

The Guns of August by Barbara W. Tuchman

A predilection for the high drama of war stories and an appreciation for history as narrative led me to explore Barbara W. Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, a dramatic, comprehensive and painstakingly detailed account of the beginnings of World War One. Having read her history of fourteenth century Europe, *A Distant Mirror*, I was eager to see how she would apply her style of taking important individuals of the period and showing how events unfolded through the prism of their experiences, to the subject of the First World War. Moreover, the period is one in which I have long been interested, having been introduced to it through the World War One poets, T. S. Elliot's *The Wasteland* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The very individual tragedy of this war and the one it engendered a generation later was brought home to me when I lived in France and saw the village memorials and the plaques in Paris commemorating the spots where a civilian had been dragged out and "*fusillé par les Allemands*," (shot by the Germans.) Finally, the fact that nearly a century later we are still grappling with war and the world that arose out of 1914 gave immediacy and poignancy to the reading of this book exactly ninety years since the events it records took place.

The Guns of August is a military history of the first month of the First World War written by a self-taught scholar and physician's wife who combined raising three daughters and writing her first books. *The Guns of August*, which received a Pulitzer Prize in 1962, cemented her reputation in the field of history. Tuchman was a traditional historian who depended on facts scoured painstakingly from a plethora of primary and secondary sources and who wove a gripping narrative from the interplay of these facts, an exploration of the role of individuals, and a consideration of the complex motivations which may have led them to take the actions they did. Rather than imposing her own loose interpretations on what the participants were thinking, however, "She recommended letting the facts lead the way," as Robert K. Massie points out in the forward. Quoting Tuchman, "The very process of transforming a collection of personalities, dates, gun calibers, letters and speeches into a narrative eventually forces the 'why' to the surface."

In this very little of the recent trends in historiography can be seen, except perhaps what Lawrence Stone referred to in his essay "The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history" from Tosh's *Historians on History*. Hers is a "single coherent story" the arrangement of which is descriptive rather than analytical. Its focus is on man not circumstances and it possesses a theme and an argument – the unfolding of World War One and its disastrous consequences for Europe. Certainly Tuchman would have agreed with Stone in his assertion that the culture of the group and will of the individual are important as causal agents of change. And she clearly wants to know what was going on in people's heads in the past. For her, the "great man" approach, the *mentalité* model, the *histoire événementielle* and the historicist technique of combining documentary evidence with the powers of the imagination are the brushes she uses to paint a vivid, living picture of the events and individuals of August, 1914.

One could argue that Tuchman might have used the cliometricians' approach to good effect in her discussion of the economic factors which the academicians and policy makers of the day felt would make a long war unfeasible, or to better show the importance the railroads played or to shore up her already impressive statistics on troop

strengths. The reader can also see opportunities for a more *longue durée* discussion of the natural obstacles that limit or stop humankind, such as the challenge presented by the sloping ground and mists of the Ardennes Forest or the way the iron ore concentrations in the area around Briey and the control of this area were significant factors not only in 1914 but in previous periods. This would have resulted in a much different kind of book though, and the reader must be thankful that Tuchman was not swayed by contemporary fashions in historiography but guided only by her own deep humanity, curiosity and urge to express her considerable literary talents in the field of history, albeit one that even when she was writing was labeled “elitist.”

Despite the considerable descriptive powers displayed in these pages, Tuchman does not disappoint in her discussion of causes, starting with the war itself. Certainly the best known short-term cause listed for the outbreak of hostilities was the assassination of the Austrian heir apparent, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by Serbian nationalists, the “damned foolish thing” that Bismarck had foreseen would ignite the next war (71). This act triggered a domino effect of related causes. Due to the complex web of treaties laid out in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when Austria took advantage of the assassination to absorb Serbia, Germany was required to support her, even as Austria’s aggression brought her into conflict with Russia. Russia had her own alliances with France and England, both of which were seen as threats by Germany and both of which were objects of envy and hatred, France for the brilliance of her culture and beauty of her civilization - despite her decadence - and England for her naval power – along with her “selfishness and perfidy” (311). “Envy of the older nations gnawed at him,” Tuchman says of the Kaiser (6). There was, too, the desire on the part of Germany to finish what she had started in 1870 with victory over the French at Sedan, a victory that had ceded her the lands of Alsace-Lorraine but which had failed to put France forever on the defensive and which had also failed to be the German 1789. For Germany, 1914 would witness the enthronement of *Kultur* in Europe and the fulfillment of Germany’s historic mission. As Thomas Mann saw it, “Germans . . . deserved to be the most powerful, to dominate, to establish a ‘German peace’” (311).

