



The Vertigo Years: Europe 1900-1914

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Europe, 1900–1914: a world adrift, a pulsating era of creativity and contradictions. The major topics of the day: terrorism, globalization, immigration, consumerism, the collapse of moral values, and the rivalry of superpowers. The twentieth century was not born in the trenches of the Somme or Passchendaele—but rather in the fifteen vertiginous years preceding World War I. In this short span of time, a new world order was emerging in ultimately tragic contradiction to the old. These were the years in which the political and personal repercussions of the Industrial Revolution were felt worldwide: Cities grew like never before as people fled the countryside and their traditional identities; science created new possibilities as well as nightmares; education changed the outlook of millions of people; mass-produced items transformed daily life; industrial laborers demanded a share of political power; and women sought to change their place in society—as well as the very fabric of sexual relations.

From the tremendous hope for a new century embodied in the 1900 World's Fair in Paris to the shattering assassination of a Habsburg archduke in Sarajevo in 1914, historian Philipp Blom chronicles this extraordinary epoch year by year. Prime Ministers and peasants, anarchists and actresses, scientists and psychopaths intermingle on the stage of a new century in this portrait of an opulent, unstable age on the brink of disaster.

Beautifully written and replete with deftly told anecdotes, *The Vertigo Years* brings the wonders, horrors, and fears of the early twentieth century vividly to life.

The Vertigo Years: Europe 1900-1914 Details

Date : Published October 21st 2008 by Basic Books (first published August 1st 2008)

ISBN : 9780465011162

Author : Philipp Blom

Format : Hardcover 488 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, European History, War, World War I

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From Reader Review The Vertigo Years: Europe 1900-1914 for online ebook

Val says

The author takes an event in each year from 1900 to 1914 as the basis for each chapter. He then expands on the theme, so that Chapter 1 on the Paris World Fair also gives a wider coverage of France at the time, the Dreyfus affair and antisemitism, Chapter 2 on the death of Queen Victoria looks at Britain and the changing role of the aristocracy there and throughout Europe, Chapter 3 on Sigmund Freud finally getting a post and recognition discusses psychoanalysis and its effects on thought, art and literature, but also looks at the conglomerate, repressed Austro-Hungarian Empire, Chapter 4 on the award of a Nobel Prize to Henri Becquerel and Marie and Pierre Curie is a very good summary of scientific advances and experiments of the time, and so on.

The concept is good and the realisation is too, most of the time. Blom has tried to cover all the significant movements, events, politics, personalities and ways of thinking of the early years of the twentieth century. This is an ambitious book, and if we want to know more than he tells us about any subject there are references. It still ends up being a bit piecemeal, but is much better than many less comprehensive books on their selected subjects. Everything is given a context.

He does succeed in demonstrating that many of the modernisations thought to stem from the disruption of the war were, in fact, already in progress, so the book is successful in its aim.

Philip Blom is a German living in Austria. His view of Europe is different from that of some other historians I have read. Is he biased? He has nothing good to say about Tsarist Russia, the only person worthy of any respect, Sergei Witte, is 'probably of Baltic German stock', he is critical of France, somewhat sneering about the US and he is highly condemnatory about King Leopold of Belgium. (Interestingly, he is more positive about Britain and its Empire than many British writers.) When he writes about Russian and French treatment of Jews, or Belgian, Dutch and Turkish genocide, is there a 'Not Germany' lingering in brackets alongside the text. When he praises British social reforms he notes that Germany had already carried these out more effectively. He is not an apologist, he is critical of Germany and Austria sometimes as well, and he does not twist the facts or select only those favourable to his point of view, so I would say this is not him being biased, but it is a request to those who denigrate pre-war Germany to look again, without their own bias.

4.5 stars

Kalliope says

As I have read this book thanks to **Kris Rabberman**, it is to her that I shall dedicate my review. And since it is also **her birthday** today (January 22nd), this is **my gift to her**.

This book has a smart and clear structure. Blom has taken the fifteen years that preceded WW1 and surveyed the key cultural and social aspects that, mostly in Europe, accompanied the political events that led to the declaration of the Great War.

These were times of rapid change. The relative political and diplomatic weight of the major European countries shifted as these dancers changed partners at every turn. Economics also moved in its rankings. If Britain was number one for its economic power, it became number three and Germany number two in a disconcertingly short time. For the population at large, social structures and novel cultural production made

them feel they were losing their balance as their reference poles proved planted on quicksand.

