# The Roads to World War I: Crash Course European History #32

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History, and things are indeed on course to crash, because World War I is coming.

Decades ago, when I studied European history in high school, I learned there were precise causes of the war: the alliance system, arms build-up, secret treaties, nationalism, and imperialism. That set of causes, launched from above by political leaders, eventually led to war.

But more recently, historians have started to lay out a more complex road to war: namely, a road that passed through social and cultural change at the turn of the century. And those changes, which were experienced by tens of thousands if not millions of people, caused tensions across a broad swath of Europe. People's lives were affected by changing family structures, by paradigm shifts in science, disruption of traditional gender roles, achievement of the vote by working men, and ongoing economic advances, and the result was disorientation, dislocation, deep resentments, and widespread fear--which, of course, is not too dissimilar from how an array of changes are affecting people today. [Intro] Some might even say that pre-war Europe a battlefield before World War I started.

Strikes, which at times grew violent, abounded across Europe—whether at the oil fields of Baku, the farms of Hungary, or the factories of Italy. Assassinations were common--as was everyday violence against Jewish people and other oppressed ethnic minorities. In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, was tried for espionage, convicted and imprisoned on Devil's Island.

The evidence against Dreyfus turned out to be fabricated, complete with forged signatures. Further evidence of his innocence was that the espionage continued, even after his exile. Passions exploded over the case, and anti-Semitism flourished, families quarreled, and assaults took place around questions of whether Dreyfus had committed these crimes.

Newspapers took both sides as violence grew. Then in 1898 famed novelist Emile Zola's article "J'accuse," exposed trumped up evidence against Dreyfus and helped build support for him. Dreyfus was eventually pardoned in 1899, but facts were not enough to stop the growing hatred and antisemitism.

Intense divisions within and between communities were growing elsewhere, too. Ireland, for one, was on the brink of civil war, with both those opposing British rule and those favoring it establishing independent armies. The distant colonial world was increasingly tense too.

Between 1904 and 1908 the German army massacred between 24,000 and 100,000 Herero people, who refused to surrender their lands in southwest Africa. Those who weren't massacred were driven into distant territory to starve. Some say that slaughter was a training ground for European soldiers who would soon engage in further war.

Around the same time, the French closed the University of Hanoi and arrested or killed prominent teachers and intellectuals. and open rebellion escalated. As one opponent said of the

French: "Look at those men with blue eyes and yellow beards. They are not our fathers, nor are they our brothers. How can they squat here, defecating on our heads?" and the Boers--that is, farmers with Dutch heritage-- of South Africa likewise rebelled against the British as the 20th century opened. They were only defeated after many civilians, confined to concentration camps, died of disease or starvation.

South Asians demanded reform too. They became more militantly anti-British and launched boycotts of British goods. In 1900, a conglomerate of colonial nations massacred Chinese civilians involved in the.

Boxer rebellion. Boxer activists had themselves assassinated European and Chinese Christians in an attempt to take back their empire from white invaders. All these events suggest that the world was already at war before 1914, although if you've been following this series, or our other series in history, you'll know that war was often happening-- if anything, peace, to whatever extent humans have experienced it, is very much a historical exception.

And that's important to remember when thinking about the ultimately disastrous system of allegiances Europe had developed. That system was created by politicians to try to prevent wars, or at least to manage any on the continent. Foremost among these politicians was our old friend Otto von Bismarck, who'd had no qualms about starting wars to help Germany build its empire but then declared Germany a "satisfied" nation.

Oh, the adjectives that haunt us. Bismarck wanted peace in Europe and so organized an alliance system to that end, binding Germany and Austria in the Dual Alliance of 1879, then adding Italy to a Triple Alliance in 1882. He also allied Germany with Russia in the Reinsurance Treaty, another attempt to build coalitions so formidable that large wars would become impossible.

But all of this was about to change when William II, aka Kaiser Wilhelm, came to power in Germany in 1890. He rattled the sword, and called Bismarck's alliances the work of an outmoded old man. Under William II, the treaty with Russia was canceled, which drove Russia to sign an alliance with France in 1894.

William also called for Germany to gain power around the world, expanding into tropical colonies to create a German "place in the sun." Which if you wanna do, you could just try to take Southern France. Oh, right, you will. Try to take Southern France.

Meanwhile, the French and British secretly built another alliance--the "entente cordiale". And I'll remind you, I've had three years of high school French. It was based on military cooperation and even shared military plans.

The entente became a triple entente when Russia and Britain settled their colonial differences in 1907, uniting three very different powers. But as they were entente-ing, Europe's powers were also growing their militaries. Standing armies grew to hundreds of thousands of troops.

General staffs demanded larger stockpiles of weapons and got what they wanted. Most costly were the "Dreadnoughts" or massive battleships with unprecedented firepower. Britain launched the first of these in 1905; others followed.

The construction of battleships in these years employed tens of thousands of workers. So through their staffs of public relations experts, military hawks threatened that cutting the production of Dreadnoughts would lead to mass unemployment and revolution. "We want eight and we won't wait" was a popular British chant for more ships. So, yeah, America didn't invent the military-industrial complex.

But we did perfect it. So, William II also wanted Dreadnoughts, because he hoped to win the British over to an alliance of Teutonic peoples, including especially Germans, that could defeat the "Latins" or "Gauls" of southern Europe whom he considered inferior. William was the grandson of Queen Victoria and a staunch anglophile, much to the dismay of his generals.

But rather than taking advice from experts in his government, William used another strategy. He avidly followed press coverage of himself and his regime, using that as a monitor of successful policy. He had tantrums and even months of nervous collapse when he was criticized in the press and elsewhere, creating an atmosphere of turmoil in German policy through erratic militarism.

