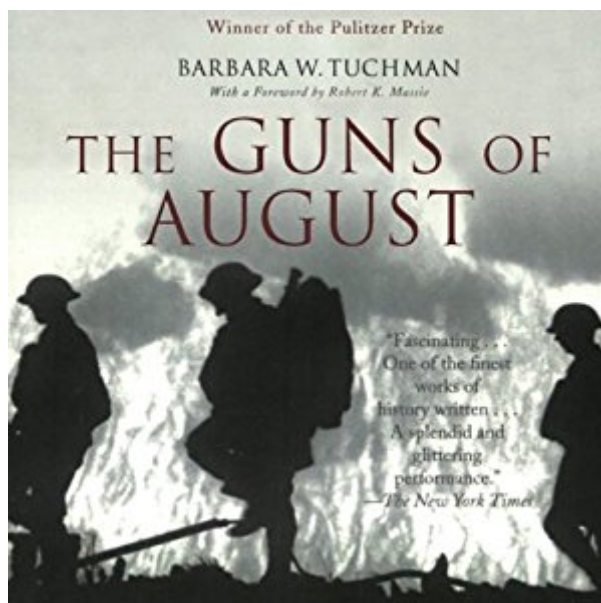


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The Guns Of August



Synopsis

Historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Barbara Tuchman has brought to life again the people and events that led up to World War I. With attention to fascinating detail, and an intense knowledge of her subject and its characters, Ms. Tuchman reveals, for the first time, just how the war started, why, and why it could have been stopped but wasn't. A classic historical survey of a time and a people we all need to know more about, *The Guns of August* will not be forgotten. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 19 hours & 9 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

Audible.com Release Date: April 28, 2008

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B0018O22QC

Best Sellers Rank: #4 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Reference #14 in Books > History > Military > World War I #41 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Military

Customer Reviews

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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