Blom's account however, is extremely well balanced. You, possible reader, will not fall even if Blom succeeds in making you feel this old vertigo. Of course, the rate of change for our society has increased so tremendously that this dated vertigo will seem a mellow oscillation. But the giddiness felt by the population of the, mostly Western, world back then, was a disturbing and exhilarating reality.

Blom takes up the 15 chronological chapters and treats each one as a conceptual fan that he unfolds and develops. His ordered treatment of time is very skilfully combined with a thematic approach resulting in a very engaging reading. Chronological then, but not a dry chronicle.

From early on we are presented with the technological and chemical advances such as electricity, telecommunications, medical equipment (X-Rays and the Magic Mountain anyone?), transport with cycling, rolling or flying machines, and the continued expansion of the railways. But these advances are discussed, most interestingly, in the context of how they affected the way humans related to each other. One of these effects is that China, Japan and Eastern Russia quite rapidly entered the euro-centric consciousness.

Blom offers us also a survey of the social classes, with particular attention to the now quaint upper classes and high nobility with their emphasis on uniforms (difficult not to laugh at some portraits of Wilhelm II). This was a world in which military connotations were still held in high esteem. Ships were not just transport but a proud sign of naval power.

This power of the Powers was also unquestioned given that they needed to keep order in their backyards in other continents. These were held by the overall population in great pride. Peculiar times were these when monarchs had their own private rubber plantations in the centre of Africa, although they used management resources that belonged to the Nation. It is in this context that Blom expands on the new quasi-anonymous power developed as journalism and newspapers grew and he introduces us to the brave Edward Dene Morel and Roger Casement with a riveting account.

Other sectors of society also fought for their power. The discussion on the suffragettes is one of the best in the book. Blom gives a wide and well-balanced overview of how this movement fared in different countries, not just in the UK. Other social groups were the new pacifists, focusing either on the two Hague conferences with the extraordinary Baroness Suttner, or on the wild Wandervogel and similar movements in the wild woods of central Europe.

Some parts are harder reads. Eugenics is not avoided by the writer and has to be swallowed by the reader. But these are balanced by the always entertaining account of the Modernist artists. Close to these we get an excellent explanation of the very modern malaise of "Newyorkitis" or what the fashionable concept of "neurasthénie" entailed (any Proustians out there?). This leads Blom to expand on an excellent overview of the emerging studies in psychology and which is not a Freud-For-Dummies.

I have read this book in relation to the project on commemorating the centennial of WW1, but this is an excellent read for those interested in Modernism if they wish a closer look at the historical context in which the rich art movement developed.

Jill Hutchinson says

This is a different kind of history book as the author does not confine himself to the causes leading up to WWI but, rather, what was happening across Europe at all levels of society and thought. Each chapter concentrates on a specific year and addresses a particular issue which was in flux at the time. It becomes a bit pedantic but generally is a unique and interesting approach to a changing world.

Nick says

Survey of the western world 100 years ago. The existing academic categories of defining western thought were not challenged or expanded, but well explained. It's unnerving how much is lost so quickly, this book unintentionally shines light on modern culture's branding of individual endurance, i.e. modern culture trains us, or we train each other, to perceive a lifespan, a generation, as being much longer and enduring than it actually is. A year is a measurable timespan, with a beginning and an end, yet most of us treat a lifespan, a generation, with an open-ended permanence, i.e. longer than the set of years it contains. We are imprinted to make decisions and view life as 'in perpetuity'. Read this history and you are struck by the 'future past', that a small set of years, a set of 100, plunges you into an environ with aspects as fantastic as any imaginary SF world, and that public consciousness has long-ago lost any real awareness of what happened a very small number of years ago. Oddly, the dominant world religions based on spiritual immortality co-exist today with the cultural myth of empirical endurance.

Jeslyn says

Excellent work. Blom's goal is to re-examine the years preceding WWI as unlinked from the War itself, on their own merits and features, debunking the myth of a period of calm that was devastatingly shattered in August 1914. He does an outstanding job of focusing on the years at hand, and I found it very easy to not think ahead, and instead ponder the many seismic changes of those 14 years.

