13. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte
Rereading Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*
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Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: Why did you choose Barbara Tuchman's book, first published in 1962, as a vehicle for discussing the First World War? What does this work still have to tell us today?

Tuchman's book is doubtless antiquated in many respects, for instance regarding the history of everyday life during the war or the transnational entanglements it engendered. Also disconcerting is the nonchalance with which Tuchman divests herself of a detailed study of Austria-Hungary as well as her sketchy picture of the July Crisis despite almost all of the relevant sources being available at time of the book's composition. And yet *The Guns of August* is rightfully judged a classic because the author clears the discursively overgrown historiographical terrain with some clear and distinct visual axes. Her chief interest is the grotesquely excessive fear of a devaluation of military power and the equally great dread of a loss of political credibility as well as the unwillingness or inability to change course even with its ruinous consequences fully in view. The year 1914 thus emerges as a historical milestone in that it was the culmination of a line of development reaching far back into the nineteenth century, while also engendering upheavals and dislocations that still make for irritations a century later.

BCZ: What do you mean by fear of a devaluation of military power?

In essence all the countries involved were deeply concerned with not being taken seriously as military powers. France was obsessed with the humiliation it had suffered in the Franco-Prussian War; at every opportunity Russia sought to redeem its defeat at the hands of Japan in 1905; Great Britain feared not having sufficient resources to effectively counter Germany's newly won hegemony on the European continent;

Austria-Hungary perceived the unrest on the periphery of its multi-ethnic state as a provocative challenge to the entire Dual Monarchy; and the German Empire entertained the specter of powerlessness in what it fancied to be a policy of encirclement practiced by its enemies. The European powers were engaged in a competition as to who had the greatest military capacity, and they were tempted to demonstrate this capacity in practical terms when favorable conditions presented themselves. Tuchman shows this beyond any shadow of a doubt.

BCZ: That sounds like an early version of what today has become a popular thesis–that all the nations involved had an equal share of responsibility in the outbreak of the war.

Tuchman doesn't see things as simply as that. She does underscore the fact that in the July Crisis all countries acted irresponsibly. Setting the tone were politicians who had neither a sense of the consequences that would result from their headstrong actions nor a willingness to understand the positions of their competitors and enemies. Whether at royal courts or in the state chancelleries, most of these politicians behaved like gamblers, raising the stakes in their belief that they could master the danger as they had in those past crises which had brought Europe to the brink of general conflagration. Yet this should not obscure the policy of the German Empire. On 5 July, when Berlin promised its Austrian ally unconditional support–the notorious »blank check«–it submitted itself to Vienna's agenda and thereby bid adieu to a diplomatic solution. At this point the dynamics of the crisis took on the dimensions of a runaway train. No matter how you look at it, German policy cannot be absolved of this responsibility. It would now seem time to reemphasize this thesis of Tuchman's– in the face of a number of new studies that see the war's outbreak as having been primarily the result of a chain of unhappy events, chance and contingency. Tuchman reminds us that chance is not the only factor determining a state's scope of action but that even in open decision situations a decision must be made and that the roulette ball which clatters into black only results in disaster because you had bet everything on red.

BCZ: Historians are still divided as to whether statesmen foresaw a long or short war–in other words, how great in fact was their appetite for risk?

Tuchman's position on this can be summarized in a single sentence: There is a world of difference between foreseeing something and understanding it. Her thesis still

retains explanatory power in light of recent research: If the actors of the summer of 1914 had in fact had a clear conception of the war that loomed, they would have certainly applied the emergency brake.

BCZ: Initially you spoke of how Tuchman also considers the long-range upheavals and dislocations that resulted from the First World War. What is her main concern here?

Barbara Tuchman never discusses the confrontation of the superpowers post-1945. And yet it is obvious that her reading of 1914 was under the impress of the Cold War and that she also wished to chart the political terrain of her own time as seen through the lens of the past. The Cold War battleground could indeed be described using the political grammar of the early twentieth century. Both epochs were dominated by fear of a loss of the ability to wage war, and an overheated struggle for credibility in this sphere was the result. It was both during the Cold War and in 1914 that statesmen played fast and loose with their most important international capital–trust was abused and distrust was cultivated. Tuchman does not attempt to draw any clumsy parallels between the two epochs. Her concern is rather political mindsets and attitude patterns of such remarkable obstinacy that they were not to be shaken even by catastrophes. For this reason alone *The Guns of August* remains a valuable book.