What History Was, Is, and Will Be: Crash Course European History #50

Crash Course: European History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=1hAraGgEiAo
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/1hAraGgEiAo

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green, and this is Crash Course European History, and we've done it! We've reached the end of history! Or I guess I should say we've reached the present day, and what a day it is.

So today, we want to look back on this course to examine history itself. How did the study of history begin, how has it changed, and how will it continue to evolve? And why does it all matter?

(Intro. music)

So last time we mentioned a book by Nobel prize winner Svetlana Alexievich called "An Oral History", which shows a new-ish way of studying the past. New-ish because it depended on evidence of people's spoken words and on their memories, instead of just written records. Alexievich valued memories--sad, opinionated, defiant, or nostalgic--as markers of what was historically important.

For example, how did ordinary people react to events like the Chernobyl disaster or say, Stalin's regime. Instead of making Stalin and the people close to him the center of the story, Alexievich centered the story elsewhere. And in doing so, she showed what life felt like for a much broader range of people. A woman recalled her childhood of intense poverty living in a mud hut and having for companions the interesting bugs that crept along the walls. History hadn't always taken bugs and desperately poor people's lives as its subjects.

Like, as you may remember, when Crash Course European History began, the hundred or so years war and the Bubonic plague were killing off people. And in those days, people noted big events such as plague or weather disasters, because they were seen as evidence of God's work. And so back then, history was kind of a calendar that showed what God was doing to us and when. But not nearly enough about the why. Why?!

Anyway, remember when plagues were a big driver of human history?

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(talking to someone off camera) Stan, could we roll the tape back to 2012? (past John speaking): 'If some superbug shows up tomorrow and it travels all these global trade routes and kills every living human, then globalization will have been very bad for human history.' Yeah, great, thanks Stan. If I knew it was coming, why wasn't I prepared?

So away from my existential crisis and back to history, so historians started out noting what God was doing to us and when, and then began noting the big events of a monarch's reign and royal genealogy, which increasingly became the motto of what history should be: a record of what a monarch had caused to happen, alongside records of what God had caused to happen. For generations, historians in Europe followed this idea of noting big political events. And European historians set many of the stands for doing history that are still in practice today around the world.

And then around the time of the French Revolution and the age of nation building, history started to lay down several claims about why we should study history and why history was so important. First, history was said to be objective, based on records found in governmental archives. Second, it was an important foundation to the growing nation-states taking shape in the nineteenth century.

Like, imagine that you're a newborn baby nation. You need to find ways to legitimize yourself: to define for instance what it means to be 'French' and why 'France' is a real and legitimate idea. And part of how nations did this was by studying, and in some ways creating, 'French History'. The idea was that the nation-state could be demonstrably truthful because it relied on official documents about how it came into being and how it replaced absolute monarchs. So instead of getting its authority solely from God as absolute monarchies had, the state's authority would come from objective history--showing the factual, historical ties that bound a people together.

That's why in the United States students study American history.

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And in France, students study French history.

And alongside studying and legitimizing the nation state, historical teaching and writing became a profession increasingly attached to universities and upholding strict standards of truth and objectivity. And these professional historians teaching in universities and doing research in government, church, or other archives, devised "The Seminar Method" in which they presented documents for their students to decipher and debate and scrutinize so that those students could find the true and objective meaning about the workings of politics and government.

The Seminar Method was most developed in Germany and took place in seminar rooms. You know, wood panels, fancy fireplaces, the rooms they put in the college brochures, and then you get to the actual college, and it's just a bunch of cinder blocks. Professors sometimes even locked those rooms to keep out the public, especially women who might be interested in history but weren't seen as worthy or capable of studying the grand formation of nations or the deeds of national leaders.

And yet, all the while in the 19th century, there were amateur historians studying a range of quite different matters. They wrote about village customs, domestic life, and the work life or ordinary people like blacksmiths or shoemakers or farmers. In England, the Strickland sisters wrote hugely popular histories and much reprinted biographies of queens and princesses from the middle ages down to their own 19th century. And so at times, it was amateurs working outside the university system who brought professional historians into the 20th century.

But also, as industry developed and working-class men and farmers and eventually women got the right to vote, history slowly came to understand that those people's lives were also noteworthy. And that in fact, they were driving much historical change--not just through their votes, but also through their other choices. From how women spent money to what kind of seeds farmers used in their fields.

Alright, let's go to the thought bubble. In 1897 in the United States, Lucy Maynard Salmon, a professor at Vassar college-

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-wrote a history of domestic servants and then histories of kitchens and cookbooks and the historic sites a pedestrian might see in an ordinary town. She used newspapers as evidence. Some historians found her work unworthy of her talents, as her first book had been a prize-winning study of an important topic--the appointing powers of the U.S. presidents. To them, Salmon seemed to have fallen.

That was because the history considered most important, which professors and teachers researched and taught, was about treaties and alliances and the much-loved topic of warfare. But in this way of teaching history, much was being lost. War, for instance, wasn't only about generals and their planning. As Louis Morton, famed military historian at Dartmouth College said to his graduate class,

"Anyone can draw a battle plan and its execution." And on the spot he drew several on the blackboard that students suggested. "But the real history of war is about the involvement of society at home and on the front and the policies needed to pursue the war itself."

Thanks, thought bubble. And so over time, history became less about individual great geniuses and the great geniuses of their battle plans, and more a study of large groups of people working together. Because in the end, generals without soldiers don't get a ton accomplished.

