Archdukes, Cynicism, and World War I: Crash Course World History #36

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=_XPZQ0LAlR4
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=====Intro (00:00)=====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're gonna talk about World War I. The so-called, Great War?

World War I wasn't the most destructive war, or the first total war, and it certainly wasn't - despite its billing - the war to end all wars. But it was the war to change all wars. World War I changed our outlook, it normalized cynicism and irony, which, I think you'll agree, are kind of dominant lenses for describing our world today. Basically, I'd argue that World War I helped make possible everything from *The Simpsons* to intentionally unattractive mustaches.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! are you referring to me?

Present John: Oh, Me From the Past, you're an embarrassment to our family. Also to all our other selves.

[intro music]

=====Causes (0:46)=====

Most people think of World War I as a tragedy because it didn't need to happen and didn't really accomplish much, except for creating social and economic conditions that made World War II possible. So when we talk about the causes of the war, inevitably, we're also assigning blame.

The immediate cause was, of course, the assassination in Sarajevo of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, by a Bosnian Serb nationalist named Gavrilo Princip. Quick aside: It's worth noting that the first big war of the 20th century began with an act of terrorism.

So Franz Ferdinand wasn't particularly well-liked by his uncle, the Emperor Franz Joseph - now *that* is a mustache! But even so, the assassination led Austria to issue an ultimatum to Serbia, whereupon Serbia accepted some, but not all, of Austria's demands, leading Austria to declare war against Serbia. And then Russia, due to its alliance with the Serbs, then mobilized its army; Germany, because it had an alliance with Austria, told Russia to stop mobilizing, which Russia failed to do, so then Germany mobilized its own army, declared war on Russia, cemented an alliance with the Ottomans, and then declared war on France, because, you know, France.

Germany's War plan, the Schlieffen Plan, required that it invade France in the most expedient way possible, which as you can see is via Belgium, And Great Britain was a friend of Belgium - I mean, as much as anyone can be a friend of Belgium - and so they declared war on Germany.

So by August 4th, all the major powers of Europe are at war with each other. By the end of the month, Japan, honoring its alliance with Britain, would be at war with Germany and Austria as well. When all was said and done, counting colonies and spheres of influence, the world map would eventually look like this. You'll never guess who wins.

So there were many opportunities NOT to mobilize and declare war, none of which were taken. Some blame the web of alliances itself, which is what Woodrow Wilson tried to fix with the League of Nations. Some blame Russia, the first big country to mobilize. Some blame Germany for the inflexibility of the Schlieffen Plan. Leninists claim war grew out of imperialism and was fueled by capitalist rivalries; and others claim it was a war between Germany's radical modernism and Britain's traditional conservatism.

But if I had to assign blame, I'd go with the alliance system and the cultural belief that war was, in general, good for nations. War helped define who was "them" and who was "us", and doing that strengthened the idea of us. And before World War I, war was perceived to be necessary and often even glorious.

=====Tactics (2:54)=====

The trench warfare on the Western Front is most famous for its brutal futility - Great Britain and France on one side, Germany on the other, with no man's land between. World War I was a writer's war, and there's a lot of metaphorical resonance in living men digging holes where they would in time die. The lines of trenches on the Western Front covered only about 400 miles as the crow flies, but because of the endless zigzagging, the trenches themselves may have run as much as 25,000 miles.

But the stalemate of trench warfare wasn't seen on every front. Especially at the beginning of the war, there was a lot of offensive movement, especially in the initial German strikes, especially on the Eastern Front, the Germans were pretty successful against the Russians, who had a large but pretty hapless army. Also, for those blessed few of you who sat through all of *Lawrence of Arabia*, you'll remember that T. E. Lawrence's exploits took place in the context of World War I, with the British battling the Ottomans.

This brings up an important point: World War I featured combatants from around the world - Britain's army, especially, included soldiers from India, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, who was just happy to be invited. Africans served with the French, and for a lot of these people, their experiences helped build nationalist movements when survivors returned home after the war.

=====Casualties (4:00)=====

That's about as close as we get to a silver lining. The war itself was incredibly destructive. Over 15 million people were killed and over 20 million wounded. In France, 13.3% of the male population between the age of 15 and 49 died in the war. The war also saw a lot of civilians die, especially in the Ottoman Empire where more than 2 million of the 3 million people killed were non-combatants.

But like so many other wars, World War I's most efficient killer was disease. Stupid disease, always hijacking history. Dysentery, typhus, and cholera were rampant, and otherwise minor injuries would prove fatal when gangrene set in. I mean, 25% of arm wounds among German soldiers were fatal. And that's not even to mention the famous influenza epidemic that broke out toward the end of the war, which killed three times as many people as the war itself.

The main reason the war was so deadly was the combination of new technology and outdated tactics. While we may think about tanks, airplanes and poison gas, all of which made their debut in the First World War, the two most devastating technologies were American: machine guns and barbed wire. Attempting to march in lines towards an enemy's trench, soldiers of both sides were mowed down by machine gun fire.

According to one German machine gunner at the battle of the Somme in 1916, "The [British] officers went in front. I noticed one of them walking calmly, carrying a walking stick. When we started

firing we just had to load and reload. They went down in their hundreds. You didn't have to aim, we just fired into them." At the Somme, the British lost 60,000 men in the first day of fighting. Remember the old colonialist verse, "Whatever happens / we have got / the maxim gun / and they have not"? Yeah, well, now everybody had machine guns.