The French, for their part, in the face of growing German militarism given voice by the Kaiser himself, “possessor of the least inhibited tongue in Europe,” stoked up their *furor Gallicae* and awaited the moment that had seemed inevitable ever since the Treaty of Versailles had amputated her eastern flank. Aside from nationalistic scores to settle, many other nations were simply “sore-headed and fed up” with “Germany’s clattering of the sword” and saw in the coming conflict hopes for the “moral regeneration of Europe” (312-313).

Tuchman sees the parts as well as the whole, and her discussion of cause as it relates to individual battles and the generals involved is psychologically astute without being limiting. She offers plausible explanations for General John French’s lack of will in the defense of Belgium (218) and shows how the breakdown of Plan 17 in the first weeks of the war paved the way for a long and brutal struggle (262), as did the final failure of the Germans’ Schlieffen Plan for a double envelopment of the enemy. The ensuing deadlock “determined the future course of the war and, as a result, the terms of the peace, the shape of the interwar period, and the conditions of the second round” (439). Throughout the book, Tuchman’s use of statistics to show cause is just enough to support her point without bogging down the narrative as when she describes the

discrepancies in the number of railroads between the Germans and the Russians (58) which would contribute to the Russians' inability to mobilize as quickly as the Germans, or the superior German numbers at the Battle of Mons (259).

It is impossible to discuss the causes of the First World War without an exploration of the philosophy and ideas circulating at the time. It is also impossible to disregard the role individuals played in an event as prone to human arrogance and folly, greatness and sacrifice, as a war that in all contemporary estimates should have lasted no more than a few months. For this reason, though it is very tempting to discuss the technological innovations such as the machine gun, airplane, telephone and submarine that were to have an impact on outcomes, I will focus the following discussion on Gustavson's categories of ideas and individuals.

In looking at the ideas prevalent in Germany during the last half of the nineteenth century, it is clear that it was never a question of "if" but only "when" as far as war with France, if not England, was concerned. Early on in *The Guns of August* Tuchman traces a hundred years of German philosophy and finds the "seed of self destruction...waiting for its hour." She cites Hegel and his idea of Germany's glorious destiny of compulsory *Kultur*; Nietzsche, who would turn the Germans into "Supermen;" and "Treitschke, who set the increase of power as the highest moral duty of the state" (22). She shows how both the Germans and the French were committed to the idea that will could prevail as the decisive factor in war. For the French it was *élan vital*, the all-conquering will which, coupled with *cran* or "guts" and translated into military terms, became the doctrine of the offensive (31). Other ideas that now seem to have lost their gloss still held full currency at the beginning of the last century; as Tuchman put it, "In 1914 'glory' was a word spoken without embarrassment, and honor a familiar concept that people believed in" (102). Indeed war itself was seen as ennobling, "an idea widely held at the time by numbers of respectable people" (311). Though the clock had moved forward into the twentieth century, the ideas that motivated people were clearly sprung from the nineteenth if not earlier. Those ideas born of the twentieth century that could have saved them, such as the pacifism embraced by the brotherhood of socialists and the ideas set out in a new book, *The Great Illusion* by Norman Angell, showing that the interlocking of finance, commerce and other economic factors made war unprofitable and unfeasible, were swept away by the overriding idea of nationhood.

