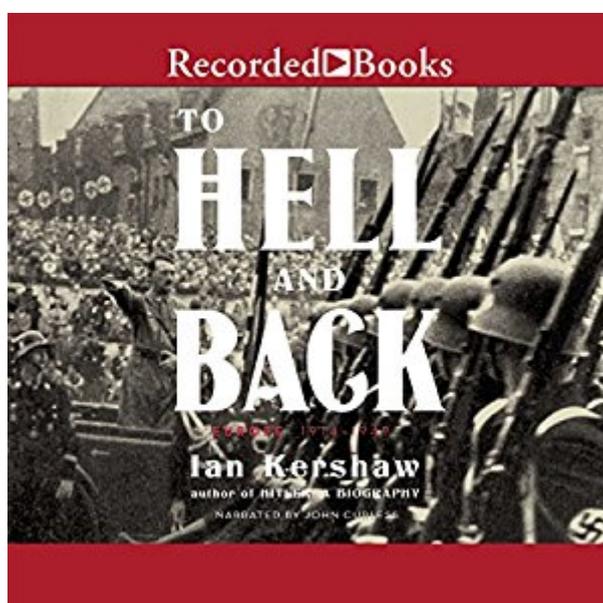


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To Hell And Back: Europe 1914-1949



Synopsis

The Penguin History of Europe series reaches the 20th century with acclaimed scholar Ian Kershaw's long-anticipated analysis of the pivotal years of World War I and World War II. The European catastrophe, the long, continuous period from 1914 to 1949, was unprecedented in human history - an extraordinarily dramatic, often traumatic, and endlessly fascinating period of upheaval and transformation. This new volume in the Penguin History of Europe series offers comprehensive coverage of this tumultuous era. Beginning with the outbreak of World War I through the rise of Hitler and the aftermath of the Second World War, award-winning British historian Ian Kershaw combines his characteristic original scholarship and gripping prose as he profiles the key decision makers and the violent shocks of war as they affected the entire European continent and radically altered the course of European history. Kershaw identifies four major causes for this catastrophe: an explosion of ethnic-racist nationalism, bitter and irreconcilable demands for territorial revisionism, acute class conflict given concrete focus through the Bolshevik Revolution, and a protracted crisis of capitalism. Incisive, brilliantly written, and filled with penetrating insights, *To Hell and Back* offers an indispensable study of a period in European history whose effects are still being felt today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

To Hell and Back is the newly published book by the distinguished British historian Sir. Dr. Ian Kershaw. Kershaw is the foremost expert on Hitler and the Nazi era. This volume is the first of two books dealing with the twentieth century catastrophe of war and death which transpired in bloody Europe. The book begins with the First World War and concludes in 1949 at the beginning of the Cold War. The author plans a second volume. The book is strong in the way Kershaw surveys the

politics of all the European nations during the period being discussed. As always his analysis of Nazi Germany is excellent as is his coverage of the cruel dictatorship of Stalin in the Soviet Union. The style is sober and scholarly and some general readers will be bored with the text. The book has excellent maps and a good bibliography. The volume is part of the Penguin History series. Kershaw is always worth reading. Recommended.

The Europe of 1914, at least for its bourgeoisie, represented the height of civilization, the Belle Époque if you will. And of a sudden the wheels fell off the track and the continent plunged into the darkness of the Great War. British historian Ian Kershaw certainly proves George Kennan's maxim that World War I was the great seminal catastrophe of the 20th Century. The war arose in the milieu of ethnic nationalism, territorial revisionism and increasing class conflict growing out of mass industrialization. These three factors would remain long after the war ended and into this pot would be thrown the crisis in capitalism induced by the Great Depression. Also arising out of the war was the successful Bolshevik Revolution that sent chills down the spines of the conservative elite. To Kershaw this was the most important event of the 20th Century because the very real fear of communism made opposition to the rise of fascism far more difficult in the West. It hardened the right and split the left. As a result the crisis in capitalism forced politics to the right rather than the left which is not too much different from what happened post-2008. Thus the West's response to the rise of fascism was timid, to say the least with respect to Germany's re-occupation of the Rhineland in 1936, the Spanish Civil War and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1938. All the while the great purge trials were going on in Moscow. Kershaw's view of this history seems more deterministic than say that of Zara Steiner's. To him there is more or less a straight-line between the Versailles settlements to the start of World War II. To be sure he gives credit to the spirit of Locarno, but not enough in my opinion. He also leaves out two chance events that may have altered history. The first is outside his topic and that was the premature death of New York Federal Reserve President in 1928. Had he lived, in the minds of more than a few economists the worst effects of the Great Depression might have been avoided. Within his bailiwick was again the premature death of German Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann in October 1929. If there ever were a German politician who could have stopped Hitler, it was Stresemann. Kershaw brings the holocaust to the forefront in Hitler's war of annihilation in the East in his coverage of World War II. Simply put Hitler wanted to conquer the West, but he wanted to destroy the East. He almost succeeded. Kershaw finishes his book with the beginnings of the postwar recovery, the role of the

Marshall plan and the start of the Cold War. By 1949 Europe is central to the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, but its power is but a shadow of its former self. Kershaw has done an excellent job in portraying this epochal period that this review hardly does justice to.

Outstanding job of coalescing mountains of detail. Kershaw uses comparison to make ideas clear and distinct. Chapters: 1) On the Brink 2) The Great Disaster 3) Turbulent Peace 4) Dancing on the Volcano 5) Gathering Shadows 6) Danger Zone 7) Towards the Abyss 8) Hell on Earth 9) Quiet Transitions in the Dark Decades 10) Out of the Ashes Kershaw takes turns to cover many different European areas. This enables reader to contrast different developments occurring at the same time. The interaction of the English, German, Russian, Italian, etc., worlds create understanding. Very well done! I enjoyed the fact that Kershaw did not avoid making moral judgements. War is horrible. Hatred is evil, whether it is directed against Jews, Kulacks, Businessmen, Handicapped, Poles, or anyone else! His comparison of Italian Fascism, German Nazism and Russian Communism is fascinating. His explanation of the difference between the eastern and western front in WW2 was enlightening. Germany had two different goals. West was to conquer, east was to exterminate. Not the same! This work does not only present war and politics, but also the emotional, cultural and religious effects. Covers artists and artistic movements. Picasso, Thomas Mann, Bertold Brecht, etc. are shown in the new world of the twentieth century. "Earlier ideals of beauty, harmony and reason were radically discarded in modernism. Fragmentation, disunity and chaos were the new leitmotifs - a remarkable anticipation in cultural forms of the political and economic rupture left by the First World War." (167) The religious outlook changed. "As people turned to the state, to political movements, or to other public institutions to answer their needs, the Churches in the eyes of increasing numbers has nothing to offer. Nationalism is the new religion. People don't go to church. They go to nationalist meetings. . . . And as war and genocide ravaged Europe, Nietzsche's attack on belief in rationality and truth, his denial of morality rooted in religious belief, came to seem anything but misplaced." (431) Trenchant analysis. This book includes eight pages of glossy photographs. Concludes with a twenty-seven page bibliography and a forty-two page index. Easy to read with a clear narrative. Kershaw presents a persuasive story. I enjoyed it.

In addition to being beautifully written, this book makes sense out of the competing geopolitical factors contributing to both WW I and WW II. Kershaw makes a compelling case that the Russian revolution was the single most important event of the first half of the 20th century. His logic is flawless. I loved this book, and highly recommend it to students and scholars of these

world-changing eras.

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