I liked the construct of taking a particular topic/emphasis/occurrence of each year and examining that influence on society, but viewing it in an arc that could extend decades prior - though I struggled with some of the chapters, particularly those discussing the changes to the psyche, there were also discussions of feminism, suffragettes, and the changing contributions of women; colonialism, human-rights atrocities, and arms races between countries; the rise of mass production, technology, and consumerism that I found absorbing and fascinating - and surprisingly similar to our current world. I have never thought of the first years of the 20th century having many similarities with the hypermodern years of the 21st century, but they are incredibly similar, and manifest themselves in society in such similar ways.

My reading was stretched out over several months due to juggling multiple readings and just the busyness of life, but it was good to take these chapters more slowly and think them through instead of trying to finish quickly.

James Murphy says

It's usually thought WWI brought about the enormous changes in Europe which ushered in the modern world. Blom's great lesson is that the social and cultural changes we associate with the war and after had already occurred or were underway. The war acted as catalyst causing processes in motion to speed up, to sometimes bring about collapse of ways of thinking or to shift identities or create new enthusiasms. Each chapter is headed by a year, and the course of the narrative is generally chronological. Blom tries to place the greatest influence of a particular reshaping in a proper niche within the spectrum of those years. The text centers on the rise of European militarism and the arms race in the run-up to the war, the colonial competition between European powers, the beginnings of class revolution in Russia, the rise of feminism--cycling trousers indeed!--and the changing roles of women, the beginnings of industrial mass production, how wireless telegraphy, telephones, and the increasing importance of autos and airplanes shrank distance and caused a dizzying sense of speed, new advances in photography and moving pictures, and new knowledge in such scientific fields as x-rays, radiation, and genetics all created a feeling of dislocation and fragmented life. Much more is included: art, music, new technologies, philosophy, Freud and the new psychiatry. This is enormous history. Blom covers it very well, I think. And he writes beautiful sentences.

Lilo says

After reading numerous non-fiction books dealing with the infamous European history of the first half of the 20th century, I thought I deserved a break from all this madness, atrocities, and right-out horror. So I decided to read "The Vertigo Years", a book about the so-called "Belle Epoche", expecting it to be a light read about golden times and containing an abundance of entertaining juicy stories.

Mind you, I had read several reviews of this book and, thus, should have known better. But this had been quite a while ago, and I had forgotten all about them.

Well, "The Vertigo Years" turned out something quite different than I had expected. I will not give a synopsis of this book, as other reviewers have done this before (and probably better than I could). I only wish to say the following:

This book has provided me more knowledge about the life and times of my grandparents and great-grandparents than any other source has ever provided me before. It has brought me closer to their lives and has helped me to better understand their actions.

I learned the horrid truth about the colonization of Africa and other Third World countries. Even though none of this had ever been mentioned in our history classes, I had known for quite some time that the colonization had not had the goal of "bringing enlightening to poor laid-back savages". Yet nothing had prepared me for the unspeakable cruelty with which the exploitation and enslavement of the natives in the Congo had been carried out by King Leopold I of Belgium, or rather his commissioned henchmen. (May King Leopold and his henchmen rot in hell.)

This book has made me understand why and how modern art has come to be. This is not to say that I would ever become a fan. My appreciation for modern art goes no further than the impressionists. And you would have to pay me to listen to a second opera with 12-tone music. (The one I went to see and hear in my late teens will last me for the next 300 years.)

There would be so much more to say about this book, which, while not the pleasant light read I had expected it to be, has turned out to be immensely mind-expanding for me. Yet I'll confine myself to what I consider most important.

There is, for instance, the topic of eugenics, which keeps popping up in the philosophies of smart and not-so-smart people of this era. We all know that this subject is a slippery slope, and we all know what it came to during the Third Reich. So I won't comment on it.

What most impressed me about this book, or rather the era depicted in this book, is that society, obviously, did not keep up with the rapid development of science and technology. -- Extended mobility had some people travel around the world and return as self-proclaimed experts on spirituality (derived from misunderstood and distorted Eastern philosophies). -- Scientific findings were misinterpreted and turned into pseudo-science. All kinds of nonsense was proclaimed as science or serious philosophy, and the average person could not tell the difference. Wannabe philosophers touted their crazy ideas as universal truths. Madmen presented themselves as philosophers, artists, and scientists. And all of these not-so-wise individuals found plenty of followers. -- Sigmund Freud had convinced peers and laypeople that whatever people were doing or thinking had to do with suppressed sexual desires. He even went so far as to state that little girls fantasized about having sex with their fathers and were, therefore, making up stories about their fathers having sexually abused them. Freud scared men by telling them that they were no longer masters in their own house. And Freud also explained suffragettes by claiming that they suffered from penis-envy. Because of Freud, the sexualization of each and every thing became an obsession. And even though Freud was celebrated as a know-it-all of psychology, antisemitism was, nevertheless, mixed into every philosophy and world-view. -- All this philosophizing was mainly done by the upper and upper-middle class, while the lower middle class frolicked in consumerism, enjoying the affordable goods produced by industrialization, and while the working class flirted with Karl Marx's socialism, which the upper classes somehow mixed with antisemitism and thoroughly despised.

