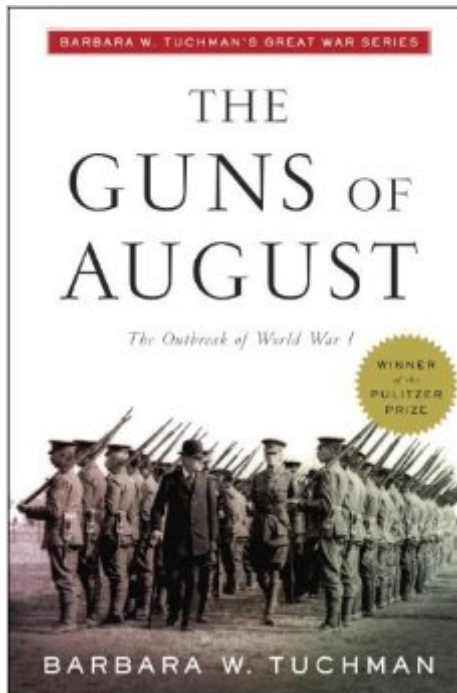


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The Guns Of August (Modern Library 100 Best Nonfiction Books)



Synopsis

Selected by the Modern Library as one of the 100 best nonfiction books of all time *The Proud Tower*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Guns of August*, and *The Zimmerman Telegram* comprise Barbara W. Tuchman's classic histories of the First World War era. In this landmark, Pulitzer Prize-winning account, renowned historian Barbara W. Tuchman re-creates the first month of World War I: thirty days in the summer of 1914 that determined the course of the conflict, the century, and ultimately our present world. Beginning with the funeral of Edward VII, Tuchman traces each step that led to the inevitable clash. And inevitable it was, with all sides plotting their war for a generation. Dizzily comprehensive and spectacularly portrayed with her famous talent for evoking the characters of the war's key players, Tuchman's magnum opus is a classic for the ages.
Praise for *The Guns of August*
"A brilliant piece of military history which proves up to the hilt the force of Winston Churchill's statement that the first month of World War I was a drama never surpassed."
"Newsweek
"More dramatic than fiction . . . a magnificent narrative"
"beautifully organized, elegantly phrased, skillfully paced and sustained."
"Chicago Tribune
"A fine demonstration that with sufficient art rather specialized history can be raised to the level of literature."
"The New York Times
"[*The Guns of August*] has a vitality that transcends its narrative virtues, which are considerable, and its feel for characterizations, which is excellent."
"The Wall Street Journal

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Written in 1962, this is a fascinating history of the beginnings of WW1 and is the result of a vast amount of research. It's all true, and all documented, and even though it's a dense read, the huge cast of characters springs to life. This is the story of a war that changed the course of history. And it's also a story of the men who make the war. The reader gets to see the blunders and the madness and the personal feuds. And the humanity of the imperfect human beings who make the decisions that result in slaughter. There are maps in the book describing the battles. There are also photographs. But I must admit that I barely looked at the maps. And I found all the photos of the elderly generals very similar. What I did love though was the sweep of the story as well as the many details that go into waging a war. Previously, most war books I've read had to do with the experience of the soldiers. But this book is about the experience of making decisions, often based on folly. And it opened my eyes to how vulnerable the ordinary person is to the whims of the generals and the forces of pure chance. Ms. Tuchman also had a sense of irony and humor and sometimes I found myself laughing out loud. The narrative of the month of August 1914 is described hour by hour. Belgium has to make a decision to accept an awful defeat or willingly allow the Germans to march through their neutral territory. There are alliances in place that are just waiting to be broken. The Russians come into the war. So do the British, even though it is with much reluctance. The basic war is between France and Germany, almost a continuation of the defeat the French suffered at the hands of the Germans during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Before I read this book, I didn't know much about WW1. Now I do. It was a war that defined the breakdown of the European nobility and set the stage for the next war, which was even more horrific. It taught me a lot, especially about how many people wind up dying because of the quest for power. It saddened me too because this quest for power is basic. So is the folly of mankind. The only thing that has changed is technology. This book is a masterful work. It lays the groundwork for an understanding of the mechanics of war. I might not remember all of the names of the generals or the battle plans. But I will always remember the feeling of being right there, watching the decisions being made, marching for miles in spite of fatigue, handling the big guns, making courageous decisions that sometimes led to disaster. And, especially, knowing that this is the true face of war. Highly recommended.

