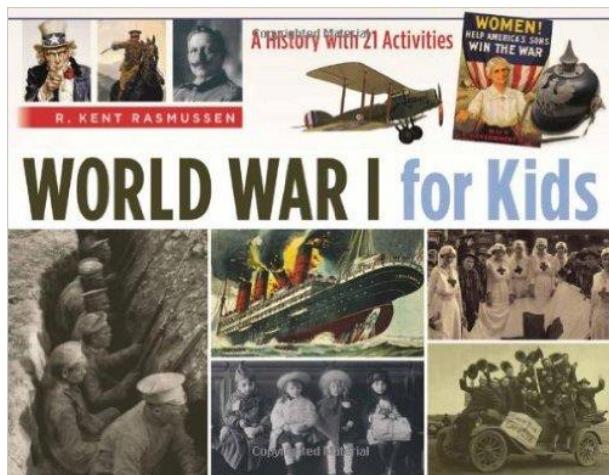


Book Review

Teaching about World War I during Its Centennial

“World War I for Kids: A History with 21 Activities” by R. Kent Rasmussen

By Eric Martone



The years of 2014 to 2018 mark the 100th anniversary of World War I. While often overshadowed in history courses by World War II, the war concluded an era and is often used as a benchmark to signal the end of the chain of events initiated by the French Revolution and the beginning of the contemporary era, since it set up many of the conflicts and events that characterized the later twentieth century.¹ Several films, publications, and teaching resources have been released to coincide with and commemorate World War I's centennial, including *World War I for Kids*.² Marketed toward students ages 9 to 12 (grade levels 4 and up), the book is useful for educators seeking a supplemental source for teaching upper elementary- and lower secondary-level students about this seminal event in world history.

World War I for Kids begins with an introduction directing readers to pay attention to significant events, why such events happened, and how they were connected with each other. Further, it directs its readers to focus on the kinds of changes the war brought to the world. The book is subsequently divided into 12 chapters, throughout which are a total of 21 learning activities.

The first chapter focuses on the complex road to war and includes sidebars on the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary (the event that triggered the war), prewar military alliances, and American reactions to the outbreak of war.³ The chapter's activity directs children to make a military recruiting poster to examine how propaganda shaped the war's early phase.

Understanding propaganda is significant in itself, but understanding how it occupied a crucial role in the early stages of the war is important on many levels. There was a yearning for the familiar characteristics of a glorious war in the conflict's opening months. Believing the war would end quickly, the press featured romanticized stories that idealized war. As the war continued, attempts to make sense out of a period of change and uncertainty connected events to a broader outplay within civilization. French propaganda, for example, portrayed the war as a clash between civilization and barbarism emerging from two culturally different races; France was cast as a “New

Roman Empire,” repelling the Germanic horde as in ancient history. The French were thus not seeking revenge for previous German defeats (like the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-1871), but rather to deliver humanity from the start of a new dark age.⁴ This civilization-against-barbarism paradigm was furthered in academia and literature by writers such as Pierre Loti.⁵ Such a manipulated nationalist image created a powerful alternate perception of events and the reshaping of history to suit state needs, while dehumanizing Germans as the Other.⁶

Chapter two focuses on the stalemate that quickly developed on the Western front and features sidebars on British nurse Edith Cavell, executed for helping Allied soldiers escape German-occupied Belgium; the unusual use of taxi cabs to shuttle soldiers to the Western front during the First Battle of the Marne; and the 1914 Christmas truce. The Christmas truce of 1914—during which an unofficial ceasefire was called along the Western Front around Christmas allowing French, German, and British soldiers to cross trenches and exchange seasonal greetings and fraternize—is among the most improbable, but true stories of the war and one that continues to inspire peace and goodwill today.⁷ This event warrants a greater emphasis (perhaps an activity) in a book such as this, due to its popularity as a topic for books for children and young adolescents.⁸

The activity in chapter two calls for children to write a poem about the war. Some nationalists, like French intellectual Maurice Barrès, attempted to see the war as paving the way for a rebirth of vitality in French culture, which would be brought about by the solidarity and heightened fervor of wartime. Such sentiments rang hollow, however, as the war trudged on and men of the younger generation came to be killed in increasingly higher numbers.⁹ Nevertheless, many of the soldiers at the front lines sought to cope with the realities of

the trenches by turning to writing, some crafting poems that have stood the test of time.¹⁰ Many veterans’ poems were published after the war. These poems dealt with life in the trenches, including attempts to make sense of and reflect on the war, as well as adjusting to life afterward. However, veterans of other wars have also written poetry and such poems could be used to examine similar themes over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to explore the effects of war.¹¹

The third chapter focuses on the horrors of trench warfare and what life was like for soldiers in the trenches. As the war dragged on, buoyant attitudes changed and European writers began to publish “fiction” like *Gaspard* and *Le Feu* that portrayed some of the realities of trench warfare. Consequently, this chapter presents a sidebar on one of the best-known World War I-era novels, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The chapter’s activities include making a periscope, cooking Maconochie Stew (a common dish at the front lines), and pressing a flower to send home from the Western front.