Society had changed due to developments in science and technology, followed by industrialization, and also due to women no longer willing to remain second-grade citizens, controlled by their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Men feared for their manliness and reacted with glorifying military careers and war. More duels were fought than any time before. Two peace conferences in The Hague turned into a farce; none of the participating nations wanted to curb their arms build-up. And Bertha von Suttner's peace-keeping efforts (supported by some 100,000 followers) were ridiculed. Mental disorders (genuine and imagined) had become rampant. The world had turned crazy. — And then, WWI happened.

The author asks in the foreword of the book to forget about WWI and other following history while reading the book, as no era should be viewed and judged by what came next. Yet this is hard to accomplish. We all know what happened next. Would it have happened if the world had NOT turned crazy during the vertigo years? Would it have happened if the development in science, technology, and society had NOT come so rapidly? No one can tell.

What remains as a fact is that developments in science and technology cause changes in society. And if these developments come very fast, society is unlikely to cope and adjust without getting into a spin of vertigo. Roughly 100 years after the approach of the 1900 "Fin de Siecle", the world got connected to the internet. I cannot help but notice certain similarities to "the vertigo years". Let's hope that it will be possible to cope with the dangers arising from this new technology. So far, I can't see that this is happening.

For more profound evaluations of this book, please read the reviews to which I give the following links:

Riku Sayuj's review:

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Kalliope's review:

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Mikey B.'s review:

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

P.S. In case you have not yet read "The Guns of August", make sure you read "The Vertigo Years" first. Unfortunately, I had forgotten this recommendation of my GR friend Mikey. I would have benefitted so much more of "The Guns of August", had I first read "The Vertigo Years".

Barbara says

I really enjoyed this book. I liked that the author had a particular theme for each year (1900-1914). Each chapter could be read on its own.

Among the topics I found most interesting were: the suffragettes, the genocide in King Leopold's Congo (must read King Leopold's Ghost), the Curies, the development of cinema, and Russian thought and society.

I also enjoyed reading about the pacifist Bertha von Suttner, who was an entirely new name to me. It was interesting reading about Rudolf Steiner too. I knew of him as the founder of Waldorf education, but knew nothing else about him.

One of the ideas Philipp Blom brought up over and over was the changing role of men during this period. Women were becoming more independent, machines made muscle power less important, brain not brawn was becoming primary. Blom made the case that men felt threatened and unsure of themselves because of these societal changes. I remember this being talked about a lot during the women's lib era. Plus ca change....

Jur says

Machines, women, speed and sex: a rather bourgeois look at the opening of the 20th century

What if World War One hadn't happened and we looked back on the preceding 15 years without the shadows of that conflict cast over it? Almost like those that lived through it might have seen it. What was on their minds?

Rather than covering the tracks of political, economic and social histories of the start of the 20th century, Blom tries to picture the state of mind of Europe. And for this he picks the dynamo to symbolise the energy of the age.

According to Blom it all comes down to machines, women, speed and sex. The new technology, women claiming their part in the world (and the insecurities the new age inspires in men), the quest for speed and action and the effect it has on nerves and finally the struggle with Victorian views on sex.

The book is very readable, especially as it skims difficult theoretical bits and sticks to an impressionistic approach. Easily skipping from biography to anecdote to the broader social framework, Blom remains firmly in charge of direction.

This avoids uneasy questions, like how many people actually knew about most of the artists and scientists mentioned in this book? Did British labourers and Russian peasants worry about the state of the world, the rapid development of technology and sexual liberation? Many of these things probably didn't matter to the noble elites either. Dare I say that this is a very bourgeois history of this period? Not that there's anything wrong with that in principle, just that the state of mind that Blom is describing is applicable only to a limited part of the European population.

(And in line with that an easy criticism: the book focusses on Germany, France, Britain, Russia and Austria. How relevant is their experience for the smaller states?)

