Who Started World War I: Crash Course World History 210

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we continue our discussion of how a regional conflict became World War I. We're also going to look at who started the war and although no one nation is truly to blame, some nations are more to blame than others.

Like America, for once? Blameless. Well, not totally blameless. Largely blameless.

John from the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! That's easy, the Germans started the war.

John: Well, Me from the Past, as it happens many historians and British politicians would agree with you. I mean, you have an opinion that can be defended. And I can't wait for you to defend it.

John from the Past: Uhh... maybe they just really liked war? I'm not really in the defending positions business, Mr. Green, I'm more in the like, bold proclamations business.

John: Yes, Me from the Past, noted. But it turns out, there's more to life than that.

[intro plays]

John: So the topic of who started World War I remains one of the most controversial and interesting topics to discuss in World History, not least because we'd like to avoid having another one.

But in general, when we talk about World Wars, as when we talk about World Cups, we pretty quickly end up discussing Germany.

The idea that the root cause of World War I was Germany, or more specifically, German militarism, continues to be popular. This has been the case every since the 1960s when this historian, Fritz Fisher, identified Germany as the chief cause of the war. But Germany's guilt for the war was also written into the Versailles Peace Treaty, in article 231, and most of you will be familiar with the idea that anger over that clause its incumbent debts helped lead to Hitler's rise.

Also, pretty much however you slice it Germany was definitely responsible for starting World War II, and looking back that made it more plausible that they would have also stated World War I, because, you know, they had a history of starting wars. To be fair, the definition of a Western European nation is "has a history of starting wars". Unless you're the Swiss.

Cue the Switzereel, Stan!

(Switzereel plays, with yodeling.)

Yeah okay, but the thing is attributing characteristics like militarism or authoritarianism to entire national populations is a little problematic. Also one nation's militarism is another nation's strong national defense, and when you live in the country, as I do, that spends more on defense than any other nation, it's probably not that good of an idea to call people militaristic.

There's just something about that broad-brush painting of an entire nation sharing a particular characteristic that feels a little propaganda-y. Also, it wasn't just Germans who were militaristic in 1914. The idea of "the glory of war" was a very popular concept all over Europe, and really there's no evidence that the German people of 1914 were any more or less militaristic than the French or the Russians, They all had poetry that celebrated heroic sacrifice and dying for the Mother- and/or Fatherland.

That's not usually "and". Maybe, though. I'm gonna stay open minded.

But there's another problem with the whole idea that the Germans were more eager for war than anyone else in Europe. That argument relies a lot on the behavior of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German leader, and the Kaiser did make some pretty bellicose and stupid public statements, which in turn made people fear that Germans were eager for war. So Wilhelm became kind of a stand-in for German aggression, a literal cartoon villain, upon whom the world, especially the English, could project their stereotypes.

So I would argue that the German character isn't to blame for World War I, and in fact no national character has ever been to blame for any war. But I am not going to let the Germans off the hook entirely.

So you remember that Germany offered the so-called "blank check" that Germans would always support Austro-Hungarian's ultimatum to Serbia. And in some ways this empowering by Germany's support encouraged Austria's foreign minister Berchtold to behave as recklessly as possible, under the mistaken impression that this is what the Germans wanted him to do.

So basically, Austria thought that Germany wanted a war, so they were like, "Oh, we'll just behave really recklessly and we'll give the Germans the war they've been so excited about." But the Germans were offering the Austrians the assurance of support in the hopes that it wouldn't lead to war.

So you could argue that in fact most of the blame for starting World War I should fall on the shoulders of the Austrians, after all, they were the ones who issued the ultimatum to Serbia, and they were the first to declare war, although only against Serbia. But, the Germans were the first to declare war on a major power, Russia, on August 1st, and the German advance on France through Belgium is what brought Britain into the war. And those are pretty solid arguments that Germany turned the conflict from, you know, a regional thing in the Balkans, which isn't unprecedented, to like this big pan-European war.

But I don't think we're done assigning blame, because we didn't just have a pan-European war, we had a world war. Russia.

Now you'll remember that of all the major powers, Russia was the first to mobilize its massive army, and it was Russia's mobilization that drew Germany, France, and Britain into the war.

Putin is looking at me, isn't he, Stan. I'm just trying to--ah! you so scary!

Stan, can you please make Mr. Putin go away, I'm just trying to talk about history, I'm not talking about any current conflicts.

And it makes me nervous to say this, but there was really no good reason for Russia to mobilize in the first place. I mean, when Austria declared war on Serbia on July 28th, the Austrians could not mobilize their own troops for two weeks, because they were on harvest break.

I mean, if we've learned anything about agriculture, it's that it's hard to have a large-scale war without it, so we can't go to war until all the wheat has been farmed.