The subsequent chapter focuses on the war’s other fronts, including the fighting on the Eastern front in Europe and in the Middle East, East Asia, and Africa. Its activities include making a World War I scorecard of the battles won and lost in the various regions across the globe. Missing in this discussion, however, is the use of colonial troops and labor in Europe. Colonial soldiers played key roles on the front lines in Europe. However, the use of colonial soldiers was controversial and they were largely returned home after the war; the West’s colonial powers were largely not ready for becoming multiracial societies. French writers like Romain Rolland, for example, related France’s use of colonial labor to ancient Rome’s hiring of barbarian mercenaries to quell other barbarians at its borders. Such actions would ultimately result in the destruction of European

civilization. Other Frenchmen connected colonial soldiers to the Germans, portraying France as fighting both external and internal “barbarians” to preserve French culture.¹²

The fifth chapter focuses on the weapons of the war, examining how new technologies were used for military purposes. The large number of technological innovations used and the extent of their impact on the war’s conduct make World War I unique. Airplane designer Anthony Fokker argued that wars ultimately benefit society, for governments invest more money in technology than they do during times of peace. After the war, these new scientific advances are often converted from wartime to civilian uses, propelling society’s “modernization.” As a result, material in this chapter can be used to set up interesting discussions not only about whether technology exacerbated the war’s casualties and destruction, but also World War I’s legacies. Sidebars in this chapter focus on new technologies used in warfare, including an excerpt from an American soldier’s description of barbed wire and the origin of the term “tank.” Activities include a three-minute egg camouflage challenge, in which students attempt to camouflage hard-boiled eggs, and making model gas masks.

Chapter six focuses on the war at sea and features a sidebar on u-boats. A bitter naval race, particularly between Britain and Germany, had been a cause of the war, in which powerful new battleships and submarines were used to a greater extent.¹³

The following chapter examines the war in the air. When World War I began, few could have imagined that airplanes, a relatively new invention, would have had a crucial role in combat. However, they underwent rapid developments during the war and emerged as military weapons of the future. The chapter’s activity calls for children to make a parachute for a toy/figure.

Chapter eight addresses the diverse roles that animals played in the war. During World War I, animals were conscripted at home to serve military needs and others served as farm animals. However, zoo animals whose homes had been destroyed and wild animals also found their way to the trenches. The chapter includes a sidebar on Sergeant Stubby and Rags, two dogs who served in the war, and activities that include training a dog to carry messages and writing a letter home from the Western front.

Chapter nine explores the United States’ entry into the war. This chapter’s activities include playing a game in which children search for a convoy, learning the lyrics of the war’s most popular song (“Over There”), and coining a war slogan.

Chapter ten examines the home fronts of the various countries in the war. Its activities include writing a letter from home to a soldier in Europe, examining how much sugar is in your food to explore the effects of rationing, and baking “war bread.”

The next chapter examines the end of the fighting and the Russian Revolution, featuring sidebars on the global influenza pandemic and the American hero, Sergeant York. It also includes an interesting perspective-taking activity in which children take on the role of wartime censors as they go through soldiers’ letters back home, and an activity calling for them to read a World War I-era adventure novel.

The final chapter focuses on the Paris Peace Conference and the agreements that concluded the war, as well as World War I’s broader legacies. It presents sidebars on US President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points; the last living veterans of the war; and the ongoing “iron harvest,” which refers to the still uncovered explosives buried in the ground on the Western front. The Paris Peace Conference’s agreements included the controversial German war guilt clause (in which Germany had to claim

sole responsibility for starting the war, contrary to historical fact); a huge war indemnity and military restrictions placed on Germany; the voiding of Italian claims on Northern Dalmatia; the recreation of Poland; the creation of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia; the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; new divisions of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia; and the creation of the League of Nations.¹⁴

Following the war, the West experienced what seemed a return to the Belle Époque, with a stable currency, thriving economy, and cultural renaissance. Golden Ages often occur in periods of peace. World War I was falsely perceived as a war eradicating possibilities for future conflict. Many countries in the West retreated into isolation, attempting to lull themselves in the world's false hope that peace would last. Veiled in this mentality, the West experienced an intellectual rebirth. One of its greatest modern cultural periods did follow one of its darkest tragedies. The cultural renaissance born after the war was not a "cultural rejuvenation" or the triumph of Western culture over barbarism. It was not fostered by war's positive experience, or the thrill of combat, but rather disillusionment and emptiness. Such a cultural outpouring was the result of coping with and making sense of the war. As the war became more desperate, the more significant it seemed to perceive the war as something that could pave the way to a higher civilization, a better and more just world. The efforts and sacrifices of countless men and women were not in vain, for in some way, something positive emerged from all the death and destruction. Following in this spirit, the final chapter's activities for children include visiting a World War I memorial and designing a commemorative postage stamp.

