to give voice to individuals ranging from political and military leaders at the highest levels to common soldiers on the battlefield, and peasants and city dwellers on the home front. While not an academically trained historian, he nevertheless engages with the arguments of contemporary scholars concerning the outbreak of war and takes informed positions in such major historiographical debates as the Fischer Controversy in Germany. Although it does not break new ground, *Catastrophe 1914* is nonetheless valuable for effectively clarifying and debunking persistent popular myths regarding the first year of the war. Hastings writes here for a general audience, but specialists, too, will appreciate the book for the many anecdotes that enrich its narrative.

The volume's eighteen chapters begin with a description of European political and military attitudes before summer 1914 and conclude with the famous Christmas Truce. While Hastings provides detailed accounts of both European fronts, the Western theater gets considerably more attention, for it was there that the war would be won or lost.

A common misperception among nonspecialists is that no single nation bore ultimate responsibility for the failure to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis that ensued from Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination and that Europe stumbled into war essentially by chance. Hastings disagrees:

What happened was not "war by accident," but war by ill-conceived Austrian design, with German support.... [Furthermore] the Germans' paranoia caused them to interpret as a hostile act any attempt to check or question their international assertiveness. Moreover, throughout the July crisis they, like the Austrians, consistently lied about their intentions and actions. By contrast, whatever the shortcomings of British conduct, the Asquith government told the truth as it saw this, to both its allies and its prospective foes. (99-100)

Thus Germany used the events surrounding the archduke's assassination to foment an international conflict as a means to assert its supremacy.

Although Hastings describes Germany's political structure in the decade before the war as plagued by extreme "dysfunctionality," he makes it clear that the Army had asserted itself as Germany's "most powerful institution." Thus, "[Helmuth von] Moltke became the critical personality in Germany's endgame" (78), believing war was inevitable and that Germany must fight sooner rather than later. In another two or three years, Russia would have rebuilt its military, depriving Germany of the strategic advantage envisioned in the Schlieffen Plan. The key, Hastings writes, was to find an incident that could generate enough public support for such a conflict. Unlike the previous two crises in the Balkans, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand presented just such a pivotal event. Thus, German military leaders thought that July 1914 was the best moment to precipitate a wider war that they believed to be inevitable.

On the larger question of responsibility, Hastings attacks the assumption that the ultimate result of the war would not have been significant for the future of Europe: "It seems frivolous to suggest, as do a few modern sensationalists, that a German victory would merely have created, half a century earlier, an entity resembling the European Union. Even if the Kaiser's regime cannot be equated with that of the Nazis, its policies could scarcely be characterized as enlightened" (99). He notes, correctly, that a German victory would have been disastrous for

the Triple Entente—“The Kaiser’s regime did not enter the war with a grand plan for world domination, but its leaders were in no doubt that they required huge booty as a reward for the victory they anticipated” (100). At the very least, Germany meant to use the war to realize its territorial ambitions in Europe.

Germany’s appetite for territorial conquest was alarming enough, but its reputation for brutality and violence was nothing short of damning. “The *Kaiserreich’s* record abroad was inhumane even by contemporary standards” (100). Hastings exaggerates in claiming that Germany’s perpetration of the Herero Genocide (1904–7) demonstrates “an enormity far beyond the scope of any British colonial misdeed” (100). But he rightly observes that the German military’s propensity for using excessive violence and disproportionate force to achieve its aims was well known. He illustrates this very persuasively in discussing Germany’s advance through Belgium early in the war. While some contemporary press reports of German atrocities in Belgium were overstated, if not fabricated, Hastings demonstrates that the army “indeed behaved with [a] systematic inhumanity” that went far beyond anything done by the British and French. “Obsessed with an alleged threat from *francs-tireurs*, the Kaiser’s army murdered civilians and hostages in large numbers” (189).¹ Hastings asserts that Germany was determined “swiftly and ruthlessly to assert its supremacy” (193) at the start of the war. Unforeseen setbacks on the battlefield resulted in brutal reprisals against local civilian populations. Citing contemporary newspaper reports, Hastings shows that, while every army committed “unauthorized misdeeds, ... the German hierarchy formally endorsed the legitimacy of its soldiers’ conduct” (193). Thus, a German victory would have been far from benign for the rest of the continent.

Once armies began to move in August 1914, it quickly became obvious that the war would not be the short, three-month affair so many expected. Casualties were much higher than anyone anticipated. Historians have traditionally attributed these developments to incompetent commanders. While Hastings does not challenge this view, he does add considerable nuance to our understanding of how the war was fought.

To be sure, the performance of military leaders on both sides left much to be desired. Moltke was constantly beset by self-doubt and the French Army was in a shambles until the arrival of Joseph Joffre. Yet, as Hastings argues, simply blaming the high casualties in 1914 on poor leadership obscures a larger point—both political and military leaders in 1914 failed to grasp that this war would be fundamentally different from any nineteenth-century conflict: “At the heart of the frustration of German purposes in August 1914 lay a failure, by Wilhelm and his generals alike, to understand the magnitude of operations that would be necessary to secure a decision rather than a mere local success in a struggle between twentieth-century industrialized nations” (177). Europe’s leaders were totally unprepared for modern, industrialized warfare. Hastings illustrates the point, as he does so many others, with a telling anecdote, in this case, concerning French uniforms on the eve of the assassination. A French military officer in Berlin noted that German soldiers, unlike the French, wore drab, field-gray uniforms. “The colonel was infuriated by a contrarian article which appeared in *Le Temps* of 30 April. This claimed that other nations regretted adopting drab uniforms, and that France was fortunate to have rejected such folly” (167). Besides displaying Hastings’s remarkable knack for storytelling, the anecdote pointedly shows just how clueless European leaders were about the type of conflict they were embarking upon.

While Hastings taps a wide range of sources to paint a vivid picture of Europe in 1914, an overabundance of anecdotal material occasionally obscures his broader arguments. He seems so intent on providing a voice to all of his many sources that he loses track of the larger threads that tie his work together. While some readers will undoubtedly enjoy hearing so many different voices, others will be frustrated by the slow progression of the narrative.

As a work designed for a wide readership, *Catastrophe 1914* is a valuable contribution to the burgeoning popular literature on World War I. But it should not be ignored by specialists in military and modern European history. The stories and sources Max Hastings has so adeptly gathered and deployed to support his arguments will interest and instruct anyone who teaches or lectures on World War I.

1. See further Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2004).