



The Great War: July 1, 1916: The First Day of the Battle of the Somme

By Joe Sacco

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From “the heir to R. Crumb and Art Spiegelman” (*Economist*) comes a monumental, wordless depiction of the most infamous day of World War I.

Launched on July 1, 1916, the Battle of the Somme has come to epitomize the madness of the First World War. Almost 20,000 British soldiers were killed and another 40,000 were wounded that first day, and there were more than one million casualties by the time the offensive halted. In *The Great War*, acclaimed cartoon journalist Joe Sacco depicts the events of that day in an extraordinary, 24-foot- long panorama: from General Douglas Haig and the massive artillery positions behind the trench lines to the legions of soldiers going “over the top” and getting cut down in no-man’s-land, to the tens of thousands of wounded soldiers retreating and the dead being buried en masse. Printed on fine accordion-fold paper and packaged in a deluxe slipcase with a 16-page booklet, *The Great War* is a landmark in Sacco’s illustrious career and allows us to see the War to End All Wars as we’ve never seen it before.

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Editorial Review

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Starred Review What photos exist of WWI tend to be claustrophobic and grainy, which makes Sacco's epic panorama feel all the more revelatory. Illustrated across a single, wordless 24-foot-long accordion-fold page, Sacco details—and detail is the right word—the situation on July 1, 1916, as British troops meet the Germans at the Battle of the Somme in France. Paged through like a book, it breaks into 12 double-page spreads of astonishingly deep focus, as we follow, from a three-quarter overhead angle, the progression of British forces rightward (that is, eastward), from horseback generals and their comfortable châteaux to chow lines bothered by just a hint of distant frontline smoke; from the labyrinth of trenches to the vortex of shell explosions and the resultant gore; and, at last, from the medic station, featuring new trenches—graves—to the ominous sight of incoming reinforcements. Unfurled, this condensed picture of the western front is one of staggering grandeur and inescapable doom: those lean-faced soldiers at the far left have no idea of the meat grinder that awaits. A separate 16-page booklet provides invaluable annotations as well as Hochschild's fine essay on this disastrous day of battle. Though the format is a bit treacherous for library collections, this is on par with Jacques Tardi's unforgettable graphic works *It Was the War of the Trenches* (2010) and *Goddamn This War!* (2013). --Daniel Kraus

From Bookforum

A single continuous panorama, eight inches tall and twenty-four feet long, Joe Sacco's *The Great War: July 1, 1916: The First Day of the Battle of the Somme* illustrates, in minutely detailed black-and-white drawings, events just before and during a summer day when the British army suffered more than fifty-seven thousand dead and wounded, its greatest single-day loss. A journalist known for comic books on contemporary conflict, such as *Safe Area Goražde*, about the 1990s Bosnian war, Sacco conveys an eloquent, convincing, entirely wordless story. —Christopher Lyon

Review

“A searing depiction of a single day.... Exacting in every damning detail, magnificent in its tragic way.”
(Jeff Shesol - New York Times Book Review)

“Show[s] what photos can't: the enormousness and the enormity of what happened that day on the Western Front.” (Douglas Wolk - Washington Post)

“You've never seen anything quite like this.” (The Seattle Stranger)

“Deeply absorbing.” (Kathryn Schulz - New York Magazine)

“This is incredible. It is fantastic. He's showing you far more than a film or photographs could. It's just drawing?it's a superb example of what art can do.” (David Hockney - Sunday Times)

“Insanely beautiful. This is yet another total masterpiece from one of the most important comic artists of all time.” (Stuart Hammond - Dazed & Confused)

“Gorgeous and haunting.” (Cory Doctorow - Boing Boing)

“An eloquent, convincing, entirely wordless story.” (Tom Horgen - Minneapolis Star Tribune)

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