But even if Austria had mobilized and attacked immediately, their initial plan was an attack on Belgrade, not Russia, which by the way was called somewhat confusingly, Plan B. Now, Vienna did have a plan to mobilize against both Serbia and Russia, but they never used it. But even if Austria had launched an all-out attack on Russia, Russia had begun its pre-mobilization, the period preparatory to war, on July 25th, and while I usually don't care

about dates, with the start of World War I, very important, because July 25th was before the Serbs had even responded to the Austrian ultimatum.

And just as a general rule, it's hard to play the blameless victim when you're moving all your troops to the border. Hey, why are you here again, Putin?

So here we have Austrians and Germans receiving reports of Russian troops massing on their borders, and you know, that seems kind of like war. A lot of it comes down to how you understand Russia's period preparatory to war. I mean, do you focus on the "period preparatory", or do you focus on the "to war"? Regardless, on July 30th, Russia became the first power to actually put its war machine into motion.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So talking about Russia leads us to some of the more meta-arguments about the causes of World War I because it's difficult to understand what Russia was doing when it mobilized without trying to understand *why* they mobilized. After all, an Austrian attack on Serbia was hardly an existential threat to Russia, I mean, look at the map. Russia's huge, and at the time, probably had the largest army in Europe, if not the world. So why would they care about what was likely to be a skirmish on the Bosnian border?

Well, here's where geo-politics and history come in. So, looking at the map, you can see that the Balkans are right next to the Dardanelles, the straits that give access to the Black Sea. Russia needed to maintain influence there in order to ensure traffic through those straits, especially if the Ottomans were going to form an alliance with the Germans, which they did.

Also, at least in its own estimation, Russia was in danger of becoming a laughingstock in European politics: their humiliating loss to Japan in the Russo-Japanese War was followed by Russia's inability to stop Austria from annexing Bosnia from the Ottomans in 1908, and that was the event that sparked Serbia's drive to expand its own territory. Its history of prior weakness meant that Russia's foreign policy makers figured that without some decisive action, Russia wouldn't be taken seriously anymore.

In the wake of Austria's ultimatum, Russian foreign minister Sazonov concluded that Russia, quote, "Could not remain a passive spectator whilst a Slavonic people was being trampled down. If Russia failed to fulfill her historic mission, she would be considered a decadent state and would henceforth have to take second place among the powers...if at this critical juncture, the Serbs were abandoned to their fate, Russian prestige in the Balkans would collapse utterly."

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So if judging by what we just learned in the Thought Bubble, it was really the Ottomans. If they could have just topped Austria from annexing Bosnia in the first place, none of this would have happened. And if I may go a little further back, there wouldn't have even been an Ottoman Empire without the stupid Romans. And of course the Roman Empire was largely dependent upon constant expansion and looting, so if only the Gauls could have defeated Caesar, none of this would have happened.

In short, no wonder Caesar was assassinated, he was about to start World War I in 1900 years.

I bring that up because that's the tricky thing about the blame game. You can trace the causes of World War I back a bunch of ways. I mean, I can't think of anyone who you can't at least partially assign blame to--well, I mean except the Mongols.

(Mongols montage)

Actually you know what, if they'd just kept control of Russia, probably no World War I. Anyway, all of this only scratches the surface of the arguments about who's to blame for World War I. I mean, I haven't dealt with stuff like the alliance system or European imperialism, or you often hear about the naval rivalry between Britain and Germany, and then there are the ideological causes, like nationalism, and the Social Darwinist thinking that led people to believe that war was a natural and inevitable state of human affairs.

You can tell all those origin stories of the Great War, and they're important, but ours centers on diplomatic history. There are a few reasons for this, first, the decision to go to war was ultimately in the hands of a very small group of diplomats. I mean, even in the most democratic countries, Britain and France, popular opinion didn't force mobilization. Also, in most countries that's still the case. It's still diplomats who decide whether to go to war. So understanding what makes governments and diplomats decide to go to war is very important.

But looking at the diplomatic causes of the war also reveals something to us about the pitfalls of writing history. I mean diplomats are famous for keeping pretty detailed records of their dealings, both at the time and in retrospect, and then historians have to sift through all these sources and make choices about which ones to emphasize. And sometimes, even which ones to believe, because of course, often these sources are in direct conflict.

Now, I'm no historian, but in creating this episode, we had to make choices that many of you will disagree with. Either because you don't think we gave enough evidence or because you don't like the things that we emphasized, and that's great. It's these constructive and critical conversations that lead us to dig deeper, to consult more primary sources, to read more broadly, and that in turn leads to a richer understanding of the world and a more engaged life.

All that noted, the alliance system was certainly important and I'm sure you'll be discussing it in your classes, and in comments.

Thank you for watching, I'll see you next week.

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As we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.