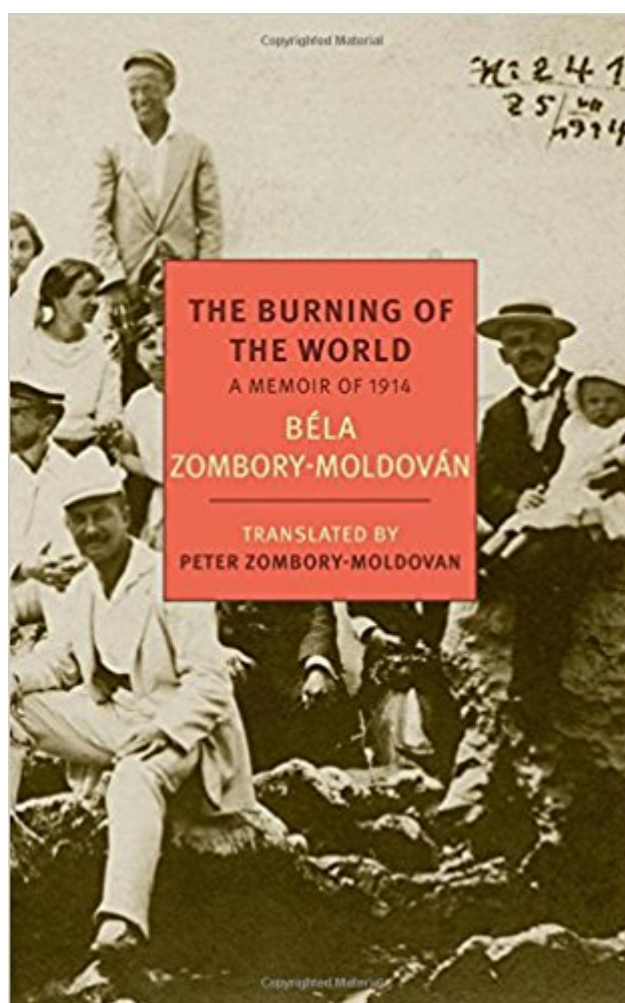


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The Burning Of The World: A Memoir Of 1914 (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

Publishing during the 100th Anniversary of the First World War – An NYRB Classics Original – The budding young Hungarian artist Béla Zombory-Moldován was on holiday when the First World War broke out in July 1914. Called up by the army, he soon found himself hundreds of miles away, advancing on Russian lines and facing relentless rifle and artillery fire. Badly wounded, he returned to normal life, which now struck him as unspeakably strange. He had witnessed, he realized, the end of a way of life, of a whole world. Published here for the first time in any language, this extraordinary reminiscence is a powerful addition to the literature of the war that defined the shape of the twentieth century.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“The literary discovery of the year.” –Eileen Battersby, "Books of 2014" “A remarkable narrative, a real treasure, a book everyone should read. The Burning of the World is a work of superb reportage as well as being a non-fiction companion volume to Joseph Roth’s classic *The Radetzky March* | The Burning of the World is a marvellous discovery with a humility and sense of wonder that places it more than the equal of even Robert Graves’s *Good-Bye to All That*.” –The Irish Times “[W]ritten with a painter’s eye for colour | [it] matters not only for its literary qualities but also as an evocation of the Austro-Russian theatre (for which we have very few accounts) during the more mobile opening phase of campaigning, when casualty rates were among the highest of the war.

[a] story not only of madness and massacre but also of regeneration.

•David Stevenson, *The Financial Times* "To a certain extent, World War I memoirs written from the anticomun perspective resemble one another, all mud and horror. What makes this one stand out is the author's painterly eye for detail, his ability to evoke a vanished way of life, and his tone of voice gentle and civilized but perfectly capable of the occasional sardonic flash."

•Henrik Bering, *The Wall Street Journal* "The pages devoted to the subject [of combat] are brilliant [The strength of this book is as an account [of] the effect of war on one sensitive young man and on everything and everybody."

•Charles Moore, *The Daily Telegraph* "To be in a war, within it, to know what that means, to understand the appalling and dreadful significance of all that is appalling and dreadful such was the fate of this gentle Hungarian painter. This book is perilous reading: the reader is invited, along with the writer, the one who remembers, to take part in what happened. But this is what we must do: from sympathy, from compassion, so that the one who truly lived through all of this will not be so utterly, unbearably alone."

•László Krasznahorkai "One reads with never-ending curiosity and ever deeper emotion these recollections of the first year of World War I on the nearly forgotten eastern front. Here, instead of trenches, there was constant movement. Vast ill-equipped and ill-trained armies composed of multiple nationalities among them Russians, Cossacks, Caucasians, Asians, Austro-Germans and Reich Germans, Hungarians, Romanians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes massacred each other for causes that few involved could understand."

•István Deák, *Columbia University* "The writing detailing the author's experiences in battle has an energy and sense of urgency, and the whole book is filled with the understanding that life would never be the same again...recommended for anyone interested in World War I, war memoirs, and the history of eastern Europe."

•Library Journal "...haunting, heartbreaking, and beautifully written...[Zombory-Moldovan's] relatively short exposure to combat is conveyed with an unforgettable intensity. But this is not another chronicle of trench warfare....This is a deeply moving account of a young man's short but terrible plunge into an inferno."

•Booklist, starred review "The Burning of the World is a compact self-portrait against a background of carnage and disillusionment."

