

From: The Modern World Global History since 1760 Course Team <noreply@coursera.org>

To: [REDACTED]

Subject: Starting Week 8

Date: Fri, 08 Mar 2013 16:46:16 +0000

Dear jeffrey epstein,

Welcome to the new students who have joined us this week. Week 8 is now posted.

Historians often designate 1914 as a breakpoint in world history, and it is easy to see why. In this account, I tend to see the breakpoint with the 'great acceleration' and associated internal stresses, especially on some traditional monarchies. The careening world after 1890 seemed headed for some kind of 'crackup,' though the particulars of the 1914 crisis are themselves laden with contingency.

The "July crisis" of 1914 was only the most recent in a series of crises originating in the Balkans. But the historian has to explain why the stakes in those local arguments seemed so terribly high for a handful of leaders in Austria, Russia, and Germany. I choose to focus especially on Germany as the most puzzling and pivotal of those. Then, having tried to understand the volatile mix of beliefs that animated the very small number of people who made these fateful choices, the historian faces another challenge: How to explain why this local conflict came so quickly to represent such vast stakes to so many informed people?

In the suggested readings, I refer to a chapter in which the historian Hew Strachan concludes his masterful volume on the early phase of the war. Strachan is struggling to explain why the war, fought over the territorial domains of a small part of southeastern Europe, so quickly came to seem to so many people as representing a cathartic struggle over civilization itself. His argument makes sense only by referring to some of the new ways of seeing the world that we discussed in Weeks 6 and 7 of this course.

Figuring out the 'aims' of a war with these symbolic qualities seemed then to acquire almost a post facto quality of rationalization. The territorial map of the Balkans was rearranged very soon after the war began. It then became a backwater theater of war. So some kind of larger reshuffling needed to be imagined, if only to represent such stakes and such sacrifice.

This week does not end with the resolution of this question of war aims, or the war's end. It ends instead with what I see as a key turning point, in 1916-1917. That is the point at which the original momentum of the war had exhausted itself to a degree that, to people today, almost seems like a kind of collective insanity. Thoughtful and powerful people on both sides had begun quietly putting out feelers looking for some way out. The slim possibilities for peace passed, however, and the metamorphoses began. Some governments turned themselves into still more totally mobilized systems for war. The German government deliberately risked — and got — war with the United States in its desperate effort to find a way to victory. Other governments visibly tottered under the strain; the vast Russian Empire falling apart. The outcome of the war itself remained uncertain as spring 1917 turned to summer.

Best wishes,

Philip Zelikow

The Modern World: Global History since 1760 Course Team

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