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The World in 1900: Paper #2

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The Proud Tuchman:

A Classic Yet Essential History of the World in 1900

The world before World War I has been widely examined in historical literature, including by American historian Barbara Tuchman (1912–1988) in *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890–1914* (1966).[[1]](#footnote-1) This work is a collection of essays written by Tuchman during the 1960s and published in 1966. Her work is a comprehensive history of the West before WWI, including its major tensions, figures, and ideological developments. Tuchman combines an impressive amount of information into a work that is essential and relevant—if at times lengthy—even more than fifty years later.

Despite never pursuing advanced study in history, Tuchman became an accomplished historian who wrote for popular and scholarly audiences alike. In *The Proud Tower*, she skillfully tells a narrative of the figures of this time and makes arguments that require a knowledgeable reader. Tuchman limits her scope geographically and only focuses on the West. She even further limits this by excluding Spain, Russia, and Eastern Europe, which are, according to Tuchman, part of a different culture and tradition.[[2]](#footnote-2) Her main focus is on England, France, Germany, and the United States. While she acknowledges this shortcoming of her study, her work is not a portrait of the “world” before the War, as her title claims, so much as it is a portrait of the West.[[3]](#footnote-3) The tendency to focus on the West in this era is not uncommon; historian Charles Emmerson notes that Tuchman’s work symbolizes the impulse to focus on Europe, since WWI began there.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Overall, Tuchman’s evidence allows her to create a large, narrative history. She employs many secondary histories of countries and of characters. Additionally, she often quotes primary sources, which allows her to show the perspective figures of the time. These primary sources include Oscar Wilde’s letters, Emma Goldman’s autobiography, and reports from the conferences at The Hague in 1899 and 1907. Overall, her sources create an image of these four countries before WWI by highlighting events like the Dreyfus Affair, ideological movements like anarchism, and figures like Richard Strauss. In doing so, she paints a comprehensive yet not exhaustive portrait of the era, focusing on the turn of the century and the changes it would bring.

The work does not include an introduction or a conclusion to tie together the essays. With no statement of argument, the reader may become overwhelmed with information. However, in her foreword, Tuchman notes that there is not one generalization to be drawn.[[5]](#footnote-5) Tuchman deals with many tensions, conflicts, people, and histories, and each essay tells a narrative of the West with its own argument. This is, in itself, a kind of argument: the West before WWI does not fit into one category and often varied. Because Tuchman does not provide one argument, it is necessary to examine each chapter in turn in order to understand the work.

Chapter One examines England during its last aristocratic government, elected in 1895.[[6]](#footnote-6) The ruling class, the Patricians, were born into wealth and were expected to serve in government. They viewed themselves as superior citizens who had the duty and right to protect others and serve as a model for the lower class.[[7]](#footnote-7) This was the Age of Privilege and the lives of the privileged were secure, comfortable, and peaceful.[[8]](#footnote-8) Tuchman tells the story of the Patricians through characters, notably Lord Salisbury, who served as Prime Minister from 1895 to 1902. Lord Salisbury symbolizes the archetypal Patrician as he was born to an aristocratic family and did not believe in political equality.[[9]](#footnote-9) Through Salisbury and other figures, Tuchman examines developments in England that concerned Patricians as well as the public, including Oscar Wilde’s 1895 trial, degeneration, and the Boer War.[[10]](#footnote-10) According to Tuchman, the Nineteenth Century was the most hope-filled, progressive, and richest century ever known.[[11]](#footnote-11) The year 1900 was the end of a century of change and signaled the beginning of a more tumultuous century to come. For the Patricians, the Twentieth Century began the end of their reign.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In “The Idea and the Deed (Anarchists: 1890-1914)” Tuchman explores the rise and fall of anarchism before the War. This chapter focuses on the important anarchist thinkers (who created “the Idea”) and actors (who performed “the Deed”) and also focuses on the anarchist assassinations of the era. Anarchist assassinations began with the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881.[[13]](#footnote-13) The movement developed in Russia, the United States, and France, and Tuchman tells the stories of the Russian leader Peter Kropotkin, Johann Most and Emma Goldman in the United States, and the practical development of Syndicalism in France. With the assassination of American President William McKinley in 1901, the era of anarchist assassinations would come to an end in the West.[[14]](#footnote-14) For Tuchman, the ideology was idealistic but by 1890, the movement became less connected with reality and more utopian.[[15]](#footnote-15) Anarchism would be plagued by its inherent paradox. According to Tuchman, “Revolution demands organization, discipline, and authority; anarchy disallows them.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Tuchman views anarchism as the last efforts of individualism and unregulated living before the State, the party, the union, and the organization would take over the individual.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Tuchman organizes Chapter Three (“End of a Dream (United States: 1890–1902)”) around Thomas B. Reed, a Republican born to a working-class family in Maine.[[18]](#footnote-18) His story exemplifies a contrast with England’s government: the American wealthy did not participate in politics. According to Tuchman, this contrast developed from the triumph of Jeffersonian democracy: in allowing white men to vote without property, a hereditary class did not develop.[[19]](#footnote-19) After the Civil War, the United States was expanding but leaders began to look outward for expansion.[[20]](#footnote-20) Because much of the public viewed imperialism as contrary to American ideals, the push outward represented a crisis of American identity and its place in the world.[[21]](#footnote-21) How can the United States represent its founding ideals if it conquers others? How can the Unites States compete with European nations if it doesn’t expand? In 1901, anarchist Leon Czolgosz shot President McKinley in Buffalo. According to Tuchman, this was the end of an era in America and Roosevelt was the architect of a new age.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In Chapter Four, Tuchman concentrates on the Dreyfus Affair and how French society reacted to it.[[23]](#footnote-23) The Affair was an issue of identity with each side fighting for its own idea of France (one of Counter-Revolution and progressive social tendencies, the other of France of 1789 and the tradition of the Republic).[[24]](#footnote-24) Newspapers played a large role in the Affair, especially with the development of the anti-Semitic press.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Chapter Five, “The Steady Drummer (The Hague: 1899 and 1907),” is the only chapter that examines developments that would lead to war. It begins with Czar Nicholas II’s call for a meeting of countries as a result of the swelling armaments industry.[[26]](#footnote-26) The first conference took place in The Hague during the summer of 1899 and it failed to achieve meaningful reform, since the majority of the countries did not want to limit their development of armaments.[[27]](#footnote-27) Tuchman notes that Germany was the most resistant to change, since military prowess was central to Germany’s identity.[[28]](#footnote-28) The second conference at The Hague took place in 1907 after the Russo-Japanese War. The same, mostly German, unwillingness to compromise plagued the conference. A third conference was tentatively planned for 1915.[[29]](#footnote-29) Tuchman refrains from placing blame for the outbreak of WWI on any country, but hints that Germany’s noncooperation was a factor.

Chapter Six centers on Richard Strauss to tell the story of Germany from 1890 to 1914. Strauss was Germany’s greatest and most forward-thinking composer and as Germany was the musical center of Europe, his story tells of art in this era.[[30]](#footnote-30) For Strauss, music could be used like literature to tell the stories of characters and it could also be used to express new ideas, like those of Frederick Nietzsche.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Chapter Seven is titled “Transfer of Power” and centers on England from 1902 to 1912, a much different era than examined in Chapter One. During this decade, the power of the Patricians waned and “the age of the people was underway.”[[32]](#footnote-32) By the 1906 election, the Liberals had gained the support of the electorate but were undercut because of domestic quarrels and because much of the working class began to support the Labour Party.[[33]](#footnote-33) Tuchman argues that though social progress gained ground in England after the turn of the century, progress was often slow and burdened by the political system.

Tuchman finishes her work with “The Death of Jaurès (Socialists: 1890–1914).” Socialism was an international movement, led by intellectuals on behalf of by not by workers.[[34]](#footnote-34) Tuchman compares socialism to anarchism, but notes that socialism was not doomed, since it allowed organization and political action.[[35]](#footnote-35) Tuchman argues that socialism failed to result in a successful revolution for three reasons. First, the movement was supposed to be international, but the era dealt with a growing nationalism because of increased international tension.[[36]](#footnote-36) Second, increased government participation of socialists and positive labor regulations demonstrated that government participation was useful and negated the need for a revolution.[[37]](#footnote-37) Finally, the Marxist revolution took place in Russia, which Tuchman considers “the wrong way in the wrong country.”[[38]](#footnote-38) With the death of French socialist leader and Jean Jaurès at the very beginning of WWI, the socialist movement changed.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Throughout the work, Tuchman consistently emphasizes the shift that occurred at the turn around 1900. For Tuchman, the progress of the Nineteenth Century halted and the new century brought violence like the Boxer Rebellion, the Boer War, and American interference in the Philippines.[[40]](#footnote-40) This signaled that “money and bigness” governed, encouraging political corruption, the growing of Empires, and international noncooperation.[[41]](#footnote-41) For Tuchman, that the War would come was not surprising, as it resulted from the tensions that began at the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

Tuchman’s work, however outdated, is an early but important one in the historiography of the period. For historian Eric Hobsbawm, the work is essential but is at times “pointillist” or “impressionistic.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Tuchman does not agree with Hobsbawm that the era’s events would inevitably lead to a war. Overall, this work is older but still relevant to histories of this era, though it is long and exclusive. Its organization is rather questionable and requires the reader’s attention and coherence of various references and arguments, but in doing so provides the reader with a rich history of the era and its actors. Tuchman does not offer one argument but rather recognizes the complex tensions prevalent throughout society and how they were often different based on theme, people, and nation.

1. Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890–1914* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Charles Emmerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), xi–xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 3, 5, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 32–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, 66–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 63, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid, 117–118. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, 118–119. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, 119, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid, 131–132. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid, 486. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid, 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid, 262, 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid, 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid, 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid, 296, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid, 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid, 352–353, 364–365, 379. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid, 407, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid, 409. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid, 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid, 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid, 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid, 420, 462. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid, 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (Vintage: 1987), 379. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)