=====The Soldiers' Experience (5:34)=====

One of the things we try to remember here at Crash Course is that people both make history and are made by it. World War I brings this fact into stark relief because we know so much about the soldiers who fought in it, and how they wrote about the war really changed our relationship with systemic violence.

For most soldiers, there was nothing glamorous or heroic about this war. For the British, for example, the trenches were two things above all: wet and smelly. The dampness came from the fact that the British trenches were in the wettest part of Flanders. The smell was mainly decomposing flesh. Nothing glorious about that.

On the upside, soldiers were at least rarely hungry, and there was a lot of food from home, which is worth underscoring, because it reminds us that home wasn't very far away. Even for the British, at their closest the front was only 70 miles from England. They could read newspapers from London one day later than Londoners could.

While going "over the top" - Stan, no puns in this episode! - Right, while going "over the top" of the trench to cross no-man's land and attack the enemy trench is what lights our romantic imagination, most soldiers' lives were dominated by the fear of shelling. According to a journal published by French soldiers: "There's nothing more horrible in war than being shelled. It's a form of torture that the soldier can't see the end of. Suddenly he's afraid of being buried alive... The man stays put in his hole, helplessly waiting for, hoping for, a miracle."

Although soldiers then, as now, lived under conditions it's difficult to imagine, there was more than even the threat of death to distress them. According to German officer Ernst Jünger, it was not "danger, however extreme … that depresses the spirit of men, so much as over-fatigue and wretched conditions." And for most soldiers, especially the British and French, the pay for their efforts was pitiful. So why did they even keep fighting? Duty, nationalism, loyalty to comrades, and fear of being shot for desertion all played a role.

But so did alcohol. As one British medical officer said: "Had it not been for the rum ration, I do not think we should have won the war." Ernst Jünger also remarked on the propensity of soldiers to drink their troubles away: "Though ten out of twelve had fallen, still the last two, as sure as death, were to be found on the first evening of rest over the bottle drinking a silent health to their dead 'companions' ".

=====Open Letter to Alcohol (7:37)=====

Oh, it's time for the open letter? Whew! An open letter to alcohol. I wonder what's in today's secret compartment. Oh, shocking, it's a golf club. And an actual disco golf ball made by a crash course fan!

Dear Alcohol - oh, that's...

Like disease, you've been a key figure in human history, despite not actually being a person, and for millennia, you've played an important role in war, often helping soldiers do their duty, often distracting them from it.

But here's the thing, alcohol, in my experience, which is extensive, if you need to be drunk to do something, you should maybe not do the thing. Unless of course, the thing is golf.

Best wishes, John Green.

=====Thought Bubble (8:19)=====

So what did we take away from the so-called Great War? Well, not much. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, fixed the blame for the war on Germany, which proved ruinous to the German economy and destructive to its political institutions. And unless you're really nostalgic for totalitarian communism, you've gotta say that World War I was also a disaster for Russia, because it facilitated the rise of the Bolsheviks.

The Russian Revolution had two phases. In the first phase, called the February Revolution, because get this, it occurred in February, army mutinies and civil unrest forced the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty which had been in power in Russia since, like, forever, to use a proper historian term.

The monarchy was replaced by a provisional government led (eventually) by Alexander Kerensky, which made the terrible decision to keep Russia in the war, which led to the October Revolution, so called because it happened in October, in which Vladimir Lenin and his Bolsheviks took over, famously promising the Russian people "peace, bread, and land." To which the Russian people responded, "Hey, you just named of our three favorite things."

Lenin's first big achievement was signing a separate peace with Germany and getting Russia out of the war, which was helpful to him since he needed to fight a civil war that wouldn't end until 1922. This might've helped Germany, too, except the US entered the war on the side of the British and the French.

Which led to another outcome of the war: increased geopolitical influence for the U.S. The U.S. was already becoming a major economic power, and being able to avoid the destruction and loss of manpower associated with World War I certainly didn't hurt. The war helped catapult the U.S. from being a debtor nation to a creditor one, and Wilson's leading role in the negotiations at Versailles – even though he actually didn't get what he wanted – made America a big player on the world stage for the first time. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

=====Conclusion (9:58)=====

So just so we don't get completely Eurocentric, another major outcome of the war was the end of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the nation-state of Turkey. The rest of the world saw some change too, but not much for the better. In Africa, Britain took Germany's colonies, and even though Indians fought and died in a higher percentage than Americans in World War I, India didn't gain any real autonomy.

All these terrible outcomes led to a general sense of disappointment in literary circles, And this feeling of pointlessness and cynicism was expressed by the writers of the "lost generation." It was a war full of loss: Millions of people were lost. Traditional ideals of war's nobility and heroism were lost as well: I mean, what is heroism when you're just sitting in a trench, waiting to be blown up?

And after World War I, war might be necessary, but it would never again be glorious. We see this shift in the writing and art that emerged from the Great War as artists transitioned from romanticism to modernism. Think of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, which is about a men rendered not noble but impotent by war. This dark, cruel irony here - you go to war to become a man and war takes away the organ often called "your manhood" - that defined Hemingway's worldview. And it also defines ours.

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

=====Credits (11:08)=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, our Associate Producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's phrase of the week was "unless you are the Mongols" (we brought it back for you), if you'd like to suggest future phrases of the week, or guess at this week's, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and, as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.