



August 1914: France, the Great War, and a Month That Changed the World Forever by Bruno Cabanes.

Trans. Stephanie O'Hara. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2016. Pp. xvii, 230. ISBN 978-0-300-20827-6.

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The Great War on the western front summons images of stalemate, poison gas, and trench warfare. But the first month of the war—from France's declaration of mobilization (1 Aug. 1914) to the Battle of the Marne (6–10 Sept. 1914)—unfolded quite differently. In *August 1914*, acclaimed historian Bruno Cabanes¹ (Ohio State Univ.) concentrates on the opening weeks of the conflict as French soldiers and civilians experienced them.

In eight brisk chapters, Cabanes considers: prewar expectations, the diplomatic crisis, mobilization, the opening engagements (particularly the Battle of the Frontiers and the retreat preceding the Battle of the Marne), and civilian experiences in both rural and urban areas. He stresses the moment of parting as newly mobilized soldiers left their families; the fears, rumors, and riots that plagued a nation on edge; the requisitioning of horses; and the regulation and victimization of civilians. Chapters 1–5 are loosely chronological, the final three thematic.

Cabanes sets out to complicate readers' assumptions about certain tropes of the opening of the war in France: the Union Sacrée that supposedly united the nation at the outset, the flags waving as smiling soldiers marched off to war, and the crucial Battle of the Marne. Since the book was originally published in French,² Anglophone nonspecialist readers may sometimes miss his points. The book is nonetheless suitable for undergraduate courses, with a little supplemental reading to provide context.

Cabanes's overarching argument is that the intense violence of the Great War shattered common French preconceptions about the conflict even before the horrors of trench warfare, poison gas, and Verdun. He gathers evidence for this thesis from the archives of the French army and the Paris police, as well as the French National Archives (e.g., reports by various *département* prefects), newspaper accounts, published memoirs, and a range of secondary sources. The author proves his case through telling details and fresh examples that make for compelling reading. Though he calls his book an "intimate history of the end of a world" (xiv) in which "something was ending, and disappearing forever" (xvii), his focus is not so much on this vague sense of loss as specific human experiences.

Chapter 1, "The War Breaks Out," discusses the assassination of Jean Jaurès (31 July 1914) and the decision to mobilize for war on the following day. Though Cabanes wisely eschews a granular account of the play-by-play of the diplomatic crisis, these pages do not quite hit the mark. Too detailed to be easily absorbed, they sometimes also lack the vivid imagery that might have created effective scenes, as well as a discernible argument underlying the narrative. Nevertheless, the book's earlier chapters give some sense of a mobilization that was both highly structured and deeply personal:

All across France, thousands of stationmasters had unsealed a letter sent to them on August 1, at the same time as the order to mobilize. The letter described which trains would be passing through their

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2. *août 14: la France entre en guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014).

station, how many cars they would contain, and their specific schedules. These were various pieces of an unusual puzzle that was being assembled minute by minute. The wheels of peacetime had ceased to function. Other mechanisms were being engaged, carefully prepared by armies of engineers, geographers, and technicians. (30)

Chapter 2, “Visions of War, Dreams of Peace,” addresses the debate over the Three-Years Law and the myth of the Union Sacrée. Cabanes emphasizes that the long-standing alliance system did not automatically lead to conflict; instead, “circumstance, perceptions of enemy forces, the passions of public opinion, and a kind of collective blindness” (36) motivated the declaration of war. Some perceptive observers had warned for years that a new European conflict would bring unprecedented slaughter, but their messages went unheeded in 1914.

The book begins to be more engaging—indeed, riveting—in chapter 3, “Farewell Ceremonies,” where Cabanes turns to soldiers’ goodbyes and the “odyssey” (70) of mobilization that took them all across France. He particularly excels at describing the cultural artifacts of parting captured in, for example, a mural (*Le départ des poilus, août 1914* [1926]) by American painter Albert Herter, the photography of Jacques Moreau, and director Abel Gance’s film *J’accuse* (1919), in which human hands symbolized care and affection. (Illustrations would have been most welcome here.)

When a mobilized man disappeared inside the train station, as if carried off by the wave of collective destiny, he no longer belonged to civilian society. Women and children would then stay for a moment, hands gripping the bars of the gate, wearing expressions of intense sadness, as the tight framing of Moreau’s photographs reveals. They were peering at the crowd of uniforms, trying to catch one last glimpse of their loved ones. (72)

Chapter 4, “Trial by Fire,” explains how, in the heat of August, the French and German armies used their reserves in crucially different ways: the French kept theirs back, whereas the Germans put theirs to immediate use to increase their effective force during their turn through Belgium. Cabanes captures the dreadful events of the battles of 20–23 August, including the bloodiest day in French military history (the 22nd), when some twenty-seven thousand French soldiers died. Here, he injects insights from studies of gender, emotions, the body, and the senses; he notes, for instance, that the exigencies of war challenged the masculine ideal of the soldier’s upright body. Adrenaline allowed muscles to contract and move more quickly. In forest combat, the “dry cracking of tree trunks and branches gave the impression that shells and bullets were coming from everywhere” (106). Charles de Gaulle, then a young lieutenant, recalling the defense of Dinant (15 Aug.), wrote “I had the feeling that there were two of me: one that runs like an automaton and another who watches in anguish” (104–5). The soldiers of 1914 certainly faced appalling brutality and carnage, but this was not the first time military surgeons had been overwhelmed by shell-inflicted injuries. They had felt the same despair at treating countless shell and shrapnel wounds during the Franco-Prussian War.

The brief fifth chapter, “The Shadow of Defeat,” clarifies the strategy behind the opening battles and the adjustments that enabled the French to halt the German advance at the Marne. Cabanes does not spend much time on this battle itself, which might have provided a natural endpoint for the book’s chronological chapters. Instead, he shifts his focus from this moment of fleeting victory to a period of uncertainty. This choice suits the book’s overall argument and avoids papering over the stunning shock of the war’s opening month with some kind of redeeming battle. Still, nonspecialist readers may find this a strange narrative choice.

The final three chapters concern the home front. In chapter 6, “The Enemy Within,” Cabanes reveals a fearful France gripped by spy mania, rather than a nation confident of future victory. He quotes letters denouncing suspicious activities in the air, such as kites and illuminated signs. He astutely jux-

taposes a prefect's stilted and officious report with the direct personal experiences related in memoirs. Chapter 7, "Fears and Rumors," examines false reports of the slaughter of children and actual anti-German riots at home, including the looting of hundreds of Maggi milk stores in Paris. The final, somewhat fragmentary chapter, "The Sounds of War," treats the silences of a mobilized country and assaults on civilians by occupying soldiers. The section on farm country is especially vivid. Requisitioned horses were checked for health and marched off to die. The restriction of travel to the hours between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. cost farmers precious time for field work during the harvest season.

A helpful, detailed map at the front of the book shows the movements of the German, French, British, and Belgian armies in August 1914. But one misses additional maps of, for example, the Battle of the Frontiers or the movements of Gen. Alexander von Kluck's First Army as it fatefully changed course instead of encircling Paris.

August 1914 is a gripping account of the trauma, violence, and dislocations of that fateful month. It proves in detail Bruno Cabanes's thesis that those early days of the conflict, even *before* it had stalled in the blood and mud of the trenches, opened a new, more terrifying era in the western European experience of war.