A climate that nurtured such ideas was bound to produce larger-than-life personalities whose character traits ran the gamut from the selfless and steadfast heroism of King Albert of Belgium, of whom Tuchman says, "the only one among them (the princes of Europe) who was to achieve greatness as a man" (3), to the arrogance, territorial cupidity and petulance of the Kaiser. Between the two extremes marches a dazzling parade of generals and politicians who collectively display every conceivable human fault- hubris, greed, cruelty, cowardice, indolence and horrible miscalculations that cost thousands of lives in a single action. There is the ingratiating Russian Minister of War Vladimir Sukhomlinov who, according to the French ambassador Paléologue, inspired "distrust at first sight," and who "could not hear the phrase 'modern war' without a sense of annoyance" (61), an attitude which would lead to the catastrophic shortages that cost the Russians the first decisive battle on the Eastern Front. There is Germany's architect of war, the "wasp-waisted" Count Alfred von Schlieffen; "Monocled and effete in appearance, cold and distant in manner," he conveniently disregarded the neutrality of

Belgium in his plan to crush France, a factor that not only brought the British into the war but also stimulated an unexpected and aggressive resistance by the Belgians themselves. While it is difficult to find anything admirable among the German military leadership, typified by the “deliberately friendless and forbidding” Captain Erich Ludendorff, the “hero of Liège” who would go on to become Hindenburg’s right-hand man on the Eastern Front, one can nonetheless appreciate the audacity of individuals such as the ironically named General von François whose single-minded insubordination and disobedience contributed to an early and astonishing success against the Russians. And General von Kluck, who, by his headlong advance and disastrous underestimation of the ability of the French to rally would open his army up to penetration at the Marne, almost takes on a tragic air.

The Allies naturally come off better in Tuchman’s account and, as with the Germans, the author skillfully combines insightful descriptions of character with a close attention to the course of action each individual takes. The result is a clear picture of the way these men influenced the outcome of the first decisive month of the war. There is the resolute and imperturbable General Joffre, commander-in-chief of the French armies, whose intransigence early on would later be validated by his “impregnable confidence” in the face of seeming defeat. “It is difficult to imagine any other man who could have brought the French armies out of retreat,” Tuchman asserts (437). In contrast there is Joffre’s British counterpart, Sir John French who, just when the reader is about to give him up for an obdurate and spineless turncoat willing to abandon the French in their direst hour, redeems himself at the last moment and commits the British Expeditionary forces to the Battle of the Marne. As in so many scenes, Tuchman conveys the terrible weight of the decisions these individuals made and the poignancy of the moment in which they resolved to act. She does not flinch from exposing their vacillation, jealousies, ineptness and myopia, but in so doing she never fails to take into account their humanity. As Massie points out in the forward, “-all were described in human terms and, where possible, given the benefit of the doubt” (xii). There are too many actors to mention but a few others stand out: The firm but critical General Lanrezac, denied a part in the Battle of the Marne for having been too right during the first weeks of the war; his replacement the bold and authoritarian General d’Esperey; the dignified and elegant defender of Paris, General Gallieni; and the young Winston Churchill, “the only British minister to have a perfectly clear conviction of what Britain should do and to act upon it without hesitation” (92).

Reading *The Guns of August* was both a gripping and supremely satisfying cerebral experience. While not an academic per se, Tuchman nonetheless demands critical faculties from the reader and there were times when the long passages on troop maneuvers involving armies, divisions and corps would make my head spin. Tuchman also seems capricious in her choice of which phrases to translate, often leaving the German untranslated, but providing English equivalents to many, but not all, French phrases. The short collection of photographs, mostly of the generals involved, could have been expanded to include images of such power as the bombing of the Library at Louvain or the Cathedral at Rheims. And while maps were included, they were not of the best quality; it was difficult to distinguish the markings showing troop movements and the place names were hard to make out. These are minor complaints though in the face of a work that displays immense organizational capacities, monumental research skills, and

lyrical passages of great beauty. The magnificent flow of the prose and the superb scholarship, as evidenced by seventy pages on sources and notes at the end, more than make up for the miniscule shortcomings I mention. Having now read the book, it is easy to understand the sensation it created in 1962 and the reason why President Kennedy gave a copy to Prime Minister Macmillan “observing that somehow contemporary statesmen must avoid the pitfalls that led to August, 1914” (*vii*). If only our politicians today would consider the lessons of history in like manner.

Jeanne Belisle Lombardo

The Guns of August, by Barbara Tuchman. 440 pages. New York: Ballantine, 1962.
ISBN 0-345-38623-X