But even when avoiding the events leading up to the battles of the Marne and Tannenberg in September 1914, it is hard to escape the teleological trap. In his choice of avant garde artists, Blom still sticks to those that became part of the canon later. Where are the promising artists that didn't make it (either through lack of success, personal problems or death on the battlefield)? Likewise, what unfulfilled promises lay in wait in society?

How important is it to avoid WWI when looking at the period 1900-1914? How much discontinuity is there in WWI anyway to many of the subjects above? The war sped up technological developments, the emancipation of women and the freeing up of social mores. Today's society is even more frantic than that of 1913. At best our attitudes towards the developments have changed. We no longer worry that much about the degeneration of mankind in neurasthenic disorders.

Which leads me to my final point. In many cases I just couldn't help drawing parallels between the first decade of the 20th and 21st centuries. The speed of innovation in electricity and combustion engines then had a similar impact to that of automation today. The rapid spread of sports clubs, cinema and department stores, the mass ownership of technological gadgets like photo cameras and watches. How does that compare to iPhones and internet? Instead of creating new mass experiences (like sports stadiums and cinema's) later innovations have individualised technology, first through television, and now allows individuals to reconnect through social media.

But it is sobering to know that worries about the psychological state of humanity is at least a century old, that media were as obsessed by the private lives of stars (Sarah Bernhardt) and scandalous court cases (Henriette Caillaux) as today, that mystics and charlatans already had wide followings (Madame Blavatsky), that the male ego has been having serious trouble adjusting itself to female assertion all this time, that an international campaign to stop slavery and brutal exploitation in the Belgian Congo succeeded in 1908 and that most of the basic elements of the atomic and evolution theory were in place by then. Despite so much change in the last 100 years, it looks so much more familiar to us than the world of 1815.

John David says

“The Vertigo Years,” much like Blom’s earlier “Wicked Company,” is a history for the general reader who wants to gain a feel for the general *Zeitgeist* of fin-de-siècle Western Europe coming up through the beginning of World War I. If you desire a history of something specifically with “the events leading up to WWI” in mind, keep looking, as this book has almost nothing to do with the complicated set of alliances and feuds that eventually resulted in the death of Archduke Ferdinand. It is, in the purest sense of the term, cultural history. Almost anything and anyone of significant (and many things of insignificant) amounts of cultural relevance are described in the book, but at 400 pages, Blom never grows ponderous. The chapters on Marie and Pierre Curie are just detailed enough to where almost everyone learns something new. And many of the chapters are wholly based around people or events with which I had little or no familiarity, like the political assassin and wife of the former French Prime Minister Henriette Caillaux, as well as the influence of Bertha von Suttner, the peace activist and first woman to ever win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1905.

There are fifteen chapters in the book, each covering one year beginning in 1900 and ending in 1914. Instead of trying to write the history of each individual year (which would probably read much more confusedly and frenetically), Blom introduces each year with one seminal person, event, or idea with a striking vignette and uses the rest of the chapter to both branch out and go into some of the finer details of what’s really going on. Some of the most wonderful chapters include the ones on the 1900 World Fair in Paris, Freud’s revolutionary idea of “culture as sublimated sexuality,” and the journalists who broke the story about King Leopold’s atrocities in the Congo. Interspersed through the text are wonderful black-and-white photographs, with quite a few color plate photographs in the middle for visual reference to the varied artists Blom alludes to, everyone from Schiele to Picasso to Derain.

For those who have read Blom’s “Wicked Company,” this book is much, much better. None of the characters here seem to incur the author’s ire like Rousseau does. And while “Wicked Company” is almost a multiple biography of half a dozen characters or more covering a very wide swath of a century or more, this book is a set of tightly controlled, engaging bits of history with which we should all be familiar. It comes highly recommended for anyone with an interest in turn-of-the-century science, art, literature, technology, and society, and politics.

Mikey B. says

A wide scope of a book that successfully presents the period 1900-14 (pre- World War I) within in own context, not as a retrospective of the build-up to World War I.

As the author states, in July 1914 the major news headlines in France were about the murder of a newspaper editor by Henrietta Caillaux, not the assassination in Sarajevo.

We often think of changing to the 21st century as a period of intense upheaval – the advent of the computer age. This book demonstrates successfully that there were far more changes occurring when the 20th century began. Cars and airplanes had been introduced. More people were migrating and living in urban areas. Cities were becoming gathering centers, where vast changes were occurring in the arts, entertainment and science. It was the age of Freud and of suffragettes.