So, despite all these attempts to control war through alliances, the early decades of the century were also deadly because of revolution and local wars in Europe itself. In 1905, the people of Russia rose up against the tsarist regime. They were hard pressed in their daily lives due to a conflict between Russia and Japan over competing claims in East Asia.

And the Japanese, who'd been developing a modern army and an industrial economy, attacked and crushed the Russian fleet in 1905. Ordinary people paid the price for these losses and rebelled, but then Tsarist promises of reform, combined with armed force, eventually restored calm and preserved the Romanov grip on power--for another decade or so. The Balkans also heated up, due to secret societies of Balkan peoples that collected arms and organized themselves against the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, and also had amazing facial hair.

Everything about that photograph is phenomenal, but the best part is that it vaguely resembles a cheerleading pyramid... Within these secret societies, people moved from safe house to safe house as they built networks of militiamen ready to sabotage, assassinate, and fight the imperial powers in order to gain independence. In the face of such resistance, Turkish nationalists demanded a strengthening of military and administrative institutions in the Ottoman Empire.

Finally, in 1908 a group of officers called the Young Turks rebelled in the name of promoting. Turkish ethnicity. They ultimately pushed aside the sultan and replaced him with a pliable brother who was more submissive to the Young Turks, albeit guided by a constitution and parliament.

The Young Turks responded to other people's nationalist dreams by squashing demands for self-rule from Balkan ethnic groups. Even as the Young Turks inspired many groups both in Europe and around the world, Austria-Hungary used their revolt as distraction during which it scooped up Bosnia. That caused outrage among Serbs as they had wanted to add Bosnia to a "greater Serbia" while all Balkan people's anger against the Young Turks boiled over.

Building on this anger, the Balkan governments of Montenegro, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece unleashed the First Balkan War in 1912 against the Ottoman Empire. They quickly won, only blocked when they tried to march on Constantinople. But there was jealousy among the victors over the splitting up the territorial gains, as there so often is, so in spring 1913 the Second Balkan War erupted.

The main issue this time was the territory awarded to Bulgaria in the settlement. Serbia, which was backed by Russia, gained territory from this second war, making Austria-Hungary and Germany anxious, not least because the Habsburgs were nervous that Austria-Hungary's. Slavic population might want to be part of this exciting new Greater Serbia.

German public relations people swung into action, planting hysterical stories on the growing and lethal threat from Slavs. So if you're wondering if misinformation can contribute to a global sense of dis-ease, confusion, and polarization: Yes. Yes, it can.

The heir to the Habsburg imperial throne, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, had a solution for all these problems: restore absolutism as it had existed before the revolutions of 1848 and the general liberalization of politics. "The parliamentary form of government has outlived its usefulness," an advisor to. Franz Ferdinand had written as early as 1898. "The so-called individual freedoms must be curtailed." Let's Go to the Thought Bubble 1. In June 1914, a nineteen-year-old Bosnian bookworm named Gavrilo Princip 2. became one of history's more famous teenagers. 3.

Princip thrived on reading Sherlock Holmes mysteries 4. and Sir Walter Scott's heart-pounding stories of heroic medieval knights. 5. And he dreamed of his beloved homeland joining Serbia, 6. and the Habsburgs had blocked that dream by annexing Bosnia in 1908. 7. Princip, along with several friends, decided something had to be done, 8. and when the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie came to Sarajevo on June 28th, 1914, the conspirators saw their chance. 9.

The Archduke and his wife were traveling unprotected in a convertible 10. --a perfect assassination opportunity. 11. Some of Princip's co-conspirators were too afraid when the moment arrived to actually try to kill the Archduke; 12. another had a gun malfunction. 13. One co-conspirator did manage to throw a grenade at the Archduke's car, 14. but he missed. 15.

Later in the day, Princip mourning the failure of his crew's plan over lunch. 16. The Archduke and Sophie were on their way to visit victims of the grenade attack in the hospital 17. when their driver took a wrong turn 18. and happened to drive past, of all people, Gavrilo Princip, 19. who proceeded to shoot dead both Franz Ferdinand and his wife. Thanks Thought Bubble.

Some people celebrated the death of the opinionated, radical heir to the Habsburg throne and others were not surprised at the murder, given that assassination was an occupational hazard of leadership in these decades. After the assassination, heads of state and high officials still went on planned vacations, because everyone expected a diplomatic solution. Again, assassination was pretty common, and diplomatic solutions always followed.

People were gripped not by the assassination but by a scandal in France--the trial for murder of Madame Caillaux who had shot a newspaper publisher for exposing her husband's extra-marital affairs. Seems like the wrong guy to shoot. And yet the European powers moved almost imperceptibly toward war.

General staffs and some officials had been planning for it, as we have seen, while competition for empire and the conduct of empire itself were warlike, and overall social and cultural change had made people tense and even violent toward one another. Moreover, wasn't Europe—from Ireland to Russia—simply a violent place where individuals and governments alike were always primed for war? As the chief of the German General Staff put it in 1912, given Europe's track record, "I consider a war to be inevitable.

And the sooner the better." We can wonder what might've happened if the Archduke's driver hadn't taken that wrong turn. Or we can wonder what might've happened without Europe's particular configuration of alliances, or if militarization hadn't made war seem unavoidable. As Margaret Atwood writes in The Testaments, "Very little in history is inevitable." But the lead up to the war was marked not by one cause, or even by a few politicians making a few decisions, but by many people making many decisions--from spreading fake news stories to pressing for more battleships--that altogether contributed to an environment that made war progressively more likely.

In short, it wasn't only the Archduke's driver who made a wrong turn. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.