

Tuchman's research and the reception of the guns of august



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One of the deadliest wars in world history, World War I, lasted from July of 1914 until November of 1918. This was one of the first wars to be defined as a global war. This essentially means that all of the world's superpowers were fighting and consequently the whole world was affected. The world's powers all gathered together and were part of either two groups. The first group was the Allies, which consisted of France, the British Empire, and the Russian empire. The second group was the Central Powers, which consisted of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany. In *The Guns of August*, Barbara Tuchman examines the months leading up to the war and the first few months of it. Specifically, she focused her narrative on the military history aspect of World War I. Overall, Tuchman depicts an extraordinary prelude to World War I, such as the decisions of the superpowers involved and world events that affected the war. It has been described by the reviewer Samuel R. Williamson Jr. as "one of the finest works of history... [and of being a part of] the best sellers list for more than forty weeks".

Tuchman begins her book by illustrating her thought process behind her work and the methods that she used. She starts with an introduction that exemplifies the need for facts and connections in order to accurately depict World War I. In the Foreword, written by Robert Massie. In this foreword, Massie reflects on Tuchman's writing process and how she describes her work. On page xi, Massie states that in regards to Tuchman's work, she asked numerous questions and "[her] research was too find out... what really happened." In other words, Tuchman's question would be 'What really and factually happened in the prelude and first few months of World War I?' On page xi, there is another question; Massie describes Tuchman's efforts to get

at “ how it actually felt for the people present?” In other words, Tuchman's question would be ‘ how did World War I make the people involved feel like?’ In the author's note, Tuchman herself, once again reiterates this question and how she answered it throughout her book. In the authors note, Tuchman goes on to explain how she answered these questions. In seeking answers to these research questions, Tuchman gathered great amounts of information from various types of sources. On page xxiv, Tuchman states that the first question was answered based on evidence from documents she's gathered and even that “ all conditions of weather...in the following pages [of the novel] have documentary support”. Some examples of documents that she used to answer this question are primary sources of battle orders, telegrams, secret codes, maps, and weather reports. On page xxiv, Tuchman states, in regard to the second question, she had a “ total immersion in military memoirs...[and] all... thoughts or feelings, in states of mind public or private... Have documentary support.” Similarly to the first question, this question is also omnipresent throughout the novel. Therefore it is hard to pinpoint the documents used to answer this question down to one. Nevertheless some examples of primary sources she used to answer this question are letters, memoirs, dairies, and pictures. Nevertheless, Tuchman's approach strays from the classic historiographical approach from here on out. Her study is more of a descriptive history than one of pure analysis.

In one book review, Jeanne Lombardo states that Tuchman used “ the historicist technique of combining documentary evidence with the powers of the imagination... [which] she uses to paint a vivid, living picture of the

events and individuals of August, 1914." It is important for readers to understand that although Tuchman doesn't come right out and say what her analysis is, it doesn't mean it is nonexistent. Tuchman utilizes her documents in a way, which creates an eloquent story. Tuchman backs up this idea when she states that she believes " 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" (xii). It is also important to include the interpretation of Ulrich Trumpener. He states in his book review published in *The Journal of Modern History* that *The Guns of August* was a great narrative work, but " as a scholarly contribution to the history of World War I it is less than satisfactory... [Tuchman's] story is only partially based on the best available evidence...[and contains] oversimplifications." Trumpener continues to discuss how *The Guns of August* increasingly left out information regarding certain countries' contributions to the war. Nevertheless, Tuchman addressed this issue in her author's note where she stated there was some omission regarding certain fronts throughout her book. In regard to these omissions, she states that they were " outside my chronological limits and it seemed to me there was unity without it is the prospect of tiresome length if they were included" (xxiv). Personally, I believe that her descriptions were all based on fact and the omission of certain aspects was essential. This is because it would have been detrimental to her interpretations and consequently her narrative descriptions.

Overall, Tuchman's sound research through both primary and secondary sources regarding World War I led to her study revolving around what she