This era was the turning point for women in Western culture. Many were no longer content to be house-bound and baby-bound. They were demonstrating for the right to vote, and more – to be seen as philosophically equal to men. There was a break-down of male and female roles. For example women were bicycling.

Art and Freud were exposing sexuality as never before. The author also focuses on what the majority of people were experiencing – the cinema was expanding enormously, more newspapers were available with news ranging from local events to worldwide, sports grew too - from watching to participation. Due to all this, church attendance and influence was dropping. Church icons were being replaced with cinema and sports stars.

The author probes these myriad topics, sometimes in interesting detail such as the suffragette movement. At other times as in art – it almost seems like a college 101 course of ‘who is who’.

The main countries under study are Britain, France and Germany and to some extent Russia. Italy is hardly mentioned and the U.S. is used mostly as a reference point for technology.

Nevertheless the book is entertaining, instructive and replete with many colourful anecdotes of the era.

Russell Bittner says

If you want to get an insider’s angle on why Europe ultimately engaged in “the war to end all wars,” this may well be your book. Yes, it’s just one of many written about the period of 1900 – 1914 (e.g., Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August* comes most immediately to mind), but it’s also probably one of the best. Are there perhaps thousands of details we could do without? Possibly. But a pointillist creates the big picture by including thousands of details; should (s)he leave any one out, it’s no longer the same picture.

Moreover, if the canvas Philipp Blom paints looks, sounds and smells disturbingly familiar (i.e., redolent of early twenty-first century America coming up on a presidential election), you shouldn’t be surprised. George Santayana once wrote that “those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it.” We may well be about to plunge into a similar abyss.

And speaking of further parallels between that time and this one, I frankly have to wonder whether the following quote from Octave Mirbeau (at the start of Chapter 10 on p. 249, titled “1909: The Cult of the Fast Machine”) doesn’t say about the automobile what we might well suggest about smart phones, incessant text-messaging, and our apparent obsession with capturing (and sending out for mass approval) every little act, motion or place in which we find ourselves: “(i)t has to be said ... that automobilism is an illness, a mental illness. This illness has a pretty name: speed ... (Man) can no longer stand still, he shivers, his nerves tense like springs, impatient to get going once he has arrived somewhere because it is not somewhere else, somewhere else, always somewhere else...”.

I have to wonder: will someone someday write a book and title it *The Vertigo Years ... Redux: America, 2000 – 2016?*

Perhaps the best way to conclude this review would be with a citation from p. 393 directly under the rubric 'The Vortex of Infinite Forces': "Fifteen years had passed since the 1900 World Fair, fifteen years in which the world had changed radically. Some of these changes – the growing cities, the factory chimneys, the rail tracks and Dreadnoughts – were very obvious. Others were less apparent but all the more profound. The War would bring them to the surface and shake what was left of the old order. But the modern world was present even before the first German soldier crossed the Belgian border."

RRB
03/25/16
Brooklyn, NY

Riku Sayuj says

Dangerous Ideas; Necessary Ideas

The Vertigo Years traces the initial eruptions of some of the most explosive ideas and social phenomenons of the century that bore the brunt of the first mad rush of modernity — from socialism and fascism, to nuclear physics and the theory of relativity; from conceptual art and consumer society, to mass media and democratization; to feminism and psychoanalysis. The many issues and the intellectual interplay is explored in great detail and gives an overall impression of what seems in retrospect like backing for the war that followed, by every section of the social classes, from the intellectual elite, to the middle classes to the oppressed classes. We may even be tempted to see the war itself as a subconscious eruption of such strong tendencies that pervaded a restless continent and thus the world.

Granted it was weird times, but the ping-pong of retrospectively attributing the war to all these ideas and tendencies, and all these back to the war is not valid. The turn of the century was marked by many leaps of understanding, and also by a blind faith in science and progress, and a strong tendency to believe simplistic arguments. The war itself was a product of this blind faith in technological advance and an inability to think through the various connected effects of each advance and its application in any field (including the military). A mad scramble for catch-all theories.