The Guns of August may be the single most influential popular history of the origins of the First World War. It has convinced generations of readers that the war stemmed from a series of rivalries, which in turn lead to an uncontrollable escalation of events which ultimately results in an unintended conflict which sweeps up the most of the continent in a war that no one wanted. To the extent that

President Kennedy is reported to have stated that this thesis influenced his thinking during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the *Guns of August* takes on an additional level of historical importance which goes far beyond its merit as an interpretation of history. This book didn't just interpret history; it influenced history. It may have even helped to prevent a nuclear war. As such, it is an important book. This is why I've assigned it three stars; the book is historically important. The great big screaming problem is, as a history, from the very day it was published, its basic thesis of war by miscalculation was already untenable on the basis of available scholarship. The root of the problem is that while Tuchman does provide a brief overview of the historical tensions that provide a background to the war, she spends all of ONE long paragraph discussing what actually transpired between the assassination on June 28 and the July 23 publication of Austro-Hungary's ultimatum to Serbia (i.e. the crossing of the threshold that establishes that a decision for war has been made and opens the door to the further expansion of the conflict). This is a STAGGERING omission. If you're not going to spend any appreciable time looking at the specific actions of the participants during the crisis period, how can one possibly advance a thesis on the war's origin or who was or was not responsible for its outbreak! Here we need to cut through some bland nonsense. The war does not break out simply because of a set of longstanding bitter rivalries. Those rivalries were just that... longstanding. They are historically relevant background, but they are ONLY background. Crises came and went in the preceding years without leading to general war. The point is that even in a time of genuine crisis, something more is required to transform a crisis into a war. What is required is a specific set of choices, made by a specific set of decision-makers, occurring within a specific timeline. Tuchman's one paragraph treatment of the crisis period is a completely inadequate examination of what the key actors were actually doing during this critical period. The irony is that for many people, Tuchman's *"Guns of August"* tends to be their first introduction to the history of the outbreak of WWI, despite the fact that far more scholarly and thorough works had been available for decades. The Carnegie Endowment translated and published quite a bit during the 1920s. Pierre Renouvin's *Immediate Origins of the War* became available in English in 1928, followed by Luigi Albertini's landmark 3 volume study, *The Origins of the War of 1914 (3 Volume Set)* which, by virtue of its extensive primary source documentation remains as valuable a reference as it was on the day of its publication. To these one could add Fritz Fischer's *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, which was published in German the year before *GoA*, and the subsequent *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914* which came out several years later. All of these works dug into primary source evidence to painstakingly reconstruct the nuts-and-bolts details of the timeline of what went on at the top levels of decision-making. The evidence makes it clear that

Tuchman's thesis was all wet. The war was not one of accidental, unintended escalation, nor were all parties more-or-less equally responsible. Decision-makers in Imperial Germany and Austro-Hungary made a specific set of deliberate choices that guaranteed the threshold to war would be crossed. While they may not have expected or intended the world war that they got, they were aware of the risks of escalation, and they very early on chose to accept those risks and opt for a punitive military strike against Serbia in preference to the pursuit of redress by diplomatic means. In contrast, prior to the issuance of Austro-Hungary's ultimatum to the Serbs, no other power took any steps which would have precluded the peaceful resolution of the assassination crisis. These other powers may share some responsibility for their role in background rivalries of the day, but they do not share equal responsibility for transforming an assassination into a war, which then had every possibility of expanding into a world war. Unfortunately, none of this comes out if one relies on Tuchman's one paragraph treatment of everything that happens between the assassination on June 28, and the ultimatum on July 23. As Tuchman's *Guns of August* is historically important, I can't recommend that readers ignore it. However, I stress that it is essential to be aware of its flaws. I can also recommend some remedies. If you're not particularly familiar with the crisis period or the cast of characters, a good introductory work to start with is *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* It's well organized and a fairly easy read. The documentation is not great, but Fromkin's book provides an excellent layout of the key players and the crisis timeline. When you get through Fromkin, move on to Albertini or Fischer's works cited above. These are not such easy reads, but they are scholarly, and very heavily documented. You'll need to spend some time with them, but if you invest that time, you'll emerge with a much more detailed understanding of the crisis period. You'll also be far better equipped to assess some of the new books which are coming out in connection with the war's anniversary.

What Barbara Tuchman has done here is something precious few historians are able to do. With her stunning prose and fathomless knowledge, she brings to life that first fateful month of World War One. The historical figures she describes seem more like a collection of characters from an action novel. More than once I found myself saying "Did they really do that?" Ordinarily I can only read about 75 pages at a time before I start to lose interest and need a break. This book I began one morning and didn't put it down until I finished it. Tuchman kept my interest throughout and at times, though I knew the outcome, I found myself sitting at the edge of my chair wondering what would happen next. Even some of the best novels do not have this kind of power. As for the book itself, it covers only the first month of the war. Though it does go into some depth of the war's origins, the

main focus is on the movement and action of the armies from mobilization day until stalemate is reached. Tuchman's research is exhaustive, and this is the definitive work on that period. When the book was finished, I was disappointed only because she didn't continue. I wish I could give this more than five stars. If you have any interest in history whatsoever, regardless of your field, you must read this book, because this is what history should be!

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