

Ian F. W. Beckett. *The Making of the First World War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 280 pp. \$28.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-16202-8.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In *The Making of the First World War*, Ian Beckett focuses on important turning points in World War I. Drawing on documents from the (British) National Archives, published primary source materials, as well as a broad range of secondary studies, each of the book's twelve chapters is dedicated to a pivotal event that altered the trajectory of the war, forged collective memories, created nations, or was particularly influential in shaping our world. The chapters, while focusing on singular events, are thoughtfully ordered so as to illustrate their place in the chronology of the war. In this way, Beckett aims to take a fresh approach to interpreting the Great War that emphasizes the impact of important moments without isolating them from the context of the war's narrative.

Beckett covers a wide variety of events occurring at the war front and on the home front, many of which have been well canvassed in the literature, while others might be less familiar to non-specialists. Chapter 1 examines the Belgian decision to flood the Flanders coast in 1914, which

prevented the Germans from outflanking the Allies and essentially completing the continuous line of trenches from Switzerland to North Sea. The globalizing implications of the Ottoman entry into the First World War is the focus of chapter 2. Chapter 3 addresses how Australian nationalism was galvanized by the sacrifices of Australian troops at Gallipoli. The promotion of David Lloyd George as minister of munitions (the subject of chapter 4) was an important moment, as it was a crucial post that positioned him to eventually replace Herbert Asquith as Britain's prime minister. In chapter 5, Beckett explains that *The Battle of the Somme* documentary film, viewed publicly for the first time in August 1916, did much to shape the popular imagine of the First World War at the time and in posterity. The death of long-reigning Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Josef I "sound-ed the death-knell" of the empire according to chapter 6 (p. 107).

The last six chapters covers critical decisions in the second half of World War I. Chapter 7 centers on Germany's resumption of unrestricted

submarine warfare in February 1917, which ultimately forced the United States into the war and illustrated Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff's domination of German decision making by early 1917. The abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in March of the same year—the subject of chapter 8—paved the way for the Bolshevik revolution only months later, which would have global implications for the remainder of the century. In chapter 9 Beckett explores the first raid of German Gotha bombers over London in June of 1917 and argues that the psychological effects far outweighed the actual damage, foreshadowing the dramatic increase in terror bombing in World War II. The Balfour Declaration of December 1917, which promised a Jewish homeland in Palestine after the war and was one of several British promises concerning the Middle East during the war, is examined in chapter 10. The failed idealism of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points is the topic of the book's penultimate chapter, while chapter 12 looks at the German army's costly, failed Lys offensive of April 1918—its last-ditch attempt to turn the tide of the war.

Beckett explains that his objective in choosing these specific episodes is “to demonstrate the complexity of the war's impact,” which, he adds, “is with us still” (p. 11). Curiously, apart from the periodic citation of one author or another's analysis, he does not attempt to engage the literature or place the study in the broader historical dialogue. While each chapter offers insightful context and entertaining anecdotes surrounding the principal event it covers, Beckett's frequent jumps forward and backward in the narrative make it tedious to follow in places. The chapters frequently end quite abruptly without explaining the overarching significance of the chosen episode to the broader legacy of the Great War. The lack of closure offered in the individual essays is matched in the just over a page-and-a-half-long conclusion. Professor Lengel's assessment of *The Making of the First World War* is a fair one when he says

that “the originality of Beckett's concept is undermined by poor execution.”[1]

Note

[1]. Edward G. Lengel, “Book Review: The Making of the First World War, by Ian F.W. Beckett,” HistoryNet, November 2, 2012, <http://www.historynet.com/book-review-the-making-of-the-first-world-war-by-ian-f-w-beckett.htm>.

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