World War I Battlefields: Crash Course European History #33

Crash Course: European History
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

=====Intoduction=====

(00:00)
Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History

so leading up to World War I, Germany had promised to back Austria, Hungary in any war; whether it was offensive or defensive and armed with this so called 'blank check' of support, the Austro-Hungarian Hapsburgs issued an ultimatum to Serbia, which the Hapsburgs blamed for the assasination of their Archduke. Serbia accepted the harsh conditions ... except one: that Austria-Hungary would be allowed to participate in the investigation of the murder. "All reason for war is gone," German Kaiser Wilhem II said. And yet Austria-Hungary and Germany -- the Central Powers -- both mobilized against Serbia by the end of July; eager to crush the pesky Serbs; believing the war would be a local and contained one ... it didn't go that way.

=====Opening Credits=====

(00:50)

In a swirl of military activity, Austria and Germany mobilized their armies; while virtually simultaneously, Russia came to the defense of its ally -- Serbia. France mobilized to aid its ally -- Russia. The wild card was Britain, which Germany thought would not come to the aid of Britain's frequent historical enemy, France. And indeed, Britain did not immediately declare war, which was a good thing for the Anglophile Germany Kaiser who did not want to declare war on his cousin George, king of England, although he didn't mind declaring war on his cousin Nicholas, Tsar of Russia. Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice hereditary succession.

As discussed in our last episode, Europe was primed for all out war. By this time, millions of young men had been trained in the conscription efforts of the past decades and on the eve of full mobilization, a French nationalist assassinated Jean Jaures, who was a powerful socialist and pacifist working for peace, a potent example of the rise of violent nationalism. Already established plans for military mobilization were rolled out. Russia ordered full mobilization on July 29, 1914 after Kaiser William said, "All reason for war is gone."

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

In point of fact, the German general staff had also quickly mobilized for war. These things could happen really fast now that military leaders had railroads and automobiles to quickly move troops and supplies and auxiliary personnel. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Germany mobilized on August 2nd, following the Schlieffen plan. According to the plan, the main German military units would proceed through neutral Belgium and descend through Northern France to encircle Paris from the West. Then, after quickly defeating France, troops would be moved to the lightly defended Eastern front where the slow-to-mobilize Russian army would be quickly knocked out. The war would be over by Christmas, but the very first stage of that plan involved marching through Belgium unopposed, which did not happen.

Indeed, millions of people would die on the western front in Belgium and France. The central powers' plan was complicated when the British joined France and Russia after Germany broke Belgium's neutrality to get to France, thus forming the so-called allied partners of the war. Also, the Russians mobilized much faster than many expected, moving swiftly to assist their French ally and as a result, scored notable early victories against the Germans and East Prussia. However, their generals were less able than their German counterparts and did not follow up on those victories, allowing the Germans to strike back effectively.

The Germans regrouped under Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff who demanded that troops from the western front be brought to the eastern one. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So the war in the East became a nightmare not just for soldiers, but also for civilians. Armies moved back and forth across east central and central Europe, driving out, abusing, and killing civilian populations in the turmoil of conflict. On the Western front, conditions were less mobile, settling into a grim pattern of trench warfare. There was little movement or acquisition of territory but massive casualties.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Because combatants all had access to heavy weaponry, including long range artillery and machine guns, generals felt that the decisive factor in achieving victory was gonna be soldiers' zeal and their confident spirit in battle. They believed that flashing sabers and lively marching, along with the "cult of the offensive," would carry their forces to victory. Basically, generals on all sides believed that a vigorous attack, rather than a good defense, would win the war.
This meant that on the western front, the leadership regularly prepared and executed massive attacks on enemy forces, which were extremely well defended. During the battles of Verdun and the Somme, literally millions of shells were fired, making for millions of casualties and resulting only in stalemate.
Soldiers were ordered out of their trenches to go over the top, only to be mowed down by intense machine gun fire. Both the battles of the Verdun and the Somme were intended as these dramatic and overwhelming efforts to definitively knock out the enemy, and both failed. In the trenches, British soldiers began to sing, "We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here" to express their confusion and despair over not knowing why they were fighting or why they were being asked to go over the top.
But still the generals ordered more attacks, which led to more casualties and almost no ground won or lost. The supply of young men to use in this way seemed limitless. The central powers benefited when the Ottoman Empire joined its side in October, 1914, while Italy joined the Allies in 1915 after being promised major territorial gains upon victory, and combatants also enlisted soldiers from colonies and conscripted hundreds of thousands more to do menial labor. The French, for example, forced some one hundred thousand southeast Asians into the ranks of soldiers and menial workers, while approximately 1.5 million Indians served Britain, with 74,000 killed in battle.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Many people in colonial armies on the western front were put into the very front ranks, meaning that they would be the first to take machine gun fire. More than two million Asian people and hundreds of thousands of Africans, in addition to Australians and New Zealanders, fought on the many battlefields of World War I as the war moved into the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia. And this meant that life within these armies was often very diverse, with people from different villages and nations and even continents sharing life in trenches.
By encountering lots of different people, soldiers learned about other ways of living than had reached them in their mostly rural lives. This included many soldiers from colonies, who learned much about their colonizers' technologies and also about their