In addition to the chapters discussed above, *World War I for Kids* includes a useful timeline of significant events, a glossary of key terms, descriptions of the key personalities of

the war, websites for further exploration, a bibliography, and a list of some notable films about (or set during) the war. The films, which date from 1918 to 2011, include some recent films—like *The Lost Battalion* (2001), *Joyeux Noël* (2005), *Flyboys* (2006), *The Red Baron* (2008), and *War Horse* (2011)—and classic films like *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *Grand Illusion* (1937), *Sergeant York* (1941), *A Farewell to Arms* (1957), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), and *The Blue Max* (1966).¹⁵

Missing from this list of films, however, is the *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*. Originally a television series from Lucasfilm during the early 1990s, the episodes were re-edited and released on DVD as films. The films follow the title character as he leaves high school to join the Belgian army under an alias to fight in World War I. The series had him transfer to different military divisions/fronts in order to focus on different aspects of the fighting as well as the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.¹⁶ The use of a protagonist close to the students' ages, commonly used in historical trade fiction as a way to make social studies more engaging to younger students, makes this series an attractive option for educators. Seeing history through the lens of a person roughly their own age helps to arouse in students a greater degree of connection with and empathy for the past. Other notable recent omissions include films like *Fall of Eagles* (1974), *The Trench* (1999), *Parade's End* (2012), and *Birdsong* (2012); the BBC's popular series *Downton Abbey*, in which World War I was featured prominently during its first two seasons (2010-2011); and the many films and series released to commemorate the war's centennial.¹⁷

World War I for Kids is lavishly illustrated and written in simple language, but its density makes it most suitable for middle school students. Its supplements in the front and back matter help make it a valuable

educational tool. The book's coverage of the many facets of the war is impressive. Although some of the 21 activities included in *World War I for Kids* would be difficult to impossible to implement in a social studies classroom, the book is overall a useful and engaging supplemental source for educators teaching about World War I.

Notes

¹ See: Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage, 1996); Margaret Macmillan, *Paris, 1919: Six Days that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2002).

² For some examples, see: Karen Kenney with Edward Lengel, *Everything World War I: Dig in With Thrilling Photos and Fascinating Facts* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Kids, 2014); G.J. Meyer, *The World Remade: America in World War I* (New York: Bantam, 2017); Ira I. Boggs with Dallas E. Boggs, *Memories of Ira I. Boggs: In Commemoration of the World War I Centennial* (Mustang, OK: Tate, 2015); Aeronaut Books' "Great War Aviation Centennial Series"; Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918-1924* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Paul Edwards, *World War I on Film: English Language Releases Through 2014* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016).

³ See: Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (1962; reprint, New York: Ballantine, 1994); *War 1914: Punishing the Serbs* (London: The Stationery Office, 1999).

⁴ See: Michael E. Nolan, "'The Eagle Soars over the Nightingale': Press and Propaganda in France in the Opening Months of the Great War," in *Call to Arms: Propaganda, Public Opinion, and Newspapers in the Great War*, ed. Troy Paddock (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); Leonard V. Smith, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker, *France and the Great War, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), P.J. Flood, *France, 1914-18: Public Opinion and the War Effort* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *Le Grande Guerre, 1914-1918* (France: Gallimard, 1998); Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (1985; reprint, Providence: Berg, 1993)

⁵ See: Michael G. Lerner, "Pierre Loti as War Reporter," *Romance Quarterly* 46 (Spring 1999).)

⁶ The notion of France as the "New Rome" was in part a resurrection of its inheritance from Charlemagne, crowned Roman Emperor by the pope in 800. Yet Germany was equally an inheritor of this legacy, for Charlemagne's empire spanned most of present-day Germany as well as France. The classical comparison proved to be more prophetic than anyone knew at the time: Just as the German "barbarians" overran the Western Roman Empire in 476, Germany overran France in 1940 during World War II.