Most of the wildest surmises of the era seems laughable at best or dangerous at worst to us now, especially the term '*Belle Époque*' and the many excesses of fields such as Criminology, Phrenology, etc. But what we need to understand is that without such wild forays and over-confident theories, science would not have progressed at such a rate. There is now an unfortunate tendency to look back at these theories and mock them with a typical - "*Look what THAT led to!*"

Isn't it deplorable that even a theory like Darwinism still has to buckle occasionally under the weight of its origins and the distortions visited upon it back then? Isn't it at least sad that the intellectual legacy of philosophers like Nietzsche is perpetually tainted by the twisting it was subjected to by over-zealous followers? Isn't the same the case even with Marxism? Why do they all have to be judged with hindsight-bias? It is our loss that these ideas are tainted, and even more so when we know so well that there is enough wheat among the supposed chaff to make them well worth passionate study and engagement.

This book allows us to see those ideas, including the ones that seem virulent and culpable to us today, in a new light — in the light of exploration and intellectual abandonment. As necessary precursors to both the good and the bad, hard to distinguish or separate at the moment of conception.

This is to be achieved by seeing the whole period in a new light, far way from the shadow cast upon it by later events.

That is when we can understand and appreciate the many ideas and false starts and sputtering that were necessary to the march of progress. That is also when we can learn to liberate the ideas from the weight of history and set them free again, to rejuvenate our own times.

The Thought Experiment

Blom is well aware that it is impossible to see this momentous period without the perspective of the war that followed. True. And the period deserves to be seen without that shadow, but this book proves that it is impossible to read without that shadow and more importantly, the author must have realized that it is impossible to write without it either, especially when most of the readers who turn to the book will do so to understand the war and its lead up better.

That is why Blom asks us to indulge in a thought experiment that should be sustained throughout the reading of this book — Blom invites us to look at the era without the benefit of our retrospective blinkers. He asks us to imagine that written history ended on 1914, so that this complicated period is not overshadowed by the events that followed. This is very hard to do and the moment we loose sight of this and slip back into our impatience to 'understand' the war, much of the book will seem pointless to the reader. If the reader wishes to understand the period, he/she needs to persist in this little suspension of belief.

After all, no period deserves to be treated merely as a lead-up to some historic event, but needs to be approached on its own terms to discover the true complexity of the people and ideas which inhabited and shaped it.

A lot more was going on than just the war.

Susanna - Censored by GoodReads says

The Vertigo Years is a thematic exploration of the world before the Great War. The events of each year of the period inspires the contemplation of a different theme.

- 1900: France
- 1901: Europe's aristocrats in their twilight of greatness
- 1902: Austria-Hungary and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis
- 1903: the new science, particularly physics
- 1904: the Europeans in Africa, particularly the Belgians in the Congo
- 1905: Russia
- 1906: Europe's militaries
- 1907: the Bohemian fringe: pacifists, nudists, Madame Blavatsky and friends
- 1908: the "women with stones" - the Suffragettes
- 1909: machines and speed

1910: the arts
1911: popular culture
1912: eugenics
1913: crime and insanity
1914: summation on the world that was "run over by a bus," to quote the late historian George Dangerfield

It's probably not the first book on the period I'd hand someone who didn't know much about the era, due to its thematic nature - but it might be the second.

Nigeyb says

Philipp Blom's central thesis is that the years 1900-1914 tend to be overlooked by historians analysing twentieth century history due to the dramatic events that followed, however he asserts that everything that followed has its genesis in these years. He makes a good argument too. Like our own era, the era was characterised by an incredible rate of technological change, profound social upheaval, etc. and Blom's book has given me a good insight into life during the early years of the twentieth century.

There's a chapter for each year beginning in 1900 and ending in 1914 and each year is introduced by a significant person or event. Each chapter works as a stand alone article and I jumped around a bit when I read the book.

The book places an emphasis on social and cultural history, and covers a wide range of topics e.g. modernism, women's suffrage, philosophy, Freud, telecommunications, neurasthenia, the Dreyfus affair, the growth of cities, etc. and convincingly demonstrates how the social and cultural changes often associated with the aftermath of WW1 would probably have all happened anyway.

The final chapter is called "1914: A political murder" however it's not about the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, it's about Henrietta Caillaux, the wife of the French finance minister, who killed the editor-in-chief of *Le Figaro*. The background of the crime is a tale that Blom could not have invented any better, a sleazy affair and an aggressive media campaign against the minister, combined to create the dramatic crime. The French public lapped the story up, meanwhile the shot in Sarajevo, fired at the same time, was hardly noticed.

The book packs a lot in and is well worth reading for anyone interested in the era, or indeed twentieth century history.