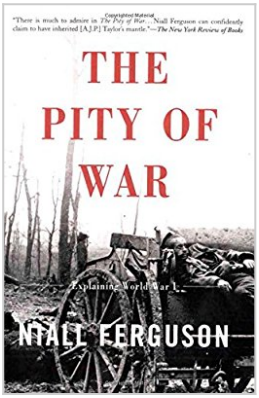

The Pity Of War: Explaining World War I

By Niall Ferguson

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In *The Pity of War*, Niall Ferguson makes a simple and provocative argument: that the human atrocity known as the Great War was entirely England's fault. Britain, according to Ferguson, entered into war based on naïve assumptions of German aims—and England's entry into the war transformed a Continental conflict into a world war, which they then badly mishandled, necessitating American involvement. The war was not inevitable, Ferguson argues, but rather the result of the mistaken decisions of individuals who would later claim to have been in the grip of huge impersonal forces.That the war was wicked, horrific, inhuman,is memorialized in part by the poetry of men like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, but also by cold statistics. More British soldiers were killed in the first day of the Battle of the Somme than Americans in the Vietnam War; indeed, the total British fatalities in that single battle—some 420,000—exceeds the entire American fatalities for both World Wars. And yet, as Ferguson writes, while the war itself was a disastrous folly, the great majority of men who fought it did so with enthusiasm. Ferguson vividly brings back to life this terrifying period, not through dry citation of chronological chapter and verse but through a series of brilliant chapters focusing on key ways in which we now view the First World War.For anyone wanting to understand why wars are fought, why men are willing to fight them, and why the world is as it is today, there is no sharper nor more stimulating guide than Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War*.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
If someone less distinguished than Jesus College, Oxford, fellow Niall Ferguson had written *The Pity of War*, you could be forgiven for thinking the book was out for a few cheap headlines by contradicting almost every accepted orthodoxy about the First World War. Ferguson argues that Britain was as much to blame for the start of the war as Germany, and that, had Britain sacrificed Belgium to Germany, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution would never have happened. Germany, he continues, would have created a united European state, and Britain could have remained a superpower. He also contends that there was little enthusiasm for the war in Britain in 1914; on the other hand, he claims the war was prolonged not by clever manipulation of the media, but by British soldiers' taking pleasure in combat. If that isn't enough, he further maintains that it wasn't the severity of the conditions imposed on Germany at Versailles in 1919 that led inexorably to World War II, and blames instead the comparative leniency and the failure to collect reparations in full.

The Pity of War, with no pretensions to offering a grand narrative of the war, goes over its chosen questions like a polemical tract. As such it is immensely readable, well researched, and controversial. You may not end up agreeing with all of Ferguson's arguments, but that should not deter you from reading it. All of us need our deeply held views challenged from time to time, even if only to remind us why we've got them. --*John Crace, Amazon.co.uk*

From Publishers Weekly
Many readers will disagree with Oxford historian Ferguson's (Paper and Iron) daring revisionist account of the Great War as presented in this superbly illustrated book, but none will be bored by his elegant marshaling of facts to support his case. Ferguson argues that Germany had a justifiable fear of Russian and French militarism and was merely making a preemptive strike in August 1914. He suggests that Britain forced the escalation of what could have been a limited continental war by entering on the side of the Allies and then increased the body count on both sides through sheer ineptitude. An economic historian, Ferguson explains that Germany was efficient at inflicting "maximum slaughter at minimum expense," paying just $5133 to kill each Allied serviceman. The bungling but economically advantaged Allies, on the other hand, paid $16,754 for each German head. For all the book's strengths, however, Ferguson comes up short in his flawed, briefly sketched analyses of the ebb and flow of diplomatic and battlefield events. Grand strategy goes unstudied. Ferguson's war is, in the end, simply an economic problem. Scarcity equals loss, and whoever has the most supplies will prevail. Ultimately, it is hard to feel satisfied with Ferguson's narrow analysis of what is surely a far more complex equation.

From Library Journal
Ferguson's controversial reexamination of The Great War--which drew some harsh criticism in Britain as revisionist history--forces the reader to take a fresh look at that now mythologized event. Organized around themes such as public financing, the press response, and "why men fought," this is not a history of the war (see Keegan, below, for that) but a provocation to rethink its causes and effects. (LJ 3/15/99)

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From reader reviews:

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