barbarism. And some soldiers tried to recreate domestic life in the trenches, observing tea time or attending to healing, wounded, or sick comrades. Early in the war, especially, they also sometimes fraternized with the enemy. In the famous Christmas truce of 1914, soldiers from both sides on the western front left their trenches and met in no man's land, playing soccer, exchanging mementos, and serenading each other. "The Germans don't want to fight anymore than we do," said one seasoned British soldier.
But despite the fraternization, the trenches were largely hellish pits of corpses and filth and excrement. Forced marches passed not over solid roads, but over pathways composed of dead bodies.
New technology unfolded during the war, which added to the death count. Beginning in 1915, soldiers suffered blinding attacks from mustard, phosgene, chlorine, and other poisonous gases developed in the rising chemical industry. Airplanes, picked up by the Europeans faster than the Americans, fought one another at close range with guns and began dropping bombs on cities.
The firepower wielded by armies was so destructive that journalists were not allowed to photograph battlefield scenes where mutilated and rotting corpses were strown for miles, and where limbs and other body parts hung, stuck in trees.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

But artists, such as German soldier Otto Dix did seek to capture the soldiers' horror at the battlefield experience. We have a long history of romanticizing war in our culture, but World War I was horrible. The art historian Robert Hughes has written of the peculiarly modernist hell of repetition, and by that measure and so many others, World War I was hell.

Amidst the chaos and brutality of the war, ethnic cleansing flourished across Eastern Europe as armies targeted Jewish people and Polish people, to name just two groups. In the Ottoman empire, Russians and their Armenian allies slaughtered entire Muslim villages while the central powers slaughtered Armenians in a deadly back and forth, and then, in the spring of 1915, the Ottoman government ordered their troops to eradicate Armenians more systematically, leading to the torture and death of an estimated 600,000 to 1 million people. This wasn't a response to a specific uprising of the Armenians. It was a genocide that deliberately aimed to eliminate as much of the Armenian population as possible.

War at sea was also a deadly stalemate, including the deployment of battleships and submarines on both sides. In 1917, the German general staff resumed submarine attacks on allied shipping after having stopped the practice for fear that the United States might enter the War on behalf of the allied powers and then that spring, the United States responded by entering the War on behalf of the allied powers, but their participation was not militarily effective until 1918, because weapons needed to be manufactured and recruits needed to be called up and trained and transported to Europe.

In the meantime, Europeans were innovating militarily, especially by developing a new tactic of concentrated attack at a single point. This puncturing would allow the attacker to move behind enemy lines, but war weariness was simultaneously bringing civilian uprisings, especially in Russia, mutinies, especially among the French, and even starvation, in cities like Vienna

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Spanish influenza, a variety of flu that often struck young and healthy people was also beginning to attack troops, and yet, amid all of this collapse, rulers firmly rejected peacemaking or even compromise. In 1915, a group of activist women visited heads of state with a peace plan, which was dismissed, but it did reappear in altered form as US president Wilson's 14 points, but instead of peace, Kaiser William raged, "Only in the ruins of London will I forgive Georgie," Georgie being his cousin King George V of England and political leader George Clemenceau of France called for a "war to the death", which it certainly was.

When Hapsburg emperor Francis Joseph died in November of 1916, his subjects were too weakened to mourn, but his successor, emperor Karl, did eventually begin to seek the war's end, as did the German (?~11:03) in the summer of 1917. I know it's not the time for a joke, but Emperor Karl? Mwah. Sometimes, even in the darkest days, history just offers up the most magnificent names.

Alright, back to the war. Even as the politicians began to waver, military leadership remained determined. The Germans tried to puncture allied lines in a spring 1918 offensive, but victory eluded them as the allies brought out airplanes and tanks and then in the summer of 1918, the allies, assisted now by American forces, drove the central powers eastward toward Germany. Casualties for the six months of German offensives reached two million as their army disintegrated. By January 1918, US President Woodrow Wilson had issued his aforementioned 14 points, a set of principles on which peace should be based. As the war continued taking its grim toll, its end began to to look plausible to many in the civillian leadership because Wilson called for a "rational settlement" rather than a revenge-driven surrender.

===== (12:00) to (14:00) =====

By the Autumn of 1918, not only were soldiers deserting the central powers, civilians across Germany were also in rebellion and so eventually, the leadership of Germany negotiated an armistice. On November 9, Kaiser William fled his empire and on November 11, an armistice was signed. The war was over. Sorta.

In the Hapsburg empire, the various ethnicities were declaring their independence and Russians were mired in their revolution which had broken out the previous spring and the Ottoman empire was still fighting and would continue to do so as Britain hoped to take over Constantinople with the help of its Greek, American, and other allies. So the end of the war to end all wars did not actually feature an end even to that war.

The extent of the loss of human life in World War I is unknowable, but as historians dig into the evidence, it's clear that deaths were far greater than initially calculated. Only now are historians paying enough attention to the war on the Eastern front, in large part because the victors wrote the first histories and did the first counting. Wartime deaths, including civilians, are loosely calculated at 40 million people. Joseph Stalin probably never said the line often attributed to him, that the death of one person is a tragedy, and the death of a million people is a statistic, but it's too often true. It's hard to think of what 40 million deaths means, but here's one way of trying to conceive of it. More people probably died in World War I than currently live in Canada.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

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===== (14:00) to (14:16) =====

Thank you again for watching and as they say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.

(Endscreen)