⁷ The numerous books on the Christmas truce include: Terri Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015); Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York: Plume, 2002); Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, *Christmas Truce: The Western Front December 1914* (London: Pan Books, 1999); Phil Porter's *The Christmas Truce* (London: Oberon, 2015) is a dramatization of the event. The film *Joyeux Noël* (2005) depicts the Christmas truce of 1914.

⁸ Versions for children and young adolescents include: Jim Murphy, *Truce* (New York: Scholastic, 2009); John Hendrix, *Shooting at the Stars* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2014); John McCutcheon and Henri Sorensen, *Christmas in the Trenches* (Atlanta: Peachtree, 2006); Carol Anne Duffy, *The Christmas Truce* (New York: Picador, 2011); Hilary Ann Robinson and Martin Impey, *The Christmas Truce: The Place Where Peace Was Found* (Leeds: Strauss House, 2014); Aaron Shepherd and Wendy Edelson, *Christmas Truce* (Olympia, WA: Skyhook, 2014).

⁹ Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) is a modern-day anti-war novel mocking the idea that war leads to cultural rejuvenation. Set during World War I, it focuses on British poet Siegfried Sassoon. Refusing to fight in a senseless war, he was declared "mentally unsound" and sent temporarily to a war hospital. While he survived the war, his mind was broken and his literary fire extinguished.

¹⁰ Collections of World War I poetry include: George Walter, ed., *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (New York: Penguin, 2007); Tim Kendall, ed., *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Candace Ward, ed., *World War One British Poets* (New York: Dover, 1997).

¹¹ See: Daryl Wise, ed., *Poems by Veterans* (Woodstock, NY: Post Traumatic Press, 2007); Tom Burns et al., *War and Literature: Looking Back on 20th Century Armed Conflicts* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2014).

¹² See: Tyler Stovall, "The Color Line behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France during the Great War," *American Historical Review* 103 (June 1998).

¹³ See: Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnaught: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 1991); Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 2003).

¹⁴ Various territories had been disputed. For example, Alsace-Lorraine, then under German control, became the subject of French and German propaganda. It had previously belonged to France and contained a mixed Franco-German population. The American and British governments favored a plebiscite to determine which country the disputed territory should join, but its return had become a French war goal. French Prime Minister Briand developed a commission to propose clear geo-political objectives concerning the Franco-German border and formulate arguments to convince the world that France was not seeking territorial aggrandizement, but rather a fair rearrangement of its national space. This commission's activities indicate clearly how intellectuals could reshape history for use as state propaganda under the guise of legitimate facts. See: Michael Heffernan, "History, Geography, and the French National Space: The Question of Alsace-Lorraine, 1914-1918." *Space & Polity* 5, no. 1 (2001); Michael E. Nolan, *The Inverted Mirror: Mythologizing the Enemy in France and Germany, 1898-1914* (New York: Berghahn, 2005).

¹⁵ French director Jean Renoir's seminal *Grand Illusion* (1937), in particular, reacts against the notion of war as a clash between civilization and barbarism emerging from two culturally different races discussed earlier in this review. Rather, the film supports the idea of a common European civilization and joint cooperation. Yet differences and loyalties, while not based on culture, revolve around one's social class. For example, members of the elite, regardless of being either French or German, share a common background and degree of loyalty. Consequently, class boundaries are affirmed rather than eliminated.

¹⁶ *The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones: Volume One—The Early Years* (2007) includes the World War I-related films "Spring Break Adventure" and "Love's Sweet Song"; *The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones: Volume Two—The War Years* (2007) includes the World War I-related films "Trenches of Hell," "Demons of Deception," "Phantom Train of Doom," "Oganga, the Giver and Taker of Life," "Attack of the Hawkmen," "Adventures in the Secret Service," "Espionage Escapades," and "Daredevils of the Desert"; *The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones: Volume Three—The Years of Change* (2008) includes the World War I-related

films "Tales of Innocence," "Masks of Evil," "Treasure of the Peacock's Eye," and "Winds of Change." The DVDs also contain much supplemental information on the historical events and key figures Indiana Jones meets along the way, including scores of documentaries and archival footage.

¹⁷ Examples include commemorative documentaries; television films and mini-series like *Battleground* (2013), *The Wipers Times* (2013), *A Promise* (2013), *Our World War* (2014), *37 Days* (2014), *The Passing Bells* (2014), *Testament of Youth* (2014), *The Silent Mountain* (2014), *Anzac Girls* (2014), *The Crimson Field* (2014), *Gallipoli* (2015), *The Water Diviner* (2014), *When We Go to War* (2015), *Batalon* (2015), *Cider with Rosie* (2015), *The Scent of Mandarin* (2015); and the superhero film, *Wonder Woman* (2017), which is set amidst World War I.

"World War I for Kids: A History with 21 Activities."

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