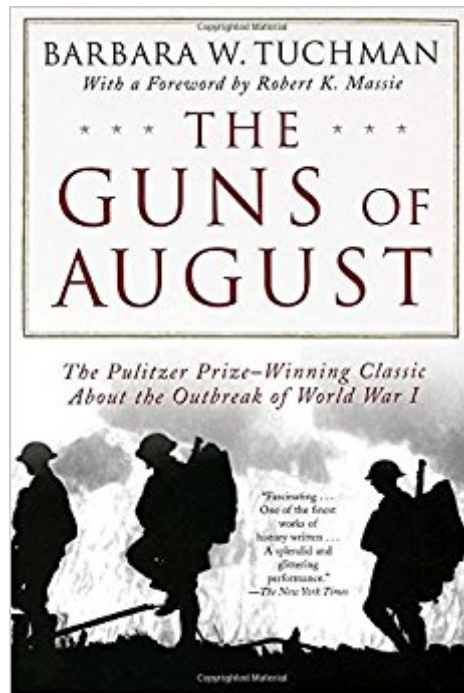


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The Guns Of August (Modern Library 100 Best Nonfiction Books)



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 'no drama ever 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*

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Customer Reviews

“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 *the* 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* From the Paperback edition.

To many people, W.W.I seems like ancient history. To me, it is the most fascinating of wars. It is when the modern world began, or, in Barbara Tuchman’s opinion, when the 19th Century ended. My late Great Uncle Jimmy, a Brit, joined the Army at the age of 16 by lying that he was 18 after being encouraged to do so by a recruiter. Where did they send him? To Ireland, to train horses for the cavalry! This was the same war that saw the debut of the airplane, submarine, tank, poison gas, machine gun, flamethrower, and hand grenade! In this Pulitzer Prize-winning history, Tuchman writes about the turning point of the year 1914--the month leading up to the war and the first month of the war. This was the last gasp of the Gilded Age, of Kings and Kaisers and Czars, of pointed or plumed hats, colored uniforms, and all the pomp and romance that went along with war. How quickly it all changed, and how horrible it became. Tuchman is masterful at portraying this abrupt change from 19th to 20th Century. And how she manages to make the story utterly suspenseful, when we already know the outcome, is the mark of a great writer, and a classic volume of history. Doug Grad, Editor

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.

A most enjoyable book that provided me with new insights into WWI and especially the combatants (Germany, France, England and Russia). It was fascinating to learn how all of them did NOT want the war (although Germany seemed "predestined" - (at least in its own mind) - to rule Europe. The failure of France and Russia in particular to be prepared for what was to become the War to End All Wars was unbelievable. The incompetence of their governmental and military leadership was beyond eye opening. It again made clear the insanity of war. My only criticism is that it got bogged down a bit in details that I will soon forget.

A fascinating look at the first month of World War I. The first world war is so often glossed over in history classes, and gets boiled down to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and trench

warfare, when there is SO MUCH MORE to the conflict. The first month of the war is incredibly important, and shapes the way much of the rest of the war will turn out, and Tuchman gives you all the details you need to understand (or at least mostly understand) what was going on during that first month. This book can be a tough read, as it's fairly dry and can be complicated, but if you are at all interested in WWI, this book is for you. I came upon this book because of the WWI series of Hardcore History podcasts, so if you liked that series, you'll love this book!

Fantastic read. Covers so much in such a short period of time its almost dizzying. Its a global classic so I don't see what my review will really touch on that others haven't already. It covers the general global feeling that a great war was on the horizon and everyone knew. The one topic I wish she covered more was the assassination of the Arch Duke that sparked the whole thing. The amount a detail that is in this book is insane, almost every troop movement is covered from the start of hostilities by the Germans through Luxemborg and Belgium, then France. It also covers the Eastern front in just as much detail. She not only gives you the large picture of armies clashing and the stress the Politicians and Generals were under but also what the common soldiers were experiencing. The book ends just before the Battle of the Marne but for such a short period of time so much went down. I plan on reading many more of Tuchman's works.

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