



1919

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“Never has there been a time when more complete callousness and indifference for human life was exhibited by the great communities all over the world,” declared Winston Churchill on November 24, 1919. World War I had swept away the old order and, in the words of William Klingaman, “mankind had entered a new age that was considerably less rational and less forgiving of human imperfections.” The leaders of the victorious nations gathered at Versailles to bring into being a lasting peace, but “the crushing complexity of the world’s problems...evaded any attempt to find a definitive solution.” Chaos reigned, as did irrationality, famine, violence, revolution, counterrevolution. Events had spun out of control.

1919: THE YEAR OUR WORLD BEGAN contains all the ingredients necessary for popular success: an epochal subject matter, a lively narrative style, memorable character sketches (the best being France’s “Tiger,” Georges Clemenceau), and moments of high drama, tragedy, and comic relief. Short on explicit conclusions and based largely on secondary sources, memoirs, and contemporary newspaper accounts, this engaging book is a well-organized mosaic of political, military, diplomatic, social, and cultural history. Aimed at a general audience, Klingaman’s synthesis ably integrates the American, European, and world scene. Thus viewed, the postwar strikes, race riots, and red-baiting, unparalleled in United States history, pale in comparison with the terror and bloodletting simultaneously occurring in Belfast, Budapest, and Berlin.

Despite the book’s depressing tone (quotes from the prophet Jeremiah introduce chapters with such titles as “The Days of Wrath,” “The Days of the Whirlwind,” and “The Days of Dust and Ashes”), the book is filled with colorful vignettes as well as insights by such contemporary observers as journalist Oswald Garrison Villard and poet William Butler Yeats. Sports fans will enjoy the accounts of the Dempsey-Willard fight, Sir Barton’s quest for the triple crown, and the Black Sox scandal. Whether it be the Russian Revolution, the suffragette movement, or the reign of Bela Kun, Klingaman whets the reader’s appetite for learning more about the momentous events that shaped the twentieth century.

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