Alright let's move on to another long ignored kind of person in history: children. But that would change. In 1960 French Historian Phillippe Aries produced his class "Centuries of Childhood", which argued that "Love was not necessarily a family value before modern times." Much of Aries' work is now refuted, but its emphasis on emotion and changing moral values and childhood was very significant.

Meanwhile, notable English historians like E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm began writing about working class religion in 1963. And social and cultural history expanded in the U.S. as well, where Eugene Genovese wrote "Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made"

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-which re-centered historical narratives about slavery. And in 1975, Amero Canadian author Natalie Zemon Davis presented a picture of the "charivari"--an event in which ordinary people 'turned the world upside down" through social mockery, cross-dressing, and obscenity. And German historians proceeded to make the study of everyday life not only into historical narratives, but also into a theory of history complete with a magical German word to describe it "Alltagsgeschichte". I'll remind you that mispronouncing things--especially German things--is my thing.

But in all these cases, we see history expanding beyond the battlefield or the deeds of the rich and powerful. Now, some might protest that history should be about the powerful, but even notions of power have changed. In older historical understandings, power involved the direct force of a king or other ruler on a person or group. Like, think about the command, "off with his head." I mean, that's a real statement of power if you can say the words off with his head, and the someone's head is removed from their body. That's obviously power.

But it's not the only kind of power, right? And in modern times power is often seen as participatory and moving through society. And political power is often seen as participatory too. Not just in the form of voting, but also public protest. We're not necessarily powerful in the way royalty once was, but instead as part of a modern society, power flows through us as we act as citizens or soldiers or patients or skateboarders or shoppers or viewers or anything else. We each express our power by participating in systems that in turn have power over us, whether that's systems of criminal justice or transportation systems. It's critical to understand however that the way those systems function, and the way that power flows is uneven and unjust.

I'm speaking to you amidst a global disease pandemic that has reminded us that it's an expression of human power to leave the house and also an expression of human power to stay inside.

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Because how we interact with each other, and right now whether we physically interact with each other, shapes the way we all end up living--or indeed whether we all end up living.

So in this new understanding of power flowing through systems and individuals, power operates among everyone, and in order to understand the story of humans in the world, we need to look at more than just political and military leaders.

We've also learned that we can't understand human history without understanding the forces that act on our history from the outside, whether that be microbes, the most underrated historical force of all time, or natural disasters. And the history of every community and every region has long been a global history. Because for centuries, humans have been connected to globalized power systems in the obvious forms of trade and empire and migration and warfare, but also in less obvious movements of world religions, cultures, diseases, food-ways, and communication systems. So studying European history, for example, necessitates understanding the world. Because Europeans migrated and traded and fought and learned from and with people all over.

For example, the history of France until recently appeared in books as the history of *this* hexagon, despite France's involvement with the rest of the world and despite the multi-ethnic nature of the French nation. Now historians are rewriting the history of France to include its colonies and its colonial past. They're also rewriting the histories of World War I and World War II to give more attention to the horrific facts of those wars eastern fronts and to the experiences of colonial troops.

We call this process "revisionism". As new facts are pointed out through research and as historians become aware that they have ignored certain truths, they *revise* the narrative of the past, making revision a crucial part of achieving historical accuracy.

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Now it's worth noting that some people provide historical interpretations that do *not* accord with the facts. For example, the belief that Lenin was a sweetheart and then Stalin came along and ruined everything. Constructing Lenon as some kind of idealistic pacifist just goes against historical facts.

But humans are sometimes committed less to evidence than to ideology. For example, the may want to hold up the idea of the good in Bolshevik communism. That ideology, that Bolshevik communism was good, then creates the belief that Stalin's murderous regime perverted Lenin's wholesome communism. The same kind of loyalty to ideology has been used to minimize or deny the downsides of capitalism or to argue that colonialism was good for the colonized, but the evidence contradicts all those beliefs.

In fact, one way we know that history is important, is that interest groups and legislatures often demand textbooks be revised to reflect certain versions of the past, including versions that do not line up with what we know to be true. The way we understand the past shapes the way we understand the present and the way we imagine the future. And so I think William Faulkner really was right when he famously wrote that, "the past is never dead. It's not even past."

Current historical practice seeks to acknowledge the power of ideology and partisanship, as well as the bias that exists in official documents, and so instead current historians try to rely on multiple evidentiary sources to ascertain truth. "What actually happened," as Leopold Von Ranke described history's goal. And so for current historians, and for all students of history, evidence, truthfulness, and mindfulness of bias in our own writing and research mirror the most important values of lawful societies in our age. One thing we try to remember around here--thinking you lack bias is one sure sign that you not only have it, but that you aren't aware that you have it.

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So paradoxically, the quest for factual truth must exist alongside the recognition of the inescapability of bias. As we've discussed throughout this series, so much depends on individual perspective. History can't eliminate those biases and it can't achieve some kind of factual perfection, but it can improve our understanding of the human endeavor by helping us shift and expand our perspectives. So history is always a work in progress.

Thank you for being here with us, and for learning with us, here in the middle of history.

Our crash course in European history has been filmed in the Jaden Smith studios here in Indianapolis. Huge thanks to the series writer Bonnie Smith and curriculum consultant Kathy Keller. Meredith Danko is our editorial director. Zulejo Razak and Nikki Hua supervise the script. Stan Mueller shoots and edits the show. The amazing team at Thought Cafe makes the animations. Thanks especially to Cody Brown, and thanks to all of you for being here with us and learning with us. As they say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.