believed truly led to the war. She had numerous interpretations from her analysis of the documents. She specifically believed that there were roughly four reasons that this war started. The first reason she believes was due to a misconception regarding the free trade and the idea it would stop a war because people would want to avoid economic consequences. This idea can be shown on page 12, where Tuchman states: Lord Esher delivered lectures on the lesson of The Great Illusion at Cambridge and the Sorbonne wherein he showed how 'new economic factors clearly prove the inanity of aggressive wars'. A 20th Century war will be on such a scale, he said, that its inevitable consequences of 'commercial disaster, financial ruin and individual suffering' would be 'so pregnant with restraining influences' as to make war unthinkable. In this quote, Tuchman illustrates the belief that the war was considered unthinkable due to the economic effects it would have. Tuchman uses a source that included the preaching's' by someone who was considered highly educated to prove this point. The Second reason Tuchman believed that the war happened the way that it did was due to ideologies regarding warfare. Tuchman thought there was too much of an emphasis of the countries involved on the idea of a quick war and staying on the offense. She demonstrated this idea on page 372, where she stated: Clausewitz [a German] had described terror as the proper method to shorten war, his whole theory of war being based on the necessity of making it short, sharp, and decisive. The civil population must not be exempted from wars the fear of estimate feel its pressure and be forced for the severest measures to compel their leaders to make peace. In this quote, Tuchman illustrates her thought that the war happened the way it did because the leaders of the nations involved believed that the war was bound to be quick

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and short. This specific example revolves around the German peoples' ideologies of a short war and the need to always attack. Tuchman used Clausewitz to prove the pressures of a short war and offensive attacks.

The third reason Tuchman discussed revolved around the effects of the treaties. Tuchman emphasized how the treaties and alliances resulted in a type of domino effect, which resulted in more countries becoming involved with the war. Tuchman describes this idea on page 63: The government maintained the disingenuous position that the military "conversations" were, in Haldane's words, 'just a natural and informal outcome of our close friendship with France'. Natural outcome they might be; informal they were not... the General Staff have 'certainly committed us to fight, whether the cabinet likes it or not.' In this quote, Tuchman explains her thought that the war happened the way it did because of how many intertwined alliances and treaties there were. This specific example revolves around the connection between the U. S and France and how their alliance essentially meant that if one of them went to war, they both had to. Lastly, another interpretation she came across was the contradictions involved in the warfare, such as having technological advances but sticking to the traditions of wars in the past. She discusses this on page 457: Doumergue made a deep impression when he said, 'it takes more courage to appear a coward and risk popular disfavor interest being killed.'...[This statement] provided a subject for further heated dispute. In this quote, Tuchman outlines a heated debate from this time. This debate was essentially one revolved around trying to overturn distinguished ideals on the ethics of war. Previously, it was thought it was better to die in

battle than to give up. Nevertheless, the use of that ideology in this war was detrimental to the militaries because of the invention of new weapons.

Tuchman decided to write *The Guns of August* when a publisher, Cecil Scott of the Macmillan Company, invited her to write a history describing the events that took place during this war. In the preface, Tuchman described a concern she had about the idea that no one would be interested in such a topic or read this book. She stated, " In moments of depression during the course of writing, I had asked Mr. Scott [the publisher], ' Who is going to read this?' (xxi) The book was originally intended for an audience that had previous knowledge of World War I and wanted to see an interpretation of how it felt for those involved. Nevertheless, as a richly descriptive study with a blend of imagination and evidence, resulted in it becoming a widely read book across a variety of populations. The book turned out to be a great resource for those interested in studying the origins of World War I, but needed a captivating story to keep them entertained while learning. The feature that was often denounced by some, the writing style being a descriptive narrative with imaginative pieces based on fact, is what ultimately led to its widespread popularity.

Tuchman's writing style in this text matched the needs of the intended audience and this outreach included every day people. Making the compelling story based on the facts allowed people who would normally be bored by history to become captivated. An example of Tuchman's ability to present fact with an interesting narrative can be shown on page 90: Meeting the censure of his comrades, Admiral Troubridge demanded a Court of

Inquiry which order to his trial by court-martial in November, 1914, on the <https://assignbuster.com/tuchmans-research-and-the-reception-of-the-guns-of-august/>

charge that ' he did forbear to Chase H. I. G. M.'s ship Goeben, being an enemy then flying'. Tuchman is able to bring Admiral Troubridge to life. She captivates her readers through not only listing the facts but also using fantastic diction, such as the word " demanded". Nevertheless, she is also able to give her readers the facts needed to understand the causes of World War I. In this instance, she was able to give a quote from a secondary source, an article on Troubridge. This use of captivation is done by one of the three types of historical writing, Narrative writing. This is because narrative writing is used when the author wants to chronologically tell an event; in this case it was the prelude to the war. Also this style is usually used when an author is telling a military history, which Tuchman is.

The Guns of August is, ultimately, an insightful and rigorous work that describes the military history of World War I. Tuchman was able to coherently voice her interpretations on the reasons the war occurred through a descriptive narrative. Although, there are some differences in opinion revolving around Tuchman's analysis, she does a great job utilizing her sources in a way to prove the economic and militaristic reasons behind the inevitable Global War.

Works Cited

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