•Larry Rohter, *The New York Times*

László Zombory-Moldován (1885–1967) was born in Munkács (now Mukachevo), in what was then the Kingdom of Hungary, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After

graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest, he established himself as a painter, illustrator, and graphic artist. Wounded in action in 1914 as a junior officer on the eastern front, he served the rest of the First World War in non-combatant duties. He was a successful painter, especially of portraits, during the interwar years, and was the principal of the Budapest School of Applied Arts from 1935 until his dismissal by the Communist regime in 1946. Out of official favor and artistic fashion in the postwar years, he devoted himself to the quiet landscapes in oils and watercolor that are his finest work. The writing of his recently discovered memoirs probably also dates from those years of seclusion. Peter Zombory-Moldovan has co-translated Arthur Schnitzler's *Reigen* and is working on a new version of Bertolt Brecht's *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches* for the English stage. A grandson of Béla Zombory-Moldován, he lives in London.

Among the dozens of books commemorating the outbreak of the Great War in August, 1914, two are unique and deserving of special attention because they are written by actual participants in the carnage. The first is "Fear" by Gabriel Chevalier which I previously reviewed on . The second just out is a book that had not been previously published until discovered in the author's papers by his grandson. It is Bela Zombory-Moldovan, "The Burning of the World." The first is a highly autobiographical novel published in 1930 by a French veteran. "Burning" is by a Hungarian survivor of the intense battles on the Russian front. Both offer the incredible first-hand perspectives of two soldiers who were there; but they also differ in important ways as well. "Fear" spends much more time on actual horrific scenes of battle--moving and frightening at the same time. "Burning" is concerned with the severe battle fatigue that the author suffers as he recovers from his wounds and awaits returning to the front. Since the author is a painter, he sees things differently than the French soldier. To be sure there are some fearsome scenes of battle, largely with an enemy who remains unseen. But the readjustment process after the battles, and the psychological effect upon the author, are the real focal points of the book. One wonders if soldiers, especially those severely wounded, ever make a complete recovery; are ever the same person they were before the battles. This New York Review Books edition contains the components we have come to expect in this fine (and inexpensive) series. The grandson/translator's introduction fills us in about the author, his family background and his postwar career (he died in 1967). There are some maps, a couple of the author's paintings, and some helpful notes which aid in understanding Hungary and the war setting. Particularly interesting is the cover photo, which shows the author on holiday at a beach with friends just days before the outbreak of the war. In fact, the transition from peacetime vacation

within the course of a few days to being a soldier at the front is one of the most remarkable aspects of the book. It is also interesting to note that much like the French civilian population, all gung ho to fight the Germans, so too the Hungarian population is enthusiastic about the war and expects a quick victory. But of course, it was not to be. Both books, much like their historical counterparts, are full of criticisms of wasteful and inept high command leadership. The weighty historical studies recently issued explain what happened on a macro basis. These two books look at the war from the perspective of the individual soldier caught in a worst hell than he ever could have imagined. Both kinds of books are essential to understanding the Great War; but "Burning" is essential to "feeling" what it was all about. We are fortunate indeed that the author left his unpublished manuscript behind and that his grandson, living in England, found it and undertook such a skillful translation.

One hundred years have passed since Archduke Ferdinand and his wife were shot dead in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. The heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was killed by a separatist who wanted the south Slav provinces to break away and become Yugoslavia. Austria-Hungary then declared war on Serbia, which was squarely behind the assassination plot. Shortly after the war's declaration, word reached Bela Zombory-Moldovan, who was quietly vacationing with family members in a small resort town on the Adriatic Sea. Bela was an avid participant in the cultural and intellectual life of Budapest, an illustrator, painter, and graphic artist. He was not a writer. Within a week from being called up to service, his entire pre-war world had ended, as had the entire world altogether. Zombory-Moldovan's memoir, as translated here by his grandson, Peter, covers the advent of the war and eight months of Bela's hellish experience in battle and his attempt to return to civilian life after being wounded. The shock of it all affected him for the rest of his life. He suffered from what is now labeled post-traumatic stress syndrome. This memoir was not meant to be published and in fact, was only recently discovered locked away in a strongbox. It is altogether fitting that it be published now. It remains thoroughly relevant to today's war-torn world and the soldiers and civilians who are its captives and victims. Although a memoir, this beautifully realized book reads like a piece of literature and reminded me in its descriptive brilliance of Dennis McFarlane's "Nostalgia," which imagines the Civil War trauma of a young, sensitive soldier who is quickly wounded, hospitalized, and then attempts to return to civilian life. The difference is that this memoir is real. I highly recommend it to those who want to know what those opening moments of World War I felt like, particularly to an artist.

I was eager to read this memoir because of the Hungarian perspective and was initially

disappointed when I came to its quick end as it seemed to fail, for me, in capturing the horror that we believe "le premier des dernières guerres" to have been. It seemed to read more as a "travelogue" - albeit one for military reasons - than an attempt to convey those horrors. And even though these were the first months of the war, so many died during that time, surely there was more to express. Yet, as I now go on to read another WW1 book, the descriptions and events in Zombory-Moldovan's memoir stay with me. Having had family I knew who survived that war, and who never spoke it of, his simple, direct and unhyperbolized (is that a word?) descriptions of his experiences seem to become more powerful in memory than in reading. After all, how does one describe an insanity?

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