



Welcome to our March book, Historians!

Our next meeting is on Zoom on Tuesday, March 9 at 6:30 to discuss *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* by Barbara Tuchman published in 1978. Plague, authoritarian rulers gaining power, bankrupt economies, schism in the church and division in the lands. Sound familiar? What can the 14th century show us about surviving the perils of the 21st century? Tuchman takes us to the 14th century in southern England and northern France. Battle scenes and scenes from daily life in the castle and in the village paint a vivid description of a time very different from our own yet amazingly similar. People in the 14th century were facing the same loss of faith in our world that we are experiencing now. In a calamitous time, how do you construct a good society?

This past week of sitting in the dark and the cold, worrying about water and food, isolated from friends and family because of impassable roads and Covid made the 14th century seem not so distant from us. In fact, the 14th century was the beginning of the Little Ice Age in Europe. And most people blamed China for spreading the plague. As Tuchman reminds us, the 14th century was a very different time from our own, yet I felt much closer in spirit to it this past week than perhaps Tuchman did in 1978!

Tuchman is correct to point us to what was the bigger story of the 14th century for the people living through the time. How do you rebuild the society that was lost after the High Middle Ages of the 12th and 13th centuries? And what should this new society look like? In telling this story, Tuchman first gives us an overview of the 14th century in Europe and then tells a personal story of the time through the life of Enguerrand de Coucy. This personal history combined with Tuchman's vivid recreation of scenes and details makes the 14th century real to the reader and strips it of the romantic glow that we want to give to the age of chivalry. While some critics faulted Tuchman for this "survey course" approach to history, she defended her narrative history as the best way to tell this story. "Narrative is the spine of what I do because that's the way life is lived. It isn't lived in categories," Tuchman wrote.

So what narrative do you take away from this book? Is the 14th century a distant mirror of the 21st century? And if so, how? What decisions do they make and how much do past actions drive their future actions? Think about the Hundred Years' War which became an endless war for reasons that no longer mattered. Do you see a parallel to today's wars? Authoritarian rulers rise out of societies that crumbled under the turmoil of this time period, particularly in the end of the republics in Italy. Again, what warnings do these events carry to us? Warfare is changing as well. The use of the longbow at Crecy not only determined the outcome of a battle but ended the age of the knight in ways they did not realize. Is this killing at a distance the true beginning of modern wars? And how does all the violence and death of this time period affect the way the average person views life, especially as the Church becomes part of the problem instead of a place to look for answers.

Sometimes looking at society in the past can give us valuable insights into dealing with society in the present day. Let's ponder if that is true in Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* when we discuss it on March 9 at 6:30. I look forward to a lively meeting